



INTERVIEW

MATT PATOKA,

partner, Patoka Farms, LLC

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



NAME: Matt Patoka

TITLE: Part owner along with his father, Bill, and uncle, Gary Patoka

COMPANY: Patoka Farms, LLC

LOCATION: Amherst, WI

HOMETOWN: Amherst

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Seven

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Bob's Plumbing and Heating as a journeyman plumber

SCHOOLING: Amherst High School and the journeyman's course in plumbing

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Amherst Fair Board

AWARDS/HONORS: Third Place State for National Corn Growers Association Yield Contest, several Pioneer Brand Products Outstanding Corn Yield awards, McCain 2018 Champion Field Direct—Class A, and McCain Pursuit of Excellence in Potato Production in the CropMET Program, 1999-2003

FAMILY: Wife, Jenni, and daughter, Ali (10 years old)

HOBBIES: Hunting, fishing, and snowmobiling

A century farm as of 2020, Patoka Farms, LLC, in Amherst, Wisconsin, has been in continuous operation at its original location for 103 years.

"We couldn't go to State Fair to get our 100-year plaque after COVID hit," says third-generation owner Gary Patoka. Gary, his brother, Bill, and Bill's son, Matt—this issue's interviewee—are the proud owners and operators of the century-old farm.

Matt's great-grandpa and great-grandma, Joe and Agnes Patoka, settled the land as a small dairy farm. Joe was killed in a car accident in the 1940's. Even though Joe and Agnes's son, Leonard, was only 16 years old at time, he and Agnes took over the farm.

"It was mainly dairy, but like everyone else in the area, they had chickens, pigs, and a few cows," Matt says.

"My dad, Leonard, would go to the

cities peddling potatoes, and my mom, Jeanette, would have to be the one to stay home, milk the cows, and do the chores," Gary relates. "One time a chicken hitchhiked on the truck on the way to market, and the story goes Dad sold it to a customer when he got there."

FARM EXPANSION

Leonard, Bill, and Gary expanded the farm over the years, buying land and improving equipment. Leonard and his mother, Agnes, bought an 80-acre parcel, and then Leonard officially

Above: Matt Patoka represents the fourth generation of family members to grow potatoes and vegetables on Patoka Farms, LLC, in Amherst, Wisconsin. The beautiful aerial view of potato harvest 2020 shows the home farm at the top of the image and was taken by drone courtesy of David and Kevin Hafner of Hafner Seed Farms.



purchased the farm from his mom in 1957, expanding it from there.

In the 1960s, Leonard bought Hoffman Farm, the first irrigated cropland in the area, and the Patokas started irrigating their own crops, in 1963, laying pipe and using handheld end guns.

Leonard researched the area over the years looking for potato land, and when available, purchased it, adding more wells and land in 1966. Leonard Patoka & Sons was a dairy farm until 2002.

Today, Patoka Farms, LLC encompasses 1,020 acres plus 500 additional acres of rented land on neighboring farms, some of which the Patokas have been renting since 1979 or '80.

“We’ve never lost a renter yet,” Bill says. “We’ve probably never made one mad enough.”

“The last chunk of land we rented, the neighbor came to us,” Gary adds. “They wanted us to rent it and knew we’d take care of it. That comes from history and word of mouth.”

Matt, you represent the fourth generation on the farm. Are you full-time? I’m full-time as of seven years ago, but even before then, I was always around here. I would come every day after work at Bob’s Plumbing and stay until 9 p.m.

I worked at Bob’s for 15 years.

At that time, we still had cattle, but I wanted to explore my opportunities off the farm.

You’ve been farming most of your life, then. Do you have any favorite memories of growing up on the farm? Yes, I’ve been here my whole life. There are many good memories. I remember, as a kid, grading potatoes at night when my Grandpa Leonard was selling potatoes throughout the state. There was always family around.

I just remember the glory days of baling hay and sweating hard.

Left: Burbank potatoes are planted, in 2019, on Patoka Farms, LLC, in Amherst, Wisconsin. The Patokas have been sourcing seed potatoes from Hafner Seed Farms for 30 years. Photo courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms

Right: From left to right, Gary, Matt and Bill Patoka are the co-owners and operators of Patoka Farms, in Amherst. Matt is Bill’s son and represents the fourth generation on the farm.

Afterward, everyone got to sit down and eat watermelons on the north porch. It was the coolest spot in summer.

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How many acres of potatoes does Patoka Farms grow under contract for McCain Foods, and how many for other processing or fresh markets?

We grow 115 acres of Burbank potatoes for McCain Foods, 110 acres of Superior canning potatoes for Del Monte, and 50 acres of Silverton potatoes for the Midwest Potatoes packing shed.

Del Monte is approximately a 65-day potato crop, and we also grow 300 acres of green beans for Del Monte. We harvest 175 acres of sweet corn for Nortera Foods, Inc., of Bonduel. We also raise 400 acres of field corn, 200 acres of soybeans, and 1 acre of pumpkins and watermelon.

We also grew out a few chipping stock potatoes back in the day.

What rotation are you on and with what other crops? We work on a three-year rotation, including sweet corn or field corn, green beans, and soybeans.

Are all your acres under irrigation, or partially? Between both owned and rented land, we currently have 1,090 acres under irrigation, which represents around 95 percent of our total acres in production.

What have been the biggest changes on Patoka Farms as far as irrigation and irrigation technology in recent years? We had three wells on diesel, and in a 10-year span, converted them to electric with variable drives for efficiency.

A variable drive doesn't overuse

water, but instead only produces what the acreage needs, never going past or over its regulated pressure. If the end gun shuts off, the well slows down and holds a constant pressure without going over the regulated psi.

If we have three or four pivots on one well, the variable drive will only put out so much pressure, so you save water. One pivot might be 1,200 feet long, and another 600 feet. The well is programmed to know that and won't pump more water than what is necessary.

They're pretty much low-pressure pivots that we re-nozzle every eight years or so. They're outside and they're plastic, so no matter how durable, the nozzles need to be maintained.

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Clockwise: Harvesting Superior canning potatoes for Del Monte directly off the field, in 2017, Bill's grandsons, Riley, Jacob and Brady (from left to right in the first image), ride along on the harvester to clean the dirt off the potatoes and pick out any rocks or spuds with soft spots as they go into the truck. *Photos courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms*

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Two years ago, we purchased our first two GPS-driven corner pivots with no buried wires. The corner arms drive off satellite positioning, so they're new and improved. Currently, out of 28 pivots, we have three of them on remote start. We run 28 pivots, 16 of the 150-series (SR) guns and six SR200 guns at the corners.

We water 100 percent of the land we own, and since we don't have nearly as much as some of the larger operations, we even farm the corners.

When the canneries come, they give us warning to get pipe out of the way so that they don't run over it.

What are your specific duties on the farm, Matt? I perform the bulk of the maintenance and get equal say in decisions made on the farm. I do all

planting with the corn planter, which also includes green beans, and do some irrigation.

I currently run the windrower, do fertilizer spreading, spread the cover crops, and do all the odds and ends in between.

How many family members and in what positions work Patoka Farms in Amherst? There are the three of us full time, and my uncles, Don and Mike, work part-time seasonally, or we give them a phone call and ask, "Are you doing anything?"

We have a lot of family members who help at harvesttime, grandkids, and our wives, as well as neighbors who keep coming out to give a hand, from five years old on up to almost 80.

"Some grandkids will hop on the

Left: Bill Patoka's wife, Ann (left), and Gary Patoka's wife, Lori (right), size and grade potatoes in 2006. "It doesn't happen without them," says Matt Patoka, about running the farming operation.

Right: Leonard Patoka is shown walking toward the farm's first two-row Braco harvester that was pulled by an International Harvester Farmall 656 Hydro tractor for many years.

grading line. Adelynn is six years old and going on 16," Gary says about his granddaughter. "She'll jump in the grading line and go to work."

"We dig direct off the field for Del Monte," Gary adds. "A few neighbors and family members ride on the harvester to clean the dirt off the potatoes and pick out any rocks or spuds with soft spots as they go into the truck."

Bill's grandchildren ride the digger,



Dryland corn is harvested at Patoka Farms. Photos courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms



and he says it's where all the grandkids started out. "We've been growing for McCain and Ore-Ida since 1982. We're direct off field, and time is money," he says.

"I've got a grandson, Jacob, and he helps us all the time over summer," Bill adds.

What's your favorite part of farming, Matt, or best part of your day?

I guess the best part is getting started in the morning, looking to what the challenges are for the day. Every day is different. The best part of the day is making sure all the pivots have made it to their destinations overnight.

Why do you enjoy farming in Amherst? The Amherst school district is one of the best parts about the area. That's where I went, and this is where I started. This is what I know.

Left: Burbank seed potatoes are loaded into the planter, in 2019, at Patoka Farms. Photo courtesy of John Schomburg, Roven Farms.

Right: Back in the day, Bill Patoka is shown driving the tractor while family members ride the harvester and clean and sort potatoes off the field.

It's home, the country living. We don't know anything else but this area.

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Proudly displayed in the Patoka Farms office are grower awards the operation has earned, and model tractors and implements that represent many of the full-size versions the farm has used over the years.



I'm sure it would be great to have flat land, and we know what Plover is like, but God gave us these rolling fields. If you start harvesting or planting on one end of a field, you can't see the other end.

Are you in sandy soil where the farm

is located? I'd say it's sandy loam, and some Rosholt loam. We have as many as three soils going across some fields ... and rocks. They need water, too. Ha!

What are your biggest challenges each year? Weather, Mother Nature.

When it rains, it pours inches at a time, six inches here, seven there. A few years back, it seemed like every time we planted the home farm, a few days later, the rain would come.

Keeping the crops on top of the field and not the bottom has become a

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challenge, with land flooding on the bottom. It's back to those rolling fields.

How has the farm changed technologically in other areas besides irrigation in the past few years?

We've had GPS on tractors for 12 years, and as part of an ongoing cycle, we're constantly upgrading to better versions of display screens, tractor guidance, and GPS technology.

We typically run a separate entity screen from what the tractors provide. We work with Trimble through Vantage North Central in Plainfield. It's a learning curve every day. We also have our own base station for the GPS.

GPS ensures the tractors stay in straight lines for efficiency in planting. It also aids in not overapplying any kind of nutrients or crop protection products because you're not overlapping. There's steering

"I remember the glory days of baling hay and sweating hard. Afterward, everyone got to sit down and eat watermelons on the north porch. It was the coolest spot in summer."

- Matt Patoka,
Patoka Farms, LLC

accuracy within sub-inches.

We're also saving fuel because the tractors are guided right down the row. When we make that first line between points A and B at planting, we can go back in there three times and not have to steer.

You can plant seed until it's gone and not have to stop. One year, it was so wet, we planted at night when the rain had stopped. We were planting at night more than during the day, and at least once until 4 a.m. When

we were done planting, it rained again the next day.

You can't see row markers in the dark, but because of GPS, we could continue planting.

"One reason we planted the last field at night is that we had a surprise birthday party for my mom, Jeanette, the next day. We had to get done planting," Gary remembers.

Jeanette was 92 when she died, and Leonard was 77.

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“Jeanette cultivated with a two-row cultivator,” Bill says. “Our mom was the backbone of this farm.”

Any new equipment purchases recently? We can’t find anything because of supply chain issues, but we bought a Spudnik AIRSEP Harvester in 2018, and we added another tractor to the line in 2022.

Once we bought the digger, we expanded our fleet of trucks, and we have new sizers coming for the 2023 season.

Do you have storage and trucking arms of the business? Not for potatoes. We just run our own bulk bed box trucks. That’s all we have for trucking, and we also use them for corn and soybeans.

How many seasonal workers does Patoka Farms employ? The total number is 6-8, and up to 15 at harvest. The majority is all family, including Bill and Gary’s sister, Mary, who’s retired. She comes here now and helps grade.

“The first thing she said is, ‘Things have changed since I was on the



The Patokas rediscovered/unearthed their first one-row mounted harvester half-buried in a field next land they own.

farm,” Gary relates.

“It’s bad when you have younger siblings who have retired, and you’re still going,” Bill adds. “There were eight of us siblings raised here on the farm, four girls and four boys. We all did our chores here.”

Is there anything you’d like to add, Matt, perhaps about your hopes for the future? We want to maintain and grow the operation and keep it as a family farm. This is actually a family farm in the truest sense of the term—everyone working here is family.

And it will remain a family farm because there’s a fifth generation waiting to get in here, too. Those would be Bill’s grandkids. There’s a gap between them, with some being older, in their 20’s, and my own daughter, Ali, is 10 years old.

Gary has grandkids who are 6, 4 and 15 months old. “The 15-month-old loves tractors, and he wants to go inside them,” Gary says. “Like a good grandpa, I bought him a peddle tractor and he loves that.”

Matt concludes that he just wants to extend appreciation to his wife, Jenni, and Gary and Bill’s wives, Lori and Ann, respectively, who have stood behind them over the years.

“It doesn’t happen without them,” he states. **BCT**



Digging Burbank potatoes for McCain Foods, in 2020, a 6120 Spudnik is pulled by a Case IH 310 Magnum tractor. The drone photo is courtesy of David and Kevin Hafner of Hafner Seed Farms.