



INTERVIEW

RANDY FLEISHAUER,

general manager, Plover River Farms Alliance Inc.

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

NAME: Randy Fleishauer

TITLE: General manager

COMPANY: Plover River Farms Alliance Inc.

LOCATION: Stevens Point, WI

HOMETOWN: Arkansaw (Yes, that is spelled correctly), WI

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Six

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Twenty-five years with R.D. Offutt Company in potato and wheat production

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Though Randy says, "I just farm," he is serving his second term on the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Board of Directors, currently as president

FAMILY: Wife, Anna; children, Rick and Tara; and two granddaughters, Carmella and Emily

HOBBIES: Hunting, occasional horrific golfing displays, and a few other various stress-relieving attempts

The question isn't "why would he," but why wouldn't Randy Fleishauer have wanted to return to Wisconsin and go to work for Plover River Farms in Stevens Point?

With a strong agricultural background and love for the Midwest, and Wisconsin in particular, Fleishauer would be joining a farm known for sustainable and eco-friendly practices as well as being part of the Healthy Grown program, including prairie restoration on portions of the land.

Helmed by Nick Somers, president of Plover River Farms, the operation has been a family affair for generations.

When Nick was five months old, his father died of a sudden heart attack, and his mother, Ann Somers, packed him and his three-year-old sister up, taking them to her home farm where she teamed up with her brother, Don Cychosz, to make a life for the family.

They raised mink, farmed dairy cattle, and grew hand-picked green beans, strawberries and eventually potatoes, the latter of which became promising with the development of irrigation.

Nick's uncle Don was one of the first in the Stevens Point area to buy a pivot irrigation system, and, in 1968, Ann, Don and Nick joined together to form Plover River Farms, Inc. It was then that Nick married his wife, Dianne, and together started their own family.

Fleishauer, meanwhile, who grew up on a small dairy farm in Arkansaw, in Pepin County, Wisconsin, and had made a career in the agriculture industry both within and outside of the state, never forgot his roots and true passion for farming.

Above: Randy Fleishauer had been with R.D. Offutt for 25 years in several locations before joining Plover River Farms as general manager. After learning the background and history of Plover River Farms, a Wisconsin Healthy Grown operation helmed by Nick and Dianne Somers, in Stevens Point, the idea of being back in the state where he was born and raised, and growing potatoes, appealed to Fleishauer.



Right: Caribou potatoes are planted at Plover River Farms, Stevens Point, Wisconsin, in April 2023, using a Lockwood vacuum planter pulled by a John Deere 8370 R tractor.



In 2017, he joined Plover River Farms Alliance, Inc. as general manager, and only a few years later, the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association Board of Directors, where he serves today as president.

You grew up on a small dairy farm in Pepin County, Wisconsin. Did you know back then that you wanted to work in the agriculture industry, and if so, why? I did. I was never crazy about the cattle aspect of the farm, but I thoroughly enjoyed the crop and equipment part of the operation, so I also worked as a service tech at a John Deere dealership for six years

before getting into potatoes.

I really enjoyed the work and people. I worked with tons of farmers having varying types and sizes of operations ... and personalities, the latter being as interesting as the work.

Do you have a favorite memory or memories of growing up on the farm? I have many. The farm is a great place to grow up.

We had a couple of smaller tractors for little jobs, an Allis Chalmers WD 40 and a Farmall H, and every farm kid remembers the first time he or she got to drive solo.

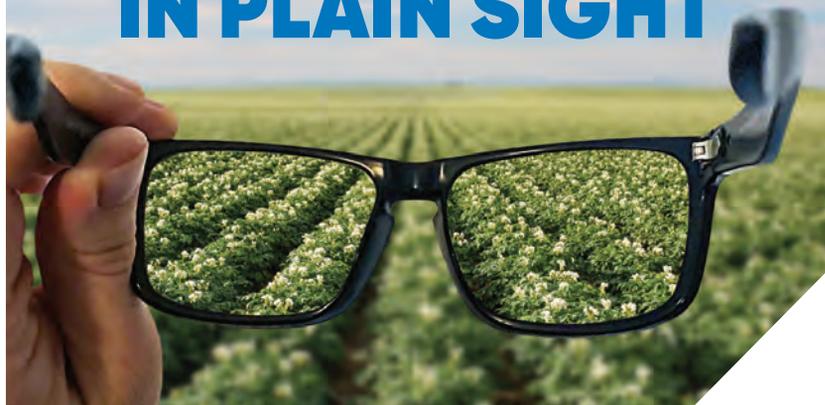
Those little four-speed tractors were, of course, the “starters.” I could barely reach the pedals without sliding all the way off the seat, but man was I happy. Freedom! ’merica!

Dad kept an eye on me that first week. I was only allowed to be in first gear until I was ready for more. Well, what red-blooded American kid is going to stay in first gear?

I bugged him for second gear until he relented. So, with the chores done, it was finally time to unhook the wagon and take my fine ride back through the farmyard to put it back in the

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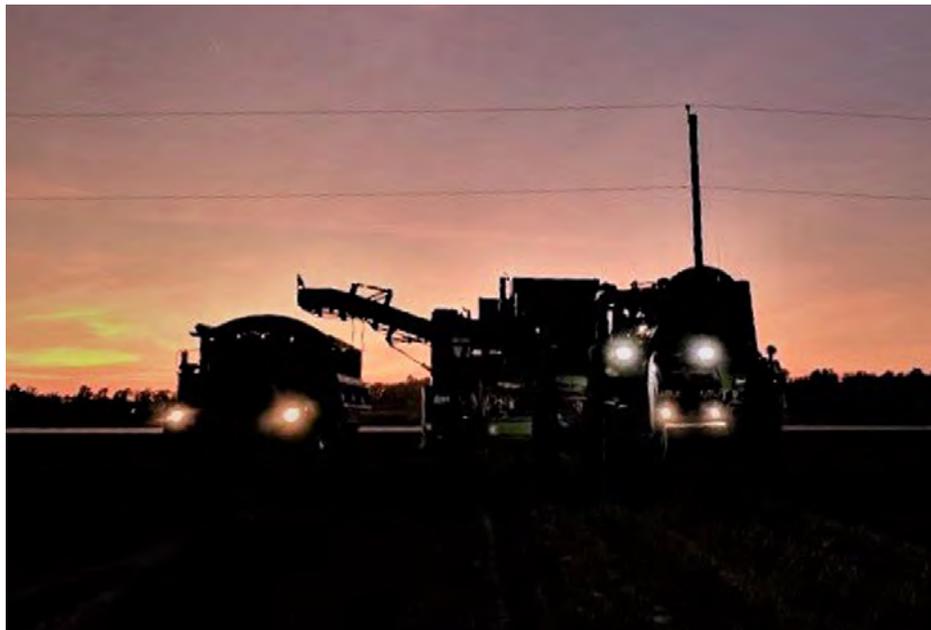
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shed ... in second gear!

I felt like I was flying. I got it reined in and parked in the shed, shaking just a bit. I got off with wobbly knees and turned toward the open door where my dad leaned, arms crossed.

At the time, I thought he was frowning, though now I know it was more of an *effort* to frown through amusement. I said, “Boy, second gear is a lot different.” Dad said, “No, not really. Not very much. You wouldn’t know that though because you were

in fourth gear. Road gear.”

I gulped. He fought back a grin and told me that, despite my efforts to give him a heart attack, I handled it just fine so from then on, I could use whatever gear was appropriate.

He emphasized that, of course, road gear through the yard was *not* appropriate and next time his reaction would be quite different. Kids!

You also worked for 25 years at R.D. Offutt in many locations. What were

Left: Nick and Dianne Somers, owners of Plover River Farms, pose during the 2018 Industry Show Awards Banquet, in Stevens Point, when Nick was inducted into the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPGVA) Hall of Fame.

Right: Dan Walsch of Plover River Farms took this pre-dawn photo of a Lenco harvester digging yellow potatoes in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

you tasked with, and what are your main takeaways from that time? I was farm manager for them in several locations in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and South Dakota. I enjoyed digging into each new area.

I was usually asked to transfer to a new locale in late February or March, so there was never an abundance of time to wrap my head around everything before planting the crop in April.

Diving into soil and plat maps, finding all the fields and seeing what they were like, meeting existing employees and hiring new ones, sorting out suppliers and supply chains, and conducting a quick evaluation were always challenges that I enjoyed.

There was also the personal end of it—selling and buying a place to park my boots and trying to remember at the end of those first few days in a



The historic Plover River Farms photo shows Nick Somers, left, with Andrew Rompalski (center), and Nick’s first cousin, Ted Cychosz, planting strawberries.

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Right: Nick Somers takes a break from potato planting, in 2012, to pose on the tractor at Plover River Farms, Stevens Point, Wisconsin.



new location how to get home.

One thing that sticks with me, aside from the farming, was the diversity and mini culture, if you will, of each area. The differences and similarities of the people, their practices, lifestyles, habits, and even how they spoke were interesting.

It's something I never paid very much attention to when traveling or visiting somewhere, because when moving outside your home region, you expect

the differences to some degree. But when you live day to day in different areas within your home region, you start to notice the nuances.

My main takeaway, though, is that no matter where you go, you will meet some great people and make friends. Although those friendships inevitably fade somewhat, most are lifelong.

Why did you join Plover River Farms in 2017 as farm manager, and what appealed to you about the position?

I was living and working near Fort Pierre, South Dakota, raising 32,000 acres of predominately wheat west of the Missouri River. I was contacted about the position at Plover River, and after a couple of phone conversations, met with Nick and Dianne Somers and the people there.

After learning of the background and history of their operation, the idea of being back in Wisconsin growing potatoes was appealing, so we decided to make the move. That was a good decision and we're happy here.

You joined the WPVGA Board, and after a few short years, are now president. Why is it important for you to be involved? Wisconsin potato and vegetable growers have worked *together* very hard, very diligently, and persistently for decades to improve and educate themselves, their customers, and the public.

It's impressive that the growers view themselves and each other as a community of like-minded businesspeople with common goals and an equal voice regardless of the size of their operations.

Left: This image of a beautiful field of Reveille potatoes with purple flowers on Plover River Farms was captured by Tricia Kertzman in July 2021.





Randy Fleishauer accepts the McCain Foods Champion Bruise Free Award, on behalf of Plover River Farms, for Crop Year 2021.

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– Randy Fleishauer,
Plover River Farms

They’ve worked together for so long to improve and enhance the industry in Wisconsin. I’m happy to help in any way I can.

What type of potato and vegetable acreage is Plover River Farms producing on rotation, and for what markets? Annually, we average 3,200 acres overall, with 1,150

acres of potatoes, including 500 for processing and the remainder going to the fresh market, rotated with sweet corn, peas, and soybeans.

Processing potatoes are contracted out with McCain Foods, and fresh market potatoes go through Paragon Farms. Vegetable crops are grown for Seneca Foods and Nortera Foods.

How many full- and part-time employees do you have? Seasonal? Plover River Farms employs 12 full-time, six part-time, and 20-plus seasonal workers.

How did the planting season go this year? As usual, the weather made it a bit sporadic, 85 degrees one week,

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snow the next, throw in some rain after that. Mother Nature loves to test a farmer's patience.

Are you already looking ahead to harvest, and if so, how are you preparing? Yes, we're looking ahead to harvest as does everyone else, I'm sure, planning years ahead for long term, months ahead seasonally,

weeks ahead for fluidity, and daily as changes hit.

Planning helps keep me sane, though some might argue the sanity part.

Holding yearly post-harvest discussions while things are still fresh in everyone's mind generally helps to streamline, improve, and make the process safer. We're fortunate

Left: A bin is filled with russet potatoes at Plover River Farms.

Right: A potato truck is filled at Plover River Farms in this 2018 image taken by the Badger Common'Tater editor.

to have a great group of people who care and are willing to provide input to keep improving.

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Are you using any new machinery or methods this season? We are moving to more no-till with sweet corn where possible, so we've upgraded our planter to better accomplish that. There are some upgrades, but really nothing technologically new on the potato side this year.

What do you most enjoy about potato and vegetable farming in Central Wisconsin and working for Plover River Farms Alliance? The answer to that is simple. I love what I do, where I do it, and the people I do it with. I know that sounds a bit cliché, but honestly, if you're lucky enough to get there, the day that truth hits you is a great one. **BC'T**



A John Deere 8370 R tractor is set up for hilling potatoes at Plover River Farms, May 2023.



Nick Somers (left) of Plover River Farms, hands out potato cookies to participants and attendees of the WPVGA-sponsored 2019 Crazylegs Classic run/walk in Madison, Wisconsin. The WPVGA mascot, Spudly, interacts with a youth participant.



Nick Somers poses in front of the Wisconsin Spudmobile traveling billboard and educational vehicle.



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