



# INTERVIEW

**JUSTIN DAGEN**, owner, Dagen Heritage Farms

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



**NAME:** Justin Dagen

**TITLE:** Owner

**COMPANY:** Dagen Heritage Farms

**LOCATION:** Karlstad, MN

**HOMETOWN:** Karlstad. The Dagen family settled in the area before the city of Karlstad existed, with the land being prairie and wilderness many years ago.

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Forty-seven. Last year marked 50 years since Justin began working on the farm as a teenager, with, as he says, “no regrets, no retreat.”

**SCHOOLING:** University of Minnesota at Crookston, ag program, for three months during the winter quarter. With Justin taking over the farm at 17 years old when his father passed away, he half-jokingly says, “My college career was the best three months of my life! No, really, I met lifelong friends down there and even put together some potato deals.” Since then, he’s taken “a bunch of different courses in management.”

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Member of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA); secretary/treasurer of the Minnesota Certified Seed Potato Growers Association; past chairman of the

*A true heritage farm by its very definition*, Dagen Heritage Farms of Karlstad, Minnesota, has experienced consecutive ownership within the same family for 150 years or more and far exceeds the 40-acre minimum to qualify it as such.

Albert Dagen immigrated from western Germany to central Minnesota in the 1840s before moving to (future) Karlstad, in 1882. Finding the soil to be especially fertile, the next three generations stayed within 4 miles, raising livestock and growing potatoes and other crops.

When Justin Dagen’s father passed away, in 1977, Justin took over his family’s seed potato operation as a high school senior.

Red River Valley Potato Growers, 1997, and again in 2007; and past president of the National Potato Council, in 2011.

**FAMILY:** Wife, Donna; daughters, Kendra and Jerica; and sons, Brooks and Sander

**HOBBIES:** “For many years, I ran, not marathons, but 10K races and 5K races,” Justin says. “There was a race somewhere nearly every weekend in Minnesota and North Dakota, and sometimes triathlons where we’d swim, bike and run.” Also, fishing and golf.

He continued growing foundation certified seed potatoes and building relationships in the industry while taking several regional and national leadership roles, including president of the National Potato Council, in 2011.

Justin’s sons, Brooks and Sander, have since joined the operation. Over 140 years later, they are 6th-generation farmers in the same township.

**Justin, what are you most proud of regarding your family’s heritage of growing potatoes in Northwestern Minnesota?** I’m

most proud of my Dagen ancestors who immigrated from Germany in the 1840s and spent some time in Racine, Wisconsin, before coming to the northern Red River Valley of Minnesota in the early 1880s.

**Above:** Year 2024 marked a half-century since Justin Dagen, shown on a break from hilling a potato field, has been working on the family farm with “no regrets, no retreat.”



Great-grandfather David Dagen was one of the founders of the Minnesota Certified Seed Potato program, in 1917, and my father, Duane Dagen, was an excellent husband and father, and farmer and accountant, but had health issues and passed away when I was 17 years old, in 1977.

**You took over your family's seed potato operation, then, as a high school senior. Were there early struggles, and if so, how did you overcome them?** Our farm was less than 1,000 acres at that time and the agricultural production business was much simpler than it is today.

I made a ton of rookie mistakes, but my mother and sisters supported me, and the Lord was with us every step of the way.

**How did the family get into the certified early-generation seed potato business, and what does that mean exactly?** In the mid-1980s, in vitro propagation of limited generation seed potatoes was clearly the wave of the future, and I adopted early.

Our farm began purchasing pre-nuclear seed from a laboratory/greenhouse operation and thus had better control of our production with everything done on our farm.

So, the seed starts in a test tube. We plant the resulting mini tubers with

care and grow them to sell primarily as Generation 3's and 4's, but if a grower prefers G2's, we can also accommodate that.

Our seed is field-inspected three times and winter-tested to ensure we achieve the quality our customers need.

**Who are your customers?** We currently provide certified seed potatoes to producers in 15 states and Canadian provinces, from the East Coast to the West Coast, but primarily in Wisconsin, Minnesota,

**Left:** Sander (left) and Justin Dagen pose in potato paradise—a Hawaii test field where research is conducted on varieties, pests and diseases during the winter months.

**Right:** Windrowers are hard at work on Dagen Heritage Farms during potato harvest.

and North Dakota.

A good percentage of our production is early generation, ultimately going to other certified seed producers in North America.

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**What type of soil are you farming and why is that conducive to seed potatoes?** Our farm lies on the bed of ancient Lake Agassiz, with beautiful sandy loam topsoil and some clay in the subsoil. The soil offers good moisture holding capacity, with our annual precipitation being around 20 inches.

Our location offers significant isolation from other potato production, and we practice long rotations with five other cash crops grown on our farm.

Hard, red spring wheat was the crop that made the Red River Valley famous but now corn genetics have made us a significant producer. Our farm has also grown sugar beets, soybeans, dry edible beans, canola, and alfalfa.

One of the more exciting segments of our business is propagating experimental varieties.

**What varieties of potatoes are you growing?** Our current production includes Umatilla, Russet Burbank, Dakota Russet, Hamlin, Caribou, Lakeview, Fontane and Challenger, which are all russet types that offer specific characteristics and qualities for the processors.

Modoc and Red Norland/Dark Red



With Dagen Heritage Farms being a true family affair, Donna Dagen takes lunch to her son, Brooks, in the first image, and Sander Dagen is shown in the tractor with his wife Stefanie, and their daughter, Macie, when she was a baby.



Norland are delicious fresh varieties we produce. Waneta is growing in popularity as a dependable, high-yielding, excellent processing chip variety featuring medium specific gravity and excellent stability and dormancy.

**What are the most important things, in your mind, in growing quality seed potatoes?** The most important thing involved in growing quality seed potatoes is probably love. You genuinely must love the details of the work involved. My sons and I often say, "Growing potatoes isn't

glamorous, but it is wholesome!"

Of course, we diligently track, segregate, and clean between seed lots to prevent cross-contamination, use the best available research to manage disease-carrying pests, and manage storage conditions so the seed potatoes are physiologically ready when shipped. We make sure every load meets the highest standards.

Additionally, honest, open and transparent communication with receivers/customers is necessary to maintain long-term relationships.



The Dagen family sees potato production through to the end, from planting treated cut seed potatoes in the spring to the growing season when plants eventually flower, to harvest, storing and shipping.

### What does it mean to track, segregate and clean between lots?

Imagine that, in a given year, our farm has 10-12 varieties of seed potatoes, but within every variety, we have G1's and G2's (first- and second-generation seed potatoes). We plant G2's, and they become G3's, which is what we primarily ship.

So, every variety has three groups that we need to keep separate from each other. We used to have four varieties of certified seed potatoes, then that turned into six, then eight and 10. So, we had to learn good ways to keep everything organized and segregated.

It's one thing for us to know where everything is, but another to let the Minnesota State Potato Seed Department know when they come out to inspect three times a year.

Brooks himself is technologically astute and can produce detailed

maps in a way that enables everyone to know what we're looking at and where each variety and generations of varieties are planted.

Sander and I are good farmers, and so is Brooks, but he's also an engineer and has the best math scores of anyone in the family.

**Speaking of which, your sons, Brooks and Sander, represent the 6th generation on the farm. That must make you very proud! What roles do they play?** Brooks has a mechanical engineering degree from North Dakota State University and a full-time job at the state-of-the-art

*"My sons and I often say,  
'Growing potatoes isn't  
glamorous, but it is wholesome!'"*

*– Justin Dagen*

CHS canola processing plant near our farm.

In fact, it's been difficult for him to give up his engineering salary at the plant, in Hallock, operated by CHS Inc., and come back to work on the farm. The Hallock canola plant is a big deal around here, and he's built a nice engineering career for himself at the facility.

He owns valuable isolated land where we produce G1 and G2 material and helps us at night and on weekends, especially during busy planting and

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harvest times and is an invaluable team member.

Sander has been full-time on the farm for 12 years and was recently promoted to senior vice president of operations. He recently took the gavel as Chairman of the Board at Northland Potatoes, serving Minnesota and North Dakota.

Brooks and Sander have beautiful families, each with two young daughters who love to come to the farm and ride in the tractors very often.

### **What are your biggest challenges?**

Not every load of seed that leaves our farm is 100% disease free or 100% defect free, so open communication is key.

I have watched weather-related potato crop destruction from the state of Washington all the way to the state of Maine. Nobody is immune. Potatoes are a perishable commodity, and I have seen them perish!

### **How many people are employed full-time and seasonally at Dagen**

**Heritage Farms?** At harvest, we have 12 or 14 people helping us out, and at shipping, 10 or 12. Since most of our land is non-irrigated, we don't have multiple pivots with 50 irrigators going at a time during the growing season.

There might be two or three people helping Sander and Brooks in the summertime, hauling grain, maintaining machinery and getting the truck fleet ready for harvest, or sometimes we go fishing or play golf.

**Any new technology that you're using these days?** The land where we produce our G1 and G2 material is pattern tiled and has center pivot irrigation. We are constantly adopting new technology to produce consistently high yields of small/medium-sized seed tubers, but ultimately the Lord is in control.

**You play the long game regarding sustainability. In what ways are you a good steward of the land?** Sustainability has been a popular buzzword for the last 20 years, and for our farm, it relates directly to soil stewardship as our soils are very fragile. We incorporate various cover crop strategies in the spring and



This little harvest helper is Walter Johnson, who belongs to Justin and Donna's daughter, Kendra Johnson, of Hibbing, Minnesota. Walter visits the farm frequently and engages in a wide variety of agricultural activities.

in the fall to protect our soil from erosion.

No-till acres have increased significantly in the United States, but we have not perfected no-till potato production yet.



A fixture in the potato industry, Justin Dagen has held state and national leadership roles through which he's gotten to know other leaders such as Walt Stevenson (at left above) Louis Wysocki (top right), and Richard Pavelski (at right in third image).







**What can you do during harvest to ensure quality and storability?** That starts a year or two before when planning seed, and when we have a crop and varietal rotation worked out. It also involves proper residue management of the soil, and proper tillage to ensure that we're going into good seed beds in the spring and thus setting the stage for a successful harvest.

Ninety percent of our land is dry land; we don't have a center pivot on everything, but we have high moisture-holding capacity. We don't have 30 feet of pure sand, but instead a layer of fertile soil with a clay base that holds moisture where our crop roots spread down to. We can hold moisture.

With that being said, we don't ever produce 500 bags-per-acre crops here, but rather 250-300-bag crops. As certified seed growers, my customers don't want football-size potatoes, but mother tubers that will cut efficiently for replanting.

We're reducing our yield by sizing stuff small, yet also increasing planting rates, stems and tuber count for certified seed.

**How many hundredweight (cwt.) of potatoes can you store and for how long?** That's a good question because

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**Top Left:** Justin Dagen's maternal great-grandfather breaks land in 1889.

**Top Right:** Red Pontiacs are shown during harvest at Dagen Heritage Farms.



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we don't have one storage facility, but four or five buildings spread out over 40 miles, just like our farm is scattered over 40 miles.

I suppose we can store maybe 200,000 hundredweight, and we have renovated the storage buildings to make them successful. We need to store potatoes until May each year, with shipping starting in March and continuing through April and May.

### **How large is your shipping operation?**

We ship to approximately 25 customers throughout North America each year. We don't do the delivering, but instead each customer arranges to have trucks sent to our place. We may ship 15-18 loads a day to three or four customers stretching from Ontario, Canada, to Florida, Massachusetts and Idaho.

### **What can you do now to ensure a good growing season and harvest?**

It would probably be just the way we handle and prepare our own seed for planting to make sure



**Tile drainage is working hard on Dagen Heritage Farms. The land where the Dagens produce G1 and G2 certified seed potatoes is pattern tiled and has center pivot irrigation.**

it's in excellent condition.

With a lot of planting in the month of May, we make sure the timing is

right regarding the physiological age of seed when it goes into ground, and that it's in good condition and ready to go. We want each seed potato to produce a good stem and canopy right away.

### **What do you hope for the future of Dagen Heritage Farms?**

We don't have to be potato farmers, or farmers at all for that matter, but we think the Lord has gifted us with whatever character traits are necessary to be good potato growers, and we enjoy it, not every day, but most.

It's not glamorous, but we think it's a wholesome calling. We believe we're doing it to serve the Lord, and we're helping to feed children so they can go to bed with full bellies. Potatoes are wholesome, economical and delicious, and I try to ingrain that mentality into all our employees.

**Is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add?** I've been blessed to have the staunch support of my precious wife, Donna. We joke that



**Brooks Dagen is shown in a field of russet potatoes, left, and Sander with red potatoes (right).**

we've been happily married for 35 years; the wedding was 38 years ago! LOL. Sons Brooks and Sander Dagen have grown to love the potato industry also.

My wife and I, in coordination with our four children, put a trust together—a succession plan that includes a structure of what the future will look like. Now we're starting with the distribution aspect of the plan, because why wait until I'm no longer here or it's too late? Brooks and Sander are very capable men of integrity, so we're starting the distribution now, together. **BCT**

**Right:** Justin Dagen (standing second from right) says, "Happy potato farmers have dusty faces," as he poses with a Canadian seed potato importer (second from left) and his sons, Brooks (left) and Sander (right).



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