



DRAWN TO FARMING WHILE GROWING UP IN LANGLADE COUNTY

Young Aulik Implement salesman and farmhand embraced the area's agricultural community

By Dennis Pecha, sales manager, NORTEC (Northern Technologies)

Growing up in Langlade County, Wisconsin, has been a rewarding experience. From an early age, I was drawn to farming. At age 10, I vividly recall visiting the Langlade County Fair with my mother and being mesmerized by the massive farm machinery displays, especially the Allis Chalmers booth.

George Gresh and Al Schroeder from Gresh Implement were my heroes, showcasing the impressive Allis Chalmers 190XT tractor. While my siblings enjoyed the fair rides and treats, I spent hours sitting on tractors.

Gresh and Schroeder were more than just implement dealers; they were icons in our community. Their passion for farming and machinery was infectious.

continued on pg. 20

Above: The author, Dennis Pecha (left), poses with Bill Gresh of Gresh Implement, the son of his childhood hero, George Gresh, who, along with Al Schroeder (shown in the second photo), showcased and sold impressive Allis Chalmers 190XT model tractors out of the implement dealership. Dennis holds his 1963 Allis Chalmers 190XT toy tractor that he used to play with in the sandbox. Bill took over the family implement dealership from his father and did a lot of business with area potato farmers.

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Drawn to Farming while Growing Up in Langlade County. . .

continued from pg. 19



They took the time to explain how each piece of equipment worked, sparking my curiosity and deepening my appreciation for the technology behind farming.

My fascination with farming began in these early years. Langlade County, with its vast fields and rich agricultural heritage, provided the perfect backdrop for a young boy's dreams.

The fair wasn't just an annual event; it was a gateway into the world of farming, where I could touch, feel, and experience machinery that was the backbone of our community's livelihood.

The Allis Chalmers 190XT tractor, with its powerful engine and sleek design, epitomized the strength and resilience of the farming spirit I admired so much.

At 12 years old, with my parents' permission, I began working for Rudy Raven, a local dairy farmer. Getting up at 4 a.m. to herd milk cows for morning milking became a routine. I was charged with all the feeding and can vividly remember climbing up the silo to fork down the morning's feeding silage.

My supervisor, Jerry Lucht, who was 14 years old, showed me the ropes. He taught me how to pile hay on the

Left: Aulik Implement, where the author spent some of his best working years, is shown in the 1940s.

Right: When Dennis Pecha was 17 years old, he met James J. Mattek (Jim Sr.), shown here in a potato field, and though, being of large stature, Jim scared Dennis, he soon put him at ease. Jim went into detail about his farming operation, explained the intricacies of their techniques, the history of their farm, and the dedication required to maintain such an enterprise.

wagon as it came off the hay baler, then unhook the wagon, re-hook it to another tractor, and take the hay back to the barn to stack it in the hay mow.



Herb Wolter (right) of Hy-Land Lakes Inc., along with his son, John (left), shows Alice in Dairyland how to bag potatoes in this old photo. Herb is also shown in the second photo by the Hy-Land Lakes Inc. Potatoes/Wolter Farms sign.



Dennis Pecha says Dale Belott (pictured) could wheel and deal relentlessly, had a deep passion for farming and a genuine love for the land. Dale was always looking for ways to improve his operation and maximize yield.

HOMEMADE DINNER

Around 5 p.m., we'd head back to the barn for evening milking, finishing up around 8 o'clock before being invited in for a homemade dinner of excellent food that was customary for the workers.

These formative experiences were not just about labor; they were about learning values and skills that have stayed with me. The early mornings and long days instilled a sense of discipline and a deep appreciation for the land and livestock.

Langlade County is rich in traditions that revolve around farming. The county fair was just one of many events that brought our community together. Harvest festivals, 4H events, interaction with the FFA and farmers' markets were occasions to celebrate our shared heritage and the fruits of our labor.

While the essence of farming in Langlade County remains rooted in tradition, modern challenges have necessitated adaptations. Climate change, market fluctuations, and technological advancements have

continued on pg. 22

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– Dennis Pecha



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Drawn to Farming while Growing Up in Langlade County. . .

continued from pg. 21

impacted the way we farm.

Embracing new technologies, such as precision farming and sustainable practices, has become essential. The lessons I learned from Gresh and Schroeder about the importance of innovation continue to resonate as we navigate these changes.

Today, I strive to pass on the knowledge and passion for farming to the next generation. Whether through local 4-H clubs, school programs, or simply sharing stories at the dinner table, it's crucial to instill an appreciation for agriculture in young minds.

When I was young, I knew most of the local growers, including Tom Schroeder and his dad, Henry. In the spring, Schroeder Brothers Farms had a maple syrup processing and cook-down facility. They not only collected raw sap from their property but also purchased raw sap from people like me.

Henry was quite a fella and had a personality of his own. He always paid by check, which was unusual for



The author says Tom and John Schroeder (shown from left to right in the first photo) and their dad, Henry (second image), were positive influences on him in his youth and made lasting impressions.

the times, as most transactions were in cash. When I asked Henry once why he used checks, he said, "None of your business," and then sat back in his chair, smiled, and said he didn't want to carry cash.

Henry asked me what I was going to do after sap season. "Go back to farming with Rudy Raven," I replied.



He suggested, "Why not grow potatoes? It's the up-and-coming crop in the Antigo area. Most dairy farmers are now planting potatoes."

FIRST POTATO CROP

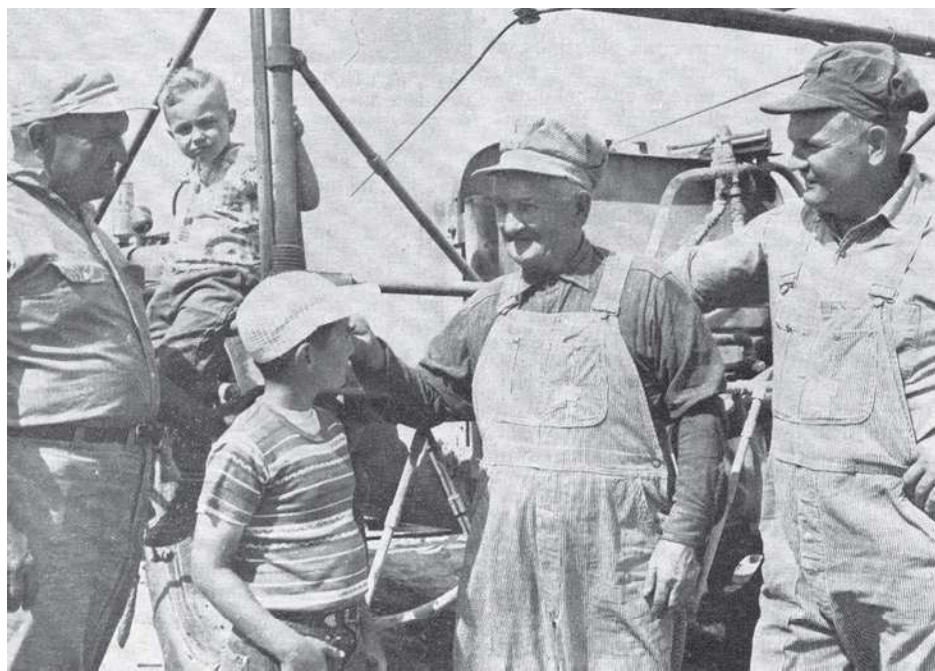
Taking his advice, I planted an area of potatoes on my mom and dad's property the next spring. Then came harvesttime, and I knew I needed potato bags. Henry told me to go see Gerald Volm and gave me directions to his place. I went and saw Mr. Volm and told him I wanted to start out with 20 potato bags.

He asked me what size I needed—5-, 10-, 20-, or 50-lb. paper bags, or 100-lb. burlap? I thought to myself, all these bag questions—this potato business is getting way too complicated!

Then it happened. I got a job offer from Donald Schroeder Potato Farms. At the time, it seemed like if your last name didn't end with Schroeder, you couldn't be a potato farmer.

Don is a cousin of Tom and John Schroeder. I accepted Don's employment offer, and life on a potato farm was great.

Then my dream came true. I found out Don had all Allis Chalmers



In this historic photo, the Matteks are resting on a spray rig while they agree on the next job to tackle. They are, from left to right, Gene, Jim III (age 4 at the time), John (age 7), James Sr. and Jim Jr.

tractors. During the interview, I was told one of my jobs would be doing field work driving a tractor. I wondered to myself, "How much am I going to have to pay Don for this job?"

After the first week, I asked my supervisor, Terry Kolpack, if I could see the tractors. Terry said, "Sure." We went to the machine shed and he slid open the doors. A ray of light came down from the heavens, beaming down on the Allis Chalmers 190XT, and sitting next to it was a huge Model D21.

Planting season was my favorite time of the year. Fresh air coming off a long winter, sun shining ... being out on the Antigo Flats planting potatoes that time of the year was like staying at a five-star resort.

The rhythmic hum of the tractors, the feeling of the cool earth beneath my boots, and the sight of newly planted rows stretching out to the horizon brought a profound sense of satisfaction and peace.

I worked for Don for several years. One day, a new Lockwood potato harvester showed up on the farm, a weird-looking contraption. The Lockwood salesman, along with Don and Terry, hooked it to the 190XT and fired it up.

WHAT A RACKET!

What a noise it made! It sounded like a jet. Come to find out, it was the air separator.

At 17, I had a life-changing experience. One night, my old friend, Al, called and wanted me to come into Aulik Implement, or "John Deere" as we called the dealer, for an interview.

All I could think about was jumping ship, and going from orange implements to green. This made me sick to my stomach. I declined the offer. For the next four nights at 7 o'clock sharp, I got a call from Al. I finally agreed, and a few days later, went to Aulik's for my interview.



As I walked into the John Deere dealership, a mix of excitement and apprehension washed over me. The gleaming green tractors were a stark contrast to the familiar orange Allis Chalmers machines that had become an integral part of my life.

Al greeted me with a warm smile and

Above: In another old photo, Herbert Wolter (left) and Ken Ourada Sr. look like they could be posing for the famous "You Been Farming Long?" poster.

led me to his office. The interview began, and Al's passion for John Deere was palpable. He spoke about

continued on pg. 24

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the advancements in technology and superior performance of their equipment. I couldn't help but be intrigued.

After much deliberation, I decided to accept the offer at Aulik Implement. Working with John Deere equipment gave me a new perspective on farming and allowed me to develop skills that would serve me well in the

years to come.

I started out as a general laborer in the front office and parts department, initially as a stock boy helping customers by carrying parts out to their cars. Eventually, I transitioned to working at the parts counter, where I interacted directly with customers, assisting them in finding the right parts for their equipment.

I'll always remember the day I encountered Jim Mattek Sr. of J.W. Mattek & Sons. Being of large stature, Jim was intimidating in the first place, and with my being only 17 years old, he scared the crap out of me. His brother, Gene, was the complete opposite.

This is when I found out that not all potato farmers had the last name Schroeder. One day, Jim corrected me in a quick hurry. He went into detail about his farming operation, explained the intricacies of their techniques, the history of their farm, and the dedication required to maintain such an enterprise.

LESSON IN HUMILITY

It was a lesson in humility and respect, and it opened my eyes to the vast network of farmers and their unique contributions to our community.

Keith Aulik and Herb Wolter of Hyland Lakes potato farm were best of friends. I always liked Herb. It fascinated me how he and his crew could take their tractor and mount it on a potato harvester, making it a self-propelled harvester. The crew members at Hyland Lakes were way ahead of their time.

Herb's commitment to advancing agricultural practices and his willingness to embrace new technologies made the operation a beacon of modern farming in our community.

On the farm, I had the opportunity

to witness firsthand the remarkable efficiency and productivity of their self-propelled harvesters.

Jim Spychalla was an interesting man. Never one to purchase a lot of new equipment, Jim was an innovator and fabricator, always looking for ways to improve and modify existing machinery to suit his needs. He had a knack for seeing potential in used parts and often preferred them over new ones.

I remember selling Jim countless parts over the years, and his preference for used components fascinated me. His resourcefulness and ingenuity were truly remarkable, and he became a regular and memorable presence at Aulik Implement.

My story would not be complete without talking about Dale Belott. According to Dale, he was the biggest potato farmer in Langlade County and possibly the world. That man could wheel and deal relentlessly. Enter the dealing process with Dale, and it was like the last man standing.

I remember one instance when Dale was negotiating the price with Al on a piece of equipment. He was relentless, employing every tactic in the book to get the best possible deal. He had a unique ability to turn every situation to his advantage, and it was both exhausting and exhilarating.

Despite his tough exterior, Dale had a deep passion for farming and a genuine love for the land. He was always looking for ways to improve his operations and maximize yield.

ROOTS IN ANTIGO

Bob Diercks of Coloma Farms would make his weekly visit to Aulik Implement, and I always enjoyed seeing him. He and Keith were also good friends. Despite farming several hundred miles away, Bob had roots and ties to the Antigo area.

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He always seemed to have time to talk to you, even if it was a quick "Good morning." His friendly demeanor and willingness to connect with others made him a beloved figure in our community.

Working with Bob, I saw firsthand the dedication and hard work that went into running a successful farm. A passion for agriculture and commitment to his land were evident in everything he did.

I was always proud to work for Aulik Implement. At the time, it was a powerhouse of a dealership. Agricultural implements and machinery such as John Deere, Meyers Forage Boxes, and Dahlman Potato Equipment were our specialty.

Keith took me under his wing and gave me an education no college could ever provide. His approach to leadership was empowering and inspiring. He believed in giving his team the autonomy to make decisions and learn from their

experiences, always encouraging innovation and problem-solving.

Al, on the other hand, was a master negotiator and strategist. His ability to navigate complex deals and build lasting relationships with clients was truly remarkable. From him, I learned the importance of persistence, attention to detail, and the art of closing a deal.

Together, Keith and Al taught me the value of hard work, integrity, and continuous improvement.

Looking back, I realize how fortunate I was to have had such exceptional mentors. Their legacy lives on not only in the success of Aulik Implement, but also in the countless individuals like me they guided and inspired along the way.

As I continue my journey, I strive to uphold the principles they instilled in me, always remembering the profound impact they had on my professional and personal growth.

After leaving Aulik Implement, Dennis Pecha purchased and operated two John Deere dealerships for 10 years before selling them and joining John Deere company. In 2000, he acquired Gallenberg Equipment and renamed it Nortec.

Despite some challenges, Nortec thrived and now manufactures subterranean rock pickers at a different location with a strong market presence.

Designed for tractors from 50- to over 300-horsepower, Nortec's product line includes options from two-bed to four-bed, with either hoppers or conveyors.

Recently, Dennis set up a distribution center for Flip Screen Australia (<https://www.flipscreen.net>) in his hometown of Antigo, Wisconsin, serving Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, with Karls Warehousing handling logistics and stocking.

FlipScreen Australia is in 49 countries around the world, and FlipScreen Antigo is one of the company's shining stars in its portfolio. BCT



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