



**NAME:** Nick Burns

**TITLE:** Packing shed manager

**COMPANY:** James Burns & Sons Farms Inc.

**LOCATION:** Almond, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Almond

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Second year as plant manager. "My uncle Rich retired at the end of 2023, and I transitioned into his position," Nick explains.

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** "I worked on the farm under my uncle Ed, doing field work, loading trucks in the warehouses, running the fertilizer spreader, whatever needed doing," Nick, who also waited tables at Grazies Italian Grill of Stevens Point while in college, explains.

**SCHOOLING:** University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point with a bachelor's degree in American studies.

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Volunteers with his mom at the Experimental Aircraft Association AirVenture fly-in convention, in Oshkosh, each year, active in the Central Wisconsin Sports Car Club, races Autocross, and is a member of St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Church, in Almond, and the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Promotions Committee

**FAMILY:** Wife, Christine, and three kids, Andrea, Emmy and James

**HOBBIES:** Autocross racing, hobby farming at home, including a small herd of cattle and chickens, making firewood, and habitat restoration in conjunction with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# INTERVIEW

## NICK BURNS,

packing shed manager and part owner, James Burns & Sons Farms Inc.

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

*History and heritage are embraced* at James Burns & Sons Farms of Almond, Wisconsin, and that's not lost on the youngest generation.

Fourteen thousand years ago, "Glacial Lake Wisconsin" was formed by the Green Bay lobe of the last glacier in the area, which broke through an ice dam at Baraboo, the rushing waters creating what is now the Wisconsin Dells.

The land where James Burns & Sons Farms Inc. raises crops lies on the eastern shore, or beach, of that long-extinct prehistoric glacial lake, with

the sandy soil and abundant water supply left behind ideal for raising potatoes.

The area is where the Burns family settled shortly after the Civil War,

**Above:** Though Nick Burns was raised on James Burns & Sons Farms Inc. of Almond, Wisconsin, it wasn't until two years ago that he transitioned into his position as packing shed manager of the operation.



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in 1867, with the original parcel of land still owned and being farmed by the family today.

The farm has grown from a couple quarter sections (with a quarter section equaling 160 acres) at the turn of the century to now more than 70 quarter sections, or 11,000 acres of owned and rented land.

#### NURTURING THE LAND

James Burns I, who passed away in 1999, and his two sons (Jim II and Danny), along with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, have continued working and nurturing the land, expanding operations and making improvements over time.

Nick Burns, who is a member of the WPVGA Promotions Committee and the son of Jim Jr. III, or “J.R.,” and grandson of James Burns II, carries on the family’s legacy and is steeped in the area’s history.

On his own hobby farm separate from the family operation, Nick has recently completed a habitat restoration project in conjunction with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, having restored seven acres to an oak savannah, a habitat for the endangered Karner blue butterfly.

“The Karner blue butterfly is an indicator species—if it thrives in


a restored habitat, that means the environment is suitable for other native animal and plant species,” Nick explains.

“My neighbor introduced me to the project,” he says. “He knew I wanted to create an oak savannah because

**Above:** Case International tractors are lined up in storage at James Burns & Sons Inc., with mainly tillage tractors on the left and row-crop tractors along the wall on the right. The tillage tractors pull discs and plows, whereas the row-crop tractors pull planters and potato harvesters.



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## Interview . . .

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it's a native habitat to the area in the recent post-Ice Age era."

### **Nick, are you James' grandson, and who are the family members still active on the farm?**

I'm his great-grandson, with one of his kids being James Burns II, my grandpa, and then my dad is Jim Jr. III (or "J.R."). My uncles Ed and Dan are active on the farm, with Dan being married to my dad's sister, and up until recently, Rich, who is retired now.

That's it for that generation. In my generation, it's myself, my brother-in-law, Christian, and my cousin, Grant, who is Ed's son.

### **Did you grow up on the farm, and if so, what do you remember most from those days?**

Yes, I have memories of working in the grading shed, stacking bags of potatoes and picking rocks, all the menial jobs you get to do as a teenager. I started driving tractor at an early age, mowing ditches and valley roads.

I think I was 12 years old the first time I had to make out a timecard. My first job was helping fill the planters for green beans back when all seed was in bags. That was not fun. I worked with my cousin, Clayton, doing that, which was kind of nice. He's still one of my best friends.

### **What has your own progression been on the farm?**

I basically worked



in the summers while I was in high school and college as a shop hand doing maintenance and loading trucks, eventually working my way up to running the fertilizer spreader and now, today, as the packing and grading shed manager.

Before I could drive, I was working in the grading shed, so I kind of knew how the operation worked. I didn't come in completely green. If my uncle Rich needed help, I'd come over and give him a hand.

### **What are your main duties on the farm, and how did you come to specialize in that area?**

Day to day, I organize orders, manage the bag inventory and create priorities for my crew. I break the bad news to them when we have an emergency order that needs to ship out the next morning.

When priority orders come in from one of our big customers who needs potatoes the same day, we stop everything and switch bagging and packing operations over to handle certain jobs.

I have a great crew that keeps on top of things and who I can hand off tasks to—they're good at taking delegations, so I don't have to worry about orders being filled. Full-time, there are about 20 of us in the packing shed and we hire 10 or so additional seasonal workers when they're needed during harvest.

On the farm, I think we're up to 45 on our payroll, and we hire extra part-time people during harvest and planting to drive trucks or fill planters.

### **How many acres are planted in potatoes each year?**

Typically,



**Top and Bottom:** Potato harvest is in full swing at James Burns & Sons Inc., which raises approximately 1,000 acres of russets for the fresh market annually.



we plant close to 1,000 acres of potatoes annually, depending on the market—850-1,100, generally in that range.

**What varieties of potatoes, and are they for processing or the fresh market?** We only plant fresh market potatoes, and 99 percent of them get packaged here. We may sell potatoes in bulk to neighbors, depending on availability.

Most of the time, we try to plant Norkotahs, or other varieties if we run out of seed. The last few years, it's been Caribous, and some years we've raised Goldrush potatoes. We had better luck with Goldrush, as Caribous tend to bulk up until they're overly big.

**In addition to grading and packing, do you also store and ship potatoes?** We have storage here only for our own use. We don't store for other people. We'll pack potatoes for other sheds, but it's our own stock.

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*“Four guys and a forklift driver can now complete the same job as what used to take 10-12 people, and it's not as physically straining as packing and hanging bags by hand.”*

**– Nick Burns**

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So, if Doug Posthuma from Alsum Farms & Produce calls us saying they need a load for Walmart or ALDI grocery stores, we'll pack for them. We don't ship, but instead the customer (receiver or buyer) hires the trucks.

We've got eight full-size and one small storage shed on the property with a combined 2,000 tandem-load (field truck) capacity, or storage for approximately 600,000 hundredweight of potatoes.

We store potatoes nearly year-round, with our goal being to run out of the prior year's crop by the end of June or in early July so we can prepare for harvest.

**How many semi-loads of potatoes does the James Burns & Sons operation pack out in a typical day or year? And do you own your own semis?** We fill five or six semi-loads on a slow day and on up to 15 during an extremely busy day.

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We fill approximately 1,000 semi-loads a year, but we don't have our own trucks, just our field trucks.

**Who's your typical customer for potatoes?** We sell mainly to retail grocery stores but also have restaurant and food service customers, with some potatoes going for processing and others to re-packers. That's a smaller segment of our market. ALDI, Walmart and Kroger are the "big three" retail customers.

**What are some of the newest technologies in your packing and grading shed?** It's not brand new, but we have a nice Hagen X-ray sizer and a hollow-heart scanner, as well as a new Fuji-Ace robotic stacker to stack bales of potatoes, Volm weighers and packers, and two automatic balers that work with the robot.

Lately, I've been looking into optical graders, but they're not ideal for russet potatoes, with it still taking a lot of hand grading to get the product you want. Sometimes the optical graders miss rough russet potato skin, or elephant hide as it's called, which is a big defect—those potatoes need to be pulled out.

Aside from grading, the trend for our



industry in the last few years is small packages. We pack a lot of potatoes in five-pound bags, and sometimes we have customers asking for three-pounders.

It takes longer to package potatoes each time you go down in bag size,

**Above:** With automatic, adjustable dual-wicket baggers, four guys and a forklift driver can now complete the same job bagging potatoes at James Burns & Sons as what used to take 10-12 people, and it's not as physically straining as packing and hanging bags by hand. Shown is still the old way of manually hanging and clipping/ sewing bags.



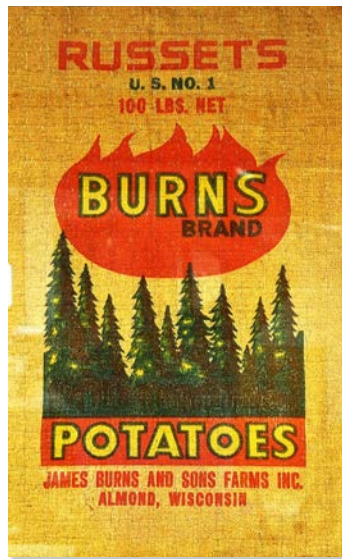
**Left and Above:** Some of the newer machines in the grading and packing shed include Volm weighers and packers, and a Fuji-Ace robotic stacker.

using progressively slower packing machines that perform more steps to accommodate the smaller bags.

**Have packaging materials also changed?** Since I've been on board, materials haven't changed a whole lot, but price has gone up. There's been talk about Walmart switching from plastic bags, but that hasn't happened yet. They're automating warehouses to handle RPC's (reusable plastic containers) made by IFCO.

So, Walmart, which is our biggest customer, wants potato bags that can be placed in the uniform reusable IFCO plastic trays that stack nicely on pallets but are a pain to handle.

**Have the packing shed technologies saved you time and labor over the years?** I was still working in the grading shed when we installed a robot in 2009 or 2010. We had two—I think they were Lockwoods—and if you made one mistake, the machine would slow down,



Though he doesn't see them often anymore, Nick Burns says he always likes running across the farm's Burns-branded bags in grocery stores, especially places where he isn't expecting to see them in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan or in the southern reaches of the operation's distribution area.

and you'd fall behind.

Now it's a lot easier to keep up and a lot less labor. Four guys and a forklift driver can now complete the

same job as what used to take 10-12 people, and it's not as physically straining as packing

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**Tote Bag and Bin Filler**

## Interview . . .

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and hanging bags by hand. Now we hang wickets of bags that are pulled off automatically.

**What's on the horizon for grading and packing?** Artificial intelligence. Most of the time, I kind of roll my eyes at AI because it's the current trend to plaster all technologies with AI whether they're applicable or not, but potato grading using high-resolution cameras would be an excellent use of AI.

There are AI optical graders on the market already, but as far as russet potatoes, we have a long way to

go. Admittedly, optical grading is the perfect application for AI, and it works well for red and yellow potatoes. There's one optical grader on the market meant for field grading that picks rocks and vines out at harvest.

**What are your rotational crops and on what rotation?** Green beans, sweet corn, field corn, and peas, and we rent land to Warzynski's (Paradise Farms Inc.) for cucumbers and to Lauer Farms for cabbage. We also plant oats and rye. As far as potatoes, we practice a five-year rotation.



Nick Burns & Sons has been adding to its fleet of farm equipment with six new potato bulk trucks, two purchased this year alone.



**Above:** At his own hobby farm at home, Nick Burns, along with his wife, Christine, and three kids, Andrea (right on the tractor), Emmy (left) and James, raises a small herd of cattle and chickens.

When Agristo was considering Wisconsin for a new processing plant, they asked how many additional potato acres we could plant. If we stepped down to a four-year rotation, we could raise another 1,000 acres of potatoes.

Twenty or thirty years ago, we planted a lot more potatoes, but with our packing and storage capacity, we don't have a lot of need for additional acres.

A five-year rotation cuts down on disease, though some of the chip growers can get away with a three-year rotation. For table stock, you really need to keep Potato Virus Y and blight at bay.

**What are some of your technologies in the field?** Irrigation telemetry, GPS-guided planters, and aerial application using drones—that's been helpful in controlling potato bugs.

We go around with ground rigs and then treat areas that are difficult to reach using aerial applications—perhaps fields that are too wet



and saturated for ground rigs, field corners or areas where we don't want to take another pass in an airplane. We can reach those using drones.

**How was the growing season?** Pretty good, kind of wet in some weeks, but not too bad. It hasn't been torrential.

**What makes Almond, Wisconsin, an ideal potato-growing region?** The Almond area has sandy soil and good

drainage. Even within the confines of our own farm, you can see the contrast of potatoes raised in heavy ground versus sandy soil. Heavy ground has potential but can't get too wet, especially in raising Norkotahs—they will rot in overly saturated soil.

**What are you most proud of regarding James Burns and Sons?** I don't see them often anymore, which is a shame, but I always liked


**Above:** For planting, James Burns & Sons uses a Gallenberg seed and fertilizer filler and Harriston planters.

running across our Burns-branded bags in grocery stores, especially places where I wasn't expecting to see them in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan or in the southern reaches of our distribution area. That was

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always kind of fun.

We're still packaging in our Burns bags from time to time, but not as many customers request them

anymore. They want potatoes packed in their own branded bags.

**What's your favorite part of the job?** I think, during the holiday rush

in early November for Thanksgiving and before Christmas, when we're packing 10 semi-loads a day for five days a week at full capacity, that's cool seeing all the product moved through here.

It gets to be long days sometimes, but it is ultimately satisfying seeing the product turned over at such a high volume.

**Is there another generation ready to take over the farm after you?**

I've already got aspirations for at least one of my children to come onto the farm and work with me, but they're little yet.

Currently, I have the oldest grandkids in our family, the closest ones to working age. They like coming and visiting the office.

**Left:** The 1960s-era cover of Vegetable Grower magazine features International Harvester 560 tractors, Dahlman mounted potato diggers, and Nick's great-grandpa (James Burns I) on the far left, a field worker, second from left, his great uncle Dan Burns, second from right, and his grandpa (James Burns II), far right, with his dog, Fannie.

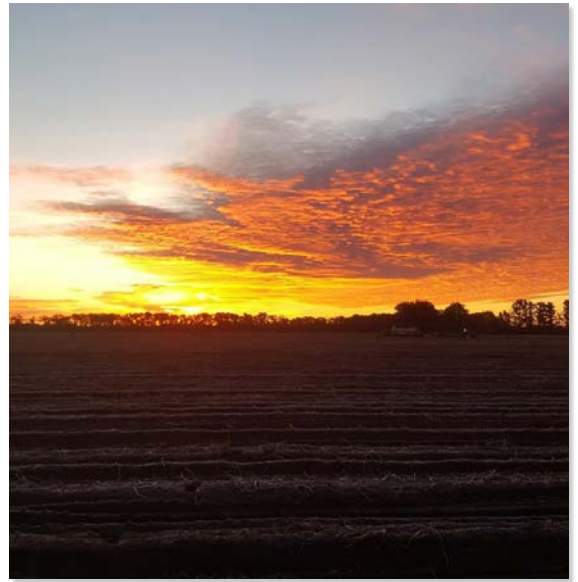
**Right:** A John Deere R4045 fertilizer spreader is filled at James Burns & Sons Farms Inc.

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My oldest daughter, Andrea, says, “Daddy, let’s go see the potatoes, let’s go see the potatoes!” She likes the machines in the grading and packing shed.

**Is there anything I’ve missed that you’d like to add?** I’ll probably be in

this position for the rest of my life, and I’m satisfied with that. I’m only 31 years old, but my big pipe dream during retirement is to expand my own hobby farm. We only have 15 acres at my house, but I’d like to do a lot more with it. **BCT**

**Left:** Sometimes a potato farming operation in Almond, Wisconsin, needs to remove a huge rock pile before expanding a field, as is the case at James Burns & Sons Farms.

**Right:** Parting shot: Enjoy a sunrise photo during potato harvest circa-2015 on James Burns & Sons Farms.



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