

# INTERVIEW

**SAM OURADA**, partner,  
Wisconsin Central Farms, Inc.

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



**NAME:** Sam Ourada

**TITLE:** Partner

**COMPANY:** Wisconsin Central Farms, Inc.

**LOCATION:** Nekoosa, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Antigo, WI

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Farm manager for 42 years, different farms

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** Anthony Farms in Scandinavia, Wisconsin, and Stan Thomas Farms of Hancock

**SCHOOLING:** Antigo High School and Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Stevens Point in soil science and chemistry

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Grower member of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) and various ATV (All-Terrain Vehicle) clubs

**AWARDS/HONORS:** WPVGA Young Grower of the Year and various McCain grower awards

**FAMILY:** Wife, Liz, married 40 years, and daughter, Courtney, 38 years old

**HOBBIES:** Fishing and UTV (Utility Terrain Vehicle) riding

## *Raised on a potato farm in Antigo, Wisconsin,*

Sam Ourada had his sights set on something else—he was going to be a soil scientist or chemist. As Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote in his 1786 poem “To a Mouse,” “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.”

Sam’s plans didn’t really go awry when he left his father’s farm to attend college at UW-Stevens Point. First, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in soil science and chemistry with a minor in resource management, and then business opportunities presented themselves.

Sam’s father and brother, Ken Ourada Sr. and Ken Jr., owned Lucky Devil Farms in Antigo. “I really wasn’t into farming when I was a kid. I was going to college to get a real job,” Sam says. “I liked grading potatoes and helping ship them with my father and brother, Ken Jr., but other than that, I would have rather been fishing.”

Now, as a partner in Wisconsin Central Farms, Inc. of Nekoosa, and owner of a vacation home on Petenwell Lake, Sam can do both—grow potatoes and go fishing.

**I know you worked for Stan Thomas Farms in Hancock and as a farm manager for Anthony Farms in Scandinavia. What made you branch out and start your own farming operation?** I worked with Stan Thomas from 1981-1987, and at Anthony Farms from 1988-1992 before moving to B& D Farms.

**Above:** Sam Ourada of Wisconsin Central Farms, Inc., in Nekoosa, Wisconsin, grows potatoes, sweet potatoes and vegetables for processing. Wisconsin Central Farms has storage capacity for approximately 285,000 cwt. (hundredweight) of potatoes and another 80,000 cwt. of sweet potatoes raised for McCain Foods.

**Left:** Sweet potato slips are transplanted on Wisconsin Central Farms. With each plant touched by hand, a transplanter has 12 seats for workers, each of whom places the plant slips on the fingers of the planter. The farm runs six-to-eight transplanters at a time, so has close to 100 people working at once.





B&D had a manager who was nearing retirement, and I could work into ownership in an affiliated company called Wisconsin Central Farms.

B&D Farms was owned by Dar (Darwin) Blanke and Pat Daly, two bankers who had hired Chuck Von Einem as their farm manager. I knew Chuck, a great guy, and I knew how he ran a farm. To me, his way of running a business was philosophically smart.

**So how did you end up as a partner in the affiliated company, Wisconsin Central Farms, Inc.?** I became a shareholder in Wisconsin Central Farms when I started working there, in 1992, and gained more ownership over time.

Dar passed away in 2012, and in 2021, the B&D Farms partners wanted to exit active farming. Liz and I found a couple other partners and bought out B&D Farms' shares or ownership in Wisconsin Central Farms.

We purchased their equipment and, for the most part, assumed their production contracts and were able to retain the employees, so it was relatively seamless. I could have retired. I was 62 years old, but I had a halfway decent standard of living and wasn't ready for full retirement yet.

**How many acres of potatoes and vegetables are you growing and on what rotation?** We raise 850-1,000 acres of potatoes, depending on contracts, including 600-650 for McCain Foods, 65-150 acres in other

processing varieties, and 200-300 acres of chipping potatoes.

We plant 400-700 acres of snapbeans, 200-400 in peas, and 600-900 acres of sweet corn, all depending on contracts.

Potatoes are mostly on a four-year rotation, probably 3.75 years on average.

**What other crops does your farm incorporate?** We plant 400-600 acres of soybeans to fill in the blanks, sort of as a glorified cover crop, and 150-300 acres of sweet potatoes for McCain Foods.

We rent out 400-500 acres for pickles and another 150 for field corn.

**Left:** Alternately saying he doesn't like new equipment and admitting he's a little too frugal to buy brand new machinery and implements, Sam Ourada refers to his trucks as "the rainbow coalition."

**Right:** This view from the tractor during sweet potato harvest on Wisconsin Central Farms is drop-dead gorgeous.

**So, your potatoes and vegetables are mostly going to the processing market?** It's all processing for potatoes and vegetables.

**What varieties of potatoes do you grow?** We raise about 500 acres of Umatilla, 50-100 acres of Russet Burbank, 80 acres of McCain experimental varieties, 65-150 acres of Goldrush, 130 of Atlantic, and 100-

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150 acres of chip varieties for storage. As far as the McCain experimental varieties, I'm trying them primarily because I want to find one that's less expensive in chemical and fertility aspects. They supposedly have a variety that uses less fumigation, chemicals and fertility, less nitrogen primarily. I have a sustainability mindset.

We've been experimenting with bio-fumigation and seeing mixed results. We're starting to figure it out, though, that piece of the puzzle, especially through longer rotation.

Like I say, we're primarily in a four-year rotation for potatoes, but it's closer to three-to-four now with prices for rotational crops being in the dumpster. It's hard to do, but you need to subsidize rotational crops with potatoes.

I don't have any Goldrush potatoes this year, which we usually grow for Northern Star, but they had so many

left in storage, we didn't plant any this year.

**We had a lot of rain this year—how was the growing season and how did you deal with the elements?**

Potatoes held up pretty good. The rain makes it difficult to get stuff done on a timely basis.

It appears that the potatoes are set higher in the hill due to being saturated deep for such a long time. This will probably lead to more greening and an added risk for field frost.

The low areas are gone—washed out early in the season—so storage issues may not be as bad as some growers thought they would be.

We'll see what August brings (with this interview conducted in late July), but if it's relatively dry and not too hot, I think we have the potential for a decent crop.

It was extremely hard to maintain

**Above and Below:** Sam Ourada is in familiar surroundings at his office in Nekoosa, Wisconsin, having worked on potato farms most of his life, currently growing processing potatoes for the frozen and chip markets, and being surrounded by potato chip tins he's collected over the years. "My daughter, Courtney, always knew she could get me a tin for my birthday or Father's Day, but then I told her I ran out of room, and now she doesn't know what to do," he jokes.

fertility. If you missed a spot through fertigation, a wedge or something, it showed up. Most years, you might not even notice if you missed a spot, but this year, you saw it.

**What can you do to ensure a good crop come August and September?**

Try not to overwater or over-fertilize. That's easier said than done. We need cooperation from Mother Nature.

**When do you start storing potatoes and how long can you store them?**

We usually start storage the last



week of September on potatoes, and September 15-20 for sweet potatoes. We store 100 percent of our sweet potatoes, generally until June, and most of our potato storages are empty by June.

We store about half of the potato crop with the other half shipped directly off the field to various plants, so that lightens our storage load but also puts us in a bind because of equipment and manpower limitations of trying to store and ship at the same time. We only have field trucks, and all end shipments are via customer trucks.

Harvest starts in early August and goes straight through until the 10th of October. The potatoes tell me when it's time. I forecast, looking at the level of senescence and the condition of the crop.

Chipping potatoes are probably the most sensitive ones I store. I'm lucky—I can pick my harvest window—so our experience with storing chippers is pretty good. We might pull some equipment and manpower off sweet potatoes to harvest potatoes, and then go back to the sweet potatoes.

**You're one of only a few sweet potato growers in the state. Why did you decide to take them on?** I'm partnering with Shawn Bula. He was growing them, we saw an opportunity, and I kind of like the challenge of doing something new.

He had contracts and access to labor. Labor is a big part of growing sweet potatoes, as they're all transplanted, so each plant is touched by hand. I had the land and some storage, and we bought our own equipment. I have two transplanter, and Shawn has five or six. Our harvest equipment is separate.

We take our transplanter out by him, and he brings his out to help with planting. A transplanter has 12 seats for workers, each of whom places the plant slips on the fingers

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*“When everything looks bad, it generally turns out better than you initially feared, and when everything looks great, it often turns out worse.”*

**– Sam Ourada**

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of the planter. We run six-to-eight transplanters at a time, so we'll have close to 100 people working at once. For the most part, sweet potatoes are also hand weeded.

**What are the biggest lessons that you've learned over the years?**

When I was in my 20's, I knew everything. Now at 64 years old, I realize how little I know. Growing crops, especially potatoes, is so dynamic. Everything can be rolling along and looking good, and then a weather event or something that can't be explained happens and the wheels fall off. Don't ever get too excited until the check clears.

When everything looks bad, it generally turns out better than you initially feared, and when everything looks great, it often turns out worse.

**You're in the middle of the Central Sands growing region. What do you like about working every day within**



**one of the largest potato-growing regions?** I'm on the west side of Lake Petenwell at the edge of the Central Sands, somewhat in my own little world. Neighboring farms are owned

by the Wysocki's and Okray's, and they're good neighbors.

We have a great relationship with the Wysocki's, and they have always stepped up to help us when needed. We've tried to reciprocate. We trade stuff back and forth.

**What are your biggest challenges growing potatoes and vegetables today?** Contract availability.

Vegetable processors have reduced acreage significantly because

**Above:** Of the many tools and machines in the Wisconsin Central Farms packing and washing shed, where most of the chipping potato varieties are washed, is a gold-colored Double L eliminator/grader that potatoes are run through before going into the red even flow hopper.

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of excess inventory from large crops over the last couple of years.

Also, grain prices have dropped, so it's difficult to show a profit with rotational crops. When you extend the potato rotation from three to four years, potatoes need to subsidize the rotational crops.

That makes it appealing to plant more potatoes, but access to profitable potato contracts is difficult, especially when you have storage capacity limitations. I've never been excited about the risk of growing open market potatoes.

**Has technology helped you in those respects?** When I started in this business 40 years ago, we would have never dreamed about how technology has changed farming—GPS Autosteer, irrigation with telemetry, remote handheld moisture sensing, cell phones, yield monitoring, and variable spreading.

These are just a few of the advancements that have increased efficiency and reduced manpower needs.

I don't do a lot of variable spreading, but I have, and though I don't have yield monitoring on our harvesters, a guy who I partner with has it on his combine.

**Above:** Sam Ourada says the McCain Foods experimental potato varieties he's growing require a little less fumigation. "I think this is the first time the Royal potatoes I'm shown digging are grown in the United States on commercial side," he says. "They get processed." The stand-alone image of potatoes is another McCain experimental variety.

I partner with everyone that I can, Dan Trzebiatowski, Shawn Bula, and Steve Kloos, a Pioneer Seeds dealer

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who grows grain.

**How difficult is the wait for harvest, especially with all the rain, inspecting crops, and applying crop protection products?** We've never had to wait for harvest. Most years, we start at the end of July and harvest on and off for two-and-a-half months. We've always pushed to get harvest equipment ready in time. I usually say we have everything ready the day we finish.

My favorite time of year is harvest. There's always stuff happening, and it's a lot of fun. Some days, we'll dig 25-30 truckloads on three fields for three different plants, and our guys say we'll never get it done. But we always do.

We have seven full-time farmworkers, and then during harvest season, we take on another 10-15 employees. Growing potatoes is fun.

**Above:** Sam Ourada and his crew have taken home a couple McCain grower awards over the years for producing quality processing varieties, with these two trophies garnered when working under the name B&D Farms. Sam is shown accepting the McCain Foods Class AA Champion CY 2021 and Class AA Reserved Champ 2020 Awards, in February 2023, at the McCain Awards Banquet.

**What kind of storage season do you foresee, and how does the rain affect the storage quality potential for potatoes?** It's hard to predict



Potatoes are bio-fumigated at Wisconsin Central Farms. Sam Ourada says the farm has been experimenting with bio fumigation and seeing mixed results, but it's coming together, especially through longer crop rotation.



because we don't know what we'll get in August. If it's relatively benign, not too hot or wet, we can have a decent storage season. Our low spots are already gone. We don't have to worry about digging them.

**Do you have help from experts who specialize in certain areas of crop production and storage?** Well, we lean on Ron's Refrigeration, Dale Nelson of Nelson's Vegetable Storage

Systems, and Pest Pros for scouting. I think Dale is very knowledgeable in process potato storage.

**What is your favorite part of being a potato and vegetable grower in Central Wisconsin?** I like harvesting and shipping potatoes. That's the thing I enjoy the most. I could do that year-round, and I do nearly ship year-round on and off. It's challenging and dynamic, and there's always

**Above:** Partnering with Shawn Bula on the sweet potato side (helping each other during the planting season), Sam Ourada says he likes the challenge of growing the labor-intensive crop.

something different. It's true that no two years have been the same. I cannot compare this year or last year to any other year.

The main reason I do this is to harvest and ship. **BCT**

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