



**NAME:** Alan Sackett

**TITLE:** Partner and president of the Board

**COMPANY:** Advanced Farm Equipment, LLC

**LOCATION:** Vestaburg, MI

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Nineteen

**PREVIOUS POSITION:** Partner and operator of Sackett Potatoes and Sackett Ranch

**SCHOOLING:** Edmore Committee Schools and Michigan State University

**ACTIVITIES:** Farming and business

**ORGANIZATIONS PREVIOUSLY SERVED:** Michigan Potato Industry Commission, Potato Growers of Michigan, Mecosta County Development Corporation, and Morton Township Planning Commission

**FAMILY:** Wife, Shar, two children, two stepchildren, six grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren

**HOBBIES:** Family, business, and helping create businesses with others

# INTERVIEW

## ALAN SACKETT, partner and president of the Board, Advanced Farm Equipment, LLC

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

*A need for potato harvesters* brought several parties from Michigan and Wisconsin together to invest in their future and ensure quality machinery would be available to them.

In short, that's the story of Advanced Farm Equipment, LLC, in Vestaburg, Michigan, but there's more to it than that.

It is no accident that Advanced Farm Equipment's website address is [www.lenco-harvesters.com](http://www.lenco-harvesters.com), as the company specializes in just that, manufacturing Lenco Equipment.

According to its website, each year, "Advanced Farm Equipment strives to improve with technology, innovating hydraulics and electronics for better control and data logging, tying into your GPS."

Equipment includes not only harvesters and windrowers, but also stationary/mobile AirHead's, stone pickers, dirt eliminators, wash-line destoners, storage conveyors, potato scoopers, load-out surge tanks, and specialty parts and tools.

With a global focus on the potato industry, Advanced Farm Equipment

(AFE) provides quality equipment, parts, and service, builds farming relationships, and maintains a national dealer network.

The latter includes Big Iron Equipment of Plover, Wisconsin; Lenco West of Monte Vista, Colorado; Harriston Industries, Minto, North Dakota; Maple Grove Enterprises of Arcade, New York; Rashco Farm Supply, Moses Lake, Washington; Allan Equipment in Prince Edward Island, Canada; Burnips Equipment Company, Dorr, Michigan; and Peak Ag of Idaho Falls, Idaho.

### Tell me the history of Advanced Farm Equipment in your own words.

Advanced Farm Equipment was

**Above:** A potato grower first, as a partner and president of the Board at Advanced Farm Equipment, Alan Sackett brings a farmer's perspective and business experience to the company. All three of the company's stone pickers are shown in the overall image.



The photo taken at Schroeder Bros. Farms, Antigo, Wisconsin, is of an Advanced Farm Equipment 2022 4-Row Self-Propelled Potato Harvester with a 65-inch AirHead.

formed in 2004. Jerry Johnston, the founding owner of Lenco Machine & Tool Company, developed potato harvesting equipment.

Sackett Ranch purchased a harvester and windrower from Lenco Machine and Tool in the late '70s. Jerry sold the business in the late '90s, and the company was renamed Lenco Products.

After struggling financially, Lenco Products could not finance the rapid growth and ultimately lost the business to the bank.

**How did a Lenco manufacturer end up in Vestaburg, Michigan, in the first place, and are you the first/only such manufacturer?** Jerry lived in the Vestaburg area, in Montcalm County, which is centrally located in Michigan. The need for potato harvesters that would separate stones and potatoes became a reality when Jerry worked together with local farmers to develop the AirHead separation system.

Today, AFE is the only company that manufactures custom-built, self-propelled AirHead harvesters known for quality, durability and performance in the United States

and Canada.

**How did you and Bill Zelinski of Big Iron Equipment team up as co-owners, and are there other owners involved?** When Lenco Products closed, the dealers were concerned about not having Lenco equipment to sell. Farmers in Michigan and Wisconsin used a lot of Lenco equipment.

The dealers and farmers did not

want to lose access to Lenco parts, equipment, and service. The assets of the business were purchased from the bank by a group of investors that included me, Bill from Big Iron Equipment, Lenco West, Jerry, and an employee of Lenco Products.

**Who manages the operation, and are manufacturing, sales, and service the main three divisions?** Today the

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**Interview . . .**

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owners include (me) Alan Sackett, Bill Zelinski, and the management team of Steve Barnette, Lynn Maggert Jr., Brad Johnston, and Kim Bollinger.

Sales is handled by a growing dealer network, and direct sales by Matt Murray. Steve is our current manager.

AFE can handle service with a crew from our hydraulics department during planting and harvest seasons.

**You are also owner of Sackett Potatoes and grow 7,200 acres of potatoes for the chip industry, a family history going back to 1904. One business complements the other. Have you always been involved in both? Tell me about your family history.** My great-grandfather came to Montcalm County in 1904. He bought 160 acres and started general farming, which included a few acres of potatoes.



Through the years, he had three sons that farmed with him. In time, my grandfather took over the farm and continued general farming with potatoes. He also had three sons who were part of the farm.

In 1955, my father took over the family farm from his father and brothers and continued general farming with potatoes.

My father had three sons, and in the 1960's, started growing chip potatoes

**Above:** A pair of John Deere tractors and Lenco 6-Row Pull-Type Windrowers are hard at work, in 2022, on Main Farms, in Michigan.

for Frito-Lay. We all farmed together until 1982 when my father retired. At that time, the farm was named Sackett Ranch.

My brothers and I farmed together, growing 800 acres of potatoes for

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An advertisement for Reinke bearings. The top half features a close-up of a white bearing assembly with a central shaft, set against a background of a large white windmill. The Reinke logo is in the top left, and the text 'LEARN MORE AT REINKE.COM' is in the top right. The bottom half has a blue background with the text 'NO MAINTENANCE REQUIRED' in large white letters. Below this, a paragraph describes the maintenance-free bearing. On the right side, contact information for Roberts Irrigation is provided, including two locations in Wisconsin and the company website.

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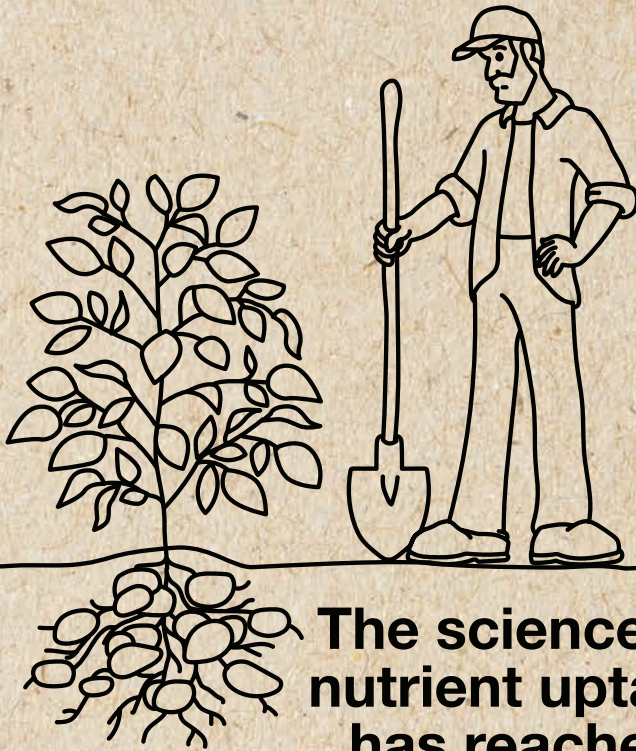
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**Interview . . .**

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chips and French fries, along with other crops.

In 1987, I separated from Sackett Ranch and took over a potato farm 30 miles north in Mecosta County. My sons, Jeff and Brian, and I formed Sackett Potatoes. We started farming 1,200 acres, with 400 acres of potatoes for the chip industry.

I have retired from Sackett Potatoes, and currently, my son, Brian, and his son, Tyler, operate Sackett Potatoes. They have farms in Illinois, North Carolina, and Michigan. At present, they grow 7,200 acres of chipping potatoes and many acres of corn, wheat, and soybeans.

My brother, Larry, still owns and operates Sackett Ranch, growing over 5,000 acres of chip potatoes.

**You are a potato grower and part-owner of an equipment company.**

**Does that give you a unique perspective and insight?** I think all growers have had input into the design process of our custom-built equipment. Dealers also bring a lot of input to the table.

I try to bring the farmer's perspective and business experience to the company.

**What other equipment does Advanced Farm Equipment manufacture other than Lenco**

**Above:** The 72-inch Lenco Stationary AirHead is designed for use in sorting lines and helps to remove debris and stones from potatoes before they go into storage.

**harvesters?** Along with self-propelled harvesters, we build windrowers, including self-propelled and pull-types of various sizes. We have currently designed and built stone pickers, stationary AirHeads, dirt eliminators, wash line equipment, and conveyors.

**What makes Lenco harvesters different or more durable or advanced than other potato equipment?** Our equipment is custom built for growers' needs



Lenco four-row potato harvesters are put to work, in 2021, digging potatoes in Wisconsin. Images courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms Photography

with quality, durability, performance, and longevity behind it. Lenco harvesters built with hydraulic ground drives are still in use today.

Sackett Potatoes purchased serial #1, in 1987. It was a 4-Row AirHead Self-Propelled with hydraulic ground drives, and I believe it is still in use on a small farm today.

**Is Big Iron Equipment your only, or main, Wisconsin dealer?** Big Iron is our only Wisconsin dealer and most productive dealer. We have a growing network of dealers in Colorado, Washington, New York, North Carolina, the Red River Valley region, and Canada.

**Does Advanced Farm Equipment also sell direct?** AFE sells direct and serves as a dealer in Michigan. We have sold machines direct to growers in other parts of the United States if they do not have a dealer in their area.

**What is your territory?** All of the U.S.



and Canada.

**Do you work directly with farmers and dealers?** We support our dealers in their markets, and we provide direct service and support to our customers in areas where we do not have an established dealer.

When a new harvester is delivered,

**Above:** Alan Sackett of Sackett Potatoes and Advanced Farm Equipment is shown next to a picture (to his left or the readers' right) of his dad harvesting potatoes in the 1940's.

we will typically send a crew to assist with unloading and assembly. We may also send an engineer to provide harvester start-up, controls, and

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An advertisement for J.W. Mattek &amp; Sons. On the left is a green circular logo with the text "FAMILY OWNED &amp; GROWN", "J.W. MATTEK &amp; SONS", and "FOUNDATION &amp; CERTIFIED SEED POTATOES". Below the logo is a black box with white text: "Contact: Jim, John or Joe". To the right of the logo is a large photograph of a potato field. In the foreground, a white semi-truck is being loaded with potatoes by a green harvester. Other harvesters are visible in the background. Overlaid on the right side of the photo is the text: "OVER 50 YEARS EXPERIENCE IN SEED PRODUCTION!", "SNOWDEN • PIKE • ATLANTIC • LAMOKA", "MEGACHIP • HODAG • MANISTEE", "SILVERTON • LADY LIBERTY", "N5798 Star Neva Road • Deerbrook, WI", and "Telephone: 715-623-6963 • Fax: 715-627-7245 • Email: jwmattek@gmail.com". In the bottom right corner of the photo is the "WISCONSIN CERTIFIED SEED POTATOES" logo, which features a red star with a white outline.



operating instructions.

**How many employees does Advanced Farm Equipment have, and in what main capacities?** Advanced Farm Equipment has 22 employees who are engineers, fabricators, painters, hydraulics and electrical specialists, and management.

**How was the 2021 Michigan/Sackett Potatoes harvest?** In Michigan, most farms enjoyed moderate weather and a good growing season. Potatoes yielded very well along with all the rotational crops.

Both 2021 and 2022 were good years for most farms, which helps counteract high input costs and the previous few years that didn't

turn out so well. The other states that Sackett Potatoes farms in also did well.

**What have the main advancements been in Lenco harvesters and other equipment you sell?** AFE offers on-board computers and programming that monitor, self-regulate, and automate some of the harvester functions to simplify control for the operator.

On-board sensors and transmitters send harvester performance information to the iCloud, where it is immediately available to our electrical and hydraulics department.

We can then monitor hydraulic pressures, road speeds, digging

**Left:** A New Holland T8 tractor pulls a 6-row Lenco windrower in October 2022. *Image courtesy of Roven Farms Photography*

**Right:** John Schomburg of Roven Farms Photography calls this picture, taken in Wisconsin, the "Red Green Lenco Show."

speeds, conveyor speeds, and loading and AirHead performance. From our facility in Michigan, we can modify the harvester programming and make real-time suggestions to the machine operators as they harvest in the field.

**What's the most exciting piece of equipment in the Advanced Farm Equipment line right now?** The most popular equipment in our line is the 4 Row Self Propelled 65" AirHead Harvester.



In addition to Lenco harvesters and windrowers, Advanced Farm Equipment offers everything from barrel washers and hiller frames (shown) to stone pickers, dirt eliminators, wash-line destoners, storage conveyors, potato scoopers, load-out surge tanks, and specialty parts and tools.

One of our most exciting new designs is our self-propelled 72" AirHead Harvester for growers who want the potential for 20% more harvesting capacity in rocky conditions. We have sold several to potato growers in New York, Wisconsin, and Canada.

There has been growing interest in our 72" stationary AirHeads for farmers who harvest without AirHead harvesters. Our mobile units are placed in storage lines to separate rocks and clods before going into storage.

**Do you feel, as a farmer, you are a better judge of quality?** As a farmer, I do contribute a perspective on equipment because I have owned Lenco equipment since the late 70's.

**Are you full-time at Advanced Farm Equipment?** No, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations; our

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*“From our facility in Michigan, we can modify the harvester programming and make real-time suggestions to the machine operators as they harvest in the field.”*

**– Alan Sackett,**  
*Advanced Farm Equipment*

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management team handles that. I am available for any business decisions or questions that anyone may have.

**What do you hope for the future of Advanced Farm Equipment and/or potato growing in general?**

I believe Advanced Farm Equipment and the Lenco brand will continue

to provide the most durable harvesters available, and will grow to gain a larger share of the potato harvester market.

Potato growing is becoming more and more challenging because of the current business atmosphere and the need for growers to become more sustainable. **BCT**

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