



INTERVIEW

STEVE WORZELLA,

vice president, Worzella & Sons, Inc.

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

NAME: Steve Worzella

TITLE: Vice president

COMPANY: Worzella & Sons, Inc.

LOCATION: Plover, WI

HOMETOWN: Plover

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: 15

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: n/a

SCHOOLING: Stevens Point Area Senior High

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: United of Wisconsin Board, Plover Plan Commission, Board of Directors of the Portage County Wildlife Fund, and past board member of Plover Whiting Youth Athletics for seven years

AWARDS/HONORS: Cooking contest winner of the Wisconsin Potato Grower/Chef Competition on a team with Chef Rob Tuszka of Silver Coach

FAMILY: Wife, Paula; five kids, Amanda, Ashley, Tyler, Hannah, and Sydney; and four grandchildren

HOBBIES: Hunting, fishing, bowling, traveling, boating, and driving my Corvette

Steve Worzella has the advantage of having seen the family potato and vegetable operation, Worzella & Sons, Inc. of Plover, Wisconsin, through the eyes of a child.

Having grown up on the farm, he is most proud of how technology has advanced and evolved the operation, and how his family has been able to adapt and change with the times.

Representing the third generation on the farm, Steve and his brother, Scott, are co-vice presidents of the company, a 5,000 plus-acre potato and vegetable farm in the heart of Wisconsin's Central Sands.

Their father, Norm, and his brother, Marv, were inducted into the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Hall of Fame in February 2021.

In 1953, WPVGA Hall of Famer Clarence Worzella, Norm and Marv's father, bought a 40-acre parcel of sandy soil near Plover and started growing potatoes under irrigation.

Norm, who has continued as chief executive officer for Worzella & Sons, says he is proud of the business' growth, which he largely attributes

to the dedicated employees the family has had in their 60 years of farming.

Marv, who is chief financial officer, adds, "We learned from our dad from a young age on. We started working with Dad in 1955, and we incorporated in 1964. Dad worked side-by-side with us and taught us how to grow vegetables and get started in farming."

COMMUNITY-MINDED

Norm and Marv's parents, Clarence and Regina, were community-minded people who generously donated to many organizations and causes.

They instilled in Marv and Norm, and now Steve, Scott and the entire Worzella family, the importance of

Above: Having grown up on the farm, Steve Worzella, vice president of Worzella & Sons, Inc., says he is most proud of how technology has advanced and evolved the multi-generational operation in Plover, Wisconsin.



giving back, and Worzella & Sons has been able to make donations that are crucial to the well-being and future of the Wisconsin potato and vegetable growing industry.

Working with Louis Wysocki, the WPVGA and Village of Plover, the Worzellas participated in a land exchange, discontinuing to farm a parcel of fertile land to make room for the Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project.

The goal of the project is to improve the health of the Little Plover River and the quality of life of the surrounding community.

The Worzellas also donated more than 20 acres of land to the Farming for the Future Foundation for a new Discovery Center currently being built along the Highway 39 corridor, in Plover.

Marv and Norm have also been instrumental in donating for causes such as improvements at Lake Pacawa Park, in Plover.

In this interview, Steve distinctly remembers working to improve Pacawa Park as a teenager.

What are you most proud of regarding your family's farming history? How my grandpa, Clarence,

started the farm with hard work, and how technology has changed, yet we've been able to adapt.

From being a kid and now seeing how things have changed, looking back to

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Above: Paul Sankey plants Silverton russet potatoes on Worzella & Sons Inc. land in the town of Buena Vista, Wisconsin, May 2020.



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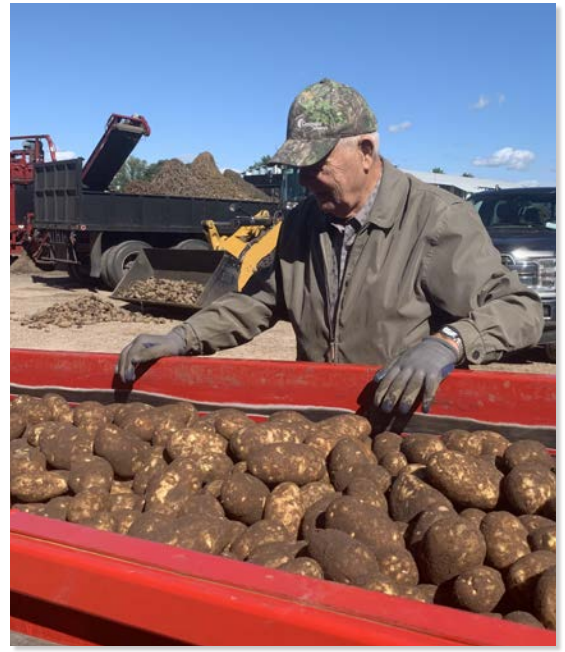
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when I was 15 years old, for example, and then seeing where we are now, it's amazing.

My grandpa would be impressed with how farming has advanced. He would have never thought of a four-wheel-drive tractor back then, and automation has changed the farming landscape.

But, then again, maybe this wouldn't be a surprise to my grandpa with all the changes in farming. He was a visionary and could see that farming

and the technology that goes along with it would continue to improve over the years.

We need to stay up with technology just to be productive. Otherwise, we would be falling behind.

The legacy of the farm is being involved with the community. My grandpa was constantly donating and giving back to the community ... always for the community, always.

He would send employees to work

at community events like the Golden Sands Festival. The Golden Sands Festival used to be a three-day event at Lake Pacawa Park, with it now being called Celebrate Plover.

Employees would help with set up and clean up at the park for the Golden Sands Festival. We planted all the trees at Lake Pacawa, but they're mostly gone now due to the renovations at Lake Pacawa Park, which include a bandshell, shelter, and all-inclusive ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)-compliant splash + play area.

My grandparents used to rent Lake Pacawa Park to the Lions Club for one dollar a year with the vision that the park would continue to be a place for families to enjoy.



Above: Michelle Worzella (who handles human resources for the company and is married to Perry) and Marv check potatoes going into storage at Worzella & Sons Inc., in September 2021. *Photos courtesy of Michelle Worzella*

Left: In this historic picture, from left to right, Grandma Regina Worzella and her and Clarence's children, Shirley (now Shirley Sankey) and Marv Worzella, pick potatoes on the farm.

The park was eventually turned over to the Village of Plover, which was able to develop what is there now. It's a beautiful park that my grandparents would be proud of.

How do you try to carry on a tradition of hard work and rewards? One thing about my grandpa, he would always say, "I have a half-hour job for you," and three hours later, you were still doing it. But he always rewarded you with ice cream and a soda.

Just like he would have wanted—you do what has to be done when it has to be done. Grandpa was all about getting the work done so you could play later.

Every year we take the employees on an annual team building event. We've enjoyed things like escape rooms, axe throwing, and a Brewers game.

It's nice to spend time with employees outside of the work environment. We probably spend more time with each other at work than we do with our families at home.

We are appreciative of the long hours everyone puts in, and we are thankful that their families understand that we "make hay when the sun shines."

How do you, Scott and your cousin, Trina Sankey, split up duties? Scott and I take care of deciding what crops will be planted; irrigating; and overseeing the employees who do the planting, spraying, tilling, harvesting, storage, and packaging.

Trina is the office manager and president of Worzella & Sons. She is responsible for the financial and account functions; team building; and is involved in organizing the Celebrate Plover event at Lake Pacawa.

Are there other family members involved in the operation, and if so, who and in what positions? My son, Tyler, and Scott's son, Brett, represent the fourth generation. Our cousin, Perry, is on the team in a consulting role, not part of the daily operations.

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"The legacy of the farm is being involved with the community. My grandpa was constantly donating and giving back to the community ... always for the community, always."

– Steve Worzella



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How many full-time and seasonal employees does Worzella & Sons have? We employ about 20 full-time employees, and when in full production, close to 40-50 seasonal employees.

The last four employees who retired each had between 35 and 50 years with the company. Charlie Sankey retired with 50-plus years. Joe Swiander, Darrell Firkus, and Dennis Kunst all retired with over 35 years apiece under their belts.

Nick Kurszewski is going to retire at the end of the year with over 40 years. We try our best to treat our employees good here. You have to if you want to keep them.

Are you growing 1,800 acres of potatoes and 3,400 acres of other vegetable crops? It would be 3,300 acres of other veggies, 300 acres of soybeans, and 150 acres of field corn for feed.

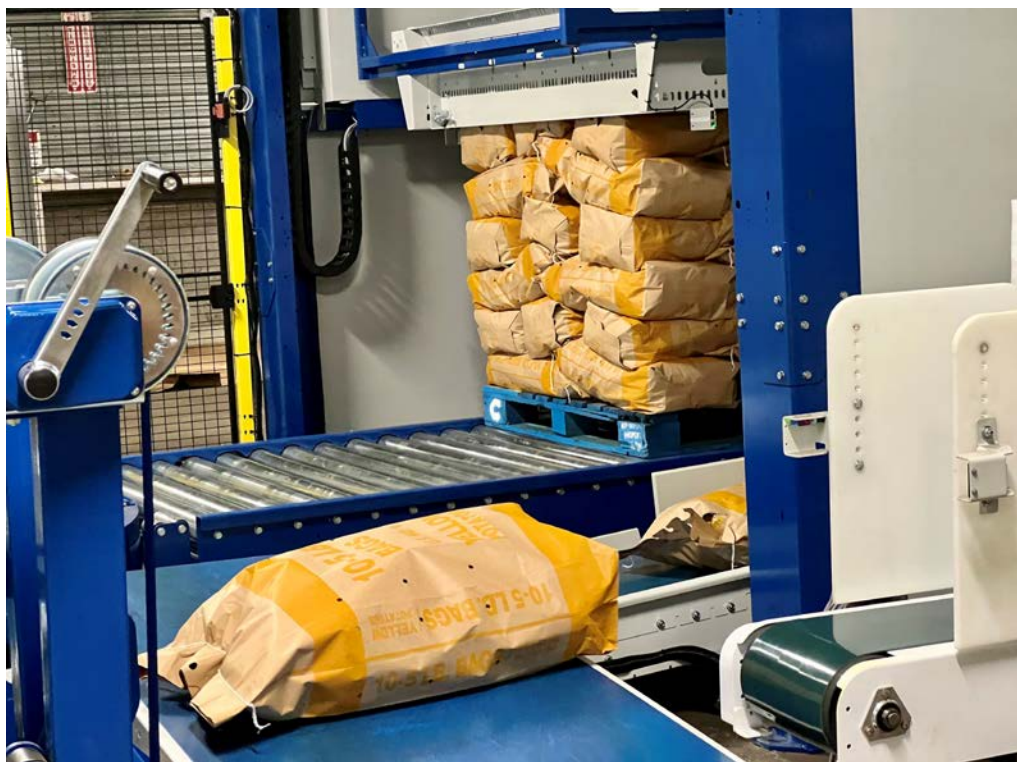
We used to grow 600-800 acres of potatoes, but we've increased it to

Above: In yesteryear, like today, Worzella & Sons Inc. was a hands-on operation, with Marv planting potatoes (left) and Norm stacking them (right).

Below: Technology is ever present at Worzella & Sons, Inc., with machines such as the Verbruggen palletizer and wrapper hard at work. *Photos courtesy of Michelle Worzella*

1,800. We need alternative acres for rotation, so we're over 5,500 acres of land now.

On what kind of rotation? It's mostly





a three-year rotation, some four-year with potatoes, so it would be green beans, sweet corn, maybe other sweet corn, and back to potatoes, or throw soybeans in there.

We put soybeans in low ground to control weeds for potatoes the next year. We grow some peas, about 300 acres.

This is the storage and marketing issue. What kind of storage capacity do you have, and can you offer potatoes year-round? We can store right around 400,000 hundredweight. We grow Norkotah, Line 8, Silverton, Goldrush, and Plover Russet, some Reveilles and Caribous.

We have 11 varieties this year total.



There are more options with all the new varieties they're breeding that resist, for instance, hollow heart and scab. It's working so far. We've had good luck with Plover Russet.

We don't store potatoes year-round, but rather we usually start shipping at the end of July and like to be done

by February 15 of each year. That's our goal, but it doesn't always work out that way. Then it's maintenance

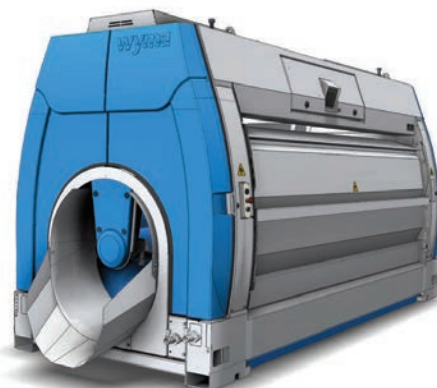
Above: Potatoes are windrowed and harvested at Worzella & Sons, Inc. *Photos courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms Photography, who has been taking pictures of the farm for over 20 years*

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Left: Steve Worzella stands in front of the farming operation's newest Spudnik 6640 potato harvester.

Above: Potatoes are harvested in 2021 at Worzella & Sons, Inc.

time. We're not equipped to run in cold weather.

I imagine it takes a lot of work to keep a clean, functional, disease-free storage. Any comments on that?

We disinfect the storages by going through a complete cleaning, which our crew is doing right now, putting a disinfectant right into the wash. They disinfect all culverts, and then spray the building one more time.

How about bagging and packaging—how big is your facility and what upgrades have been made recently?

Our packaging shed is about 34,000 square feet. We run over 1,500 acres through the shed. To accommodate that volume, we put in more automation—two automatic graders, a hollow heart detector, automatic stackers, and barrel washers.

How do you keep your potatoes

disease, bruise, and rot free? You handle them like they're babies, very carefully. Don't dig questionable potatoes that should not be put in the bin, especially if you have a disease issue. Dig potatoes when they're cool, not above a 65-degree pulp temperature.

What kind of feedback do you get from customers? We receive indirect feedback from our partner marketing



Above: After potatoes were handpicked off the ground back in the day—by Shirley Worzella (left, now Sankey) and Jimmy Turzinski in the first image—they were harvested in crates and then sometimes driven by Clarence Worzella down to Milwaukee and peddled out of the back of his pickup truck.



company, RPE, Inc., sharing positive feedback and experiences with our potatoes.

Why was it important for Worzella & Sons to take land out of production for the Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project, and the land you donated for the Farming for the Future Foundation? We gave up

160 acres to the Little Plover River conservancy area, taking it out of production and giving it to the Village of Plover as a land swap. Then we donated 24 acres to the Farming for the Future Foundation.

These are things my grandpa would have loved to see—he was all about youth and learning. It's exactly what

Fresh Worzella & Sons Inc. potatoes are dug, in 2022, along Highway 51 in Plover, Wisconsin. Photos courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms Photography

he would have wanted. That's why we donated land to the Farming for the Future project, for the youth, the kids. Education is the goal of the

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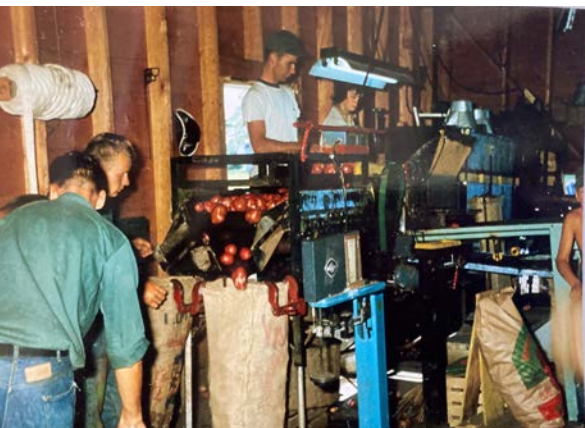
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What's your favorite part of being a farmer? Every day is a challenge. There are no two days the same, and every year is different. I like seeing the rewards at the end of the year. That's why I like digging samples. I can see what the crop is going to be. **BCT**



Left: Jim Turzinski (second from left), and Norm (white T-shirt) and Shirley (Worzella) Sankey sort and grade potatoes in this vintage photo.

Right: Brothers and third-generation farmers, Steve (left) and Scott Worzella split vice president duties at Worzella & Sons, Inc.

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