



INTERVIEW

DALE JOHNSON,

president and co-owner, Johnson Brothers Inc.

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

NAME: Dale Johnson
TITLE: President, and co-owner with brother, Rodney
COMPANY: Johnson Brothers Inc.
LOCATION: Sagola, MI
HOMETOWN: Crystal Falls, MI
YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Forty-three
PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: None
SCHOOLING: Forest Park High School in Crystal Falls
ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: County Road Commission Board member for 12 years; involved with Zoning and Planning Board of Sagola Township; and the Johnsons have been deeply involved with Michigan's Iron Range Farm Bureau dating to when the family first started farming, with Dale and Rodney's dad having been president, and Rodney being a longtime and current president
AWARDS/HONORS: Dale and Rodney were honored twice as Farmers of the Year in Dickinson and Iron counties of Michigan
FAMILY: Wife, Dee; two daughters, Kristel and Katie; and two granddaughters
HOBBIES: Deer hunting and fishing when there's time

Located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Johnson Brothers Inc., in Sagola, grows approximately 300 acres of certified seed potatoes and farms 1,050 acres total of crops on rotation. The operation is currently focused on russet varieties, including Silverton, Burbank and Norkotah potatoes.

Established by Elmer and Senia Johnson as a typical farm of its time, including cattle and crops, the family started raising potatoes around 1931. In 1956, the cattle were sold and the two main operations became potatoes and logging.

Elmer and Senia's sons, Melvin and Donald, took reigns of the operation, with Melvin focused on potatoes and Donald taking care of logging. After Donald's passing, the farm narrowed its focus to potato farming. Melvin worked on the farm and inspired future generations until his death in 2019.

Currently, there are three generations working on the certified seed potato farm, including Dale and Rodney Johnson, Faith and John Kuzak, Jason and David Johnson, and

Donavon and Robert Kuzak.

In 2007, Jason, David, and John brought the fourth generation into the business through the formation of Spudland Farms.

Dale, were Elmer and Senia Johnson your grandparents or great-grandparents? They were my grandparents who started the farm right where we're currently located. My great-grandfather's farm was just a few miles down the road and included apple orchards, a few potatoes and some animals.

Above: Dale Johnson (left on the Lenco harvester) and his brother, Rodney (right), are co-owners of Johnson Brothers Inc., in Upper Michigan, where they raise around 300 acres of certified seed potatoes, though they've passed quite a few of those acres on to the next generation.



My great-grandfather had six sons, and five of them each started a farm. My grandpa Elmer's was the only one that survived, and if you ask me and my brother, it's because my grandma was very conservative with the money. But my grandpa was a hard worker.

My dad, Melvin, always said the farm took off in World War II because, at that time, anything you grew was always sold. My grandpa had a dump truck and was hired by the government to haul materials needed for the war effort.

He traveled to the ore docks in Escanaba (part of Michigan's maritime and mining past where iron ore was loaded onto ships for transport), so he was gone all the time.

He'd come home and split the money he made with my grandma, and then when he finally came home for the summer, my grandma handed him

Left: A couple of years ago, Dale and Rodney Johnson bought a brand-new planter and tractor, going to GPS (global positioning system) for the first time, which makes planting easier, including consistency across fields and nice, straight rows. Rodney's son, David, is driving the tractor.

Right: Caribou certified seed potatoes are windrowed and harvested on Johnson Brothers Inc. farm, in Sagola, Michigan.

a whole wad of money that she saved from what he had given her, and that's how the farm got started.

Did you grow up on the farm, Dale, and if so, what are your favorite memories from those days? As soon as we were old enough to be up here, my mom and dad had us on the farm, almost every day of the year. Dad always had jobs for us to do. As a kid, you hated it, but now in looking back, I know why he was doing it.

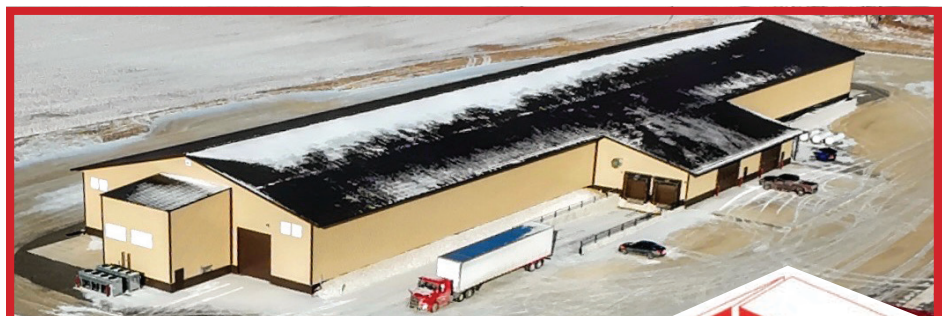
My mom and dad, Melvin and Elaine, both passed away in 2019. They did

everything together. Every time my dad went to town, he'd take Mom with him.

I have a lot of memories from those days. Dad always tried to get us to do more jobs, but the most fun was finally being able to drive the tractor on your own. When I was 12 years old, I'd hook up implements and go to whatever field I could. It was fun to finally be on my own.

When we were about that age, we got a new tractor and all of us fought

continued on pg. 10



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Interview . . .

continued from pg. 9

over who would be able to drive that John Deere 4630. The tractor is still here working on the farm, and we use it quite a bit. It's in great shape.

When dad bought the 4630, it changed the farm completely. We finally had some horsepower and were able to buy other implements to help do a better job of growing crops. The crops got better, and the land was taken care of better than before.

What has your own progression been on the farm, Dale? As Rodney and I got older, dad kept assigning more jobs to us. The way I see it with the next generation, as they get older, you try to delegate more to them.

My dad continuously gave us more challenges, and he'd say that each job we tackled better be done as well or better than it was previously. Rodney and I liked those challenges, and our further involvement gave Dad the opportunity to clear more land with bulldozers so we could farm it.

He'd tell us, "See you in the fall. If you need something, call and I'll go get it for you guys." That was the best part. As time went on, there were new challenges for us to take on nearly every season.

Most of the potatoes were his.



My dad didn't want to partner with me and my brother but instead wanted us to have our own potatoes and make our own decisions. That's how Johnson Brothers formed.

What has the farm's progression been like since you've been involved? My dad farmed about 120 acres of potatoes, so we have more than doubled in size as far as acreage. And if you look at what equipment we have now compared to what Dad had, there's no comparison.

We built another new storage facility this year. As far as storage, we try to ship the last potatoes by the middle of May each year. We start harvesting

Above: Dale and Rodney's parents, Melvin and Elaine Johnson, pictured here in a neighbor's wheat field, both passed away in 2019. Melvin worked on the certified seed potato farm and inspired the future generations up until the time of his passing. "They did everything together," Dale says about his parents. "Every time my dad went to town, he'd take Mom with him."

in the middle of September and don't have refrigeration to store potatoes past mid-May.

We were able to purchase a John Deere self-propelled sprayer, which saves so much money and product in spraying each year.

A couple of years ago, we bought



Dale and Rodney's grandpa harvests potatoes in 1956, and the year prior, in 1955, the Johnson family is shown picking potatoes by hand.

a brand-new planter and tractor, going to GPS (global positioning system) for the first time, which makes planting and everything else so much easier. The technology is great with consistency across fields and nice, straight rows.

Does Johnson Brothers Inc. raise around 300 acres of potatoes on rotation, and with what other crops? We try to raise around 300 acres of certified seed potatoes or a few acres more, on rotation with oats, clover, and sometimes sorghum. About two-thirds of our potato acreage is on a three-year rotation and the other third on a four-year schedule.

A lot has changed since my father passed away. My brother and I have passed quite a few acres on to the next generation. Rodney and I raise about 130 acres of potatoes, and Rodney's kids grow about another 150 acres, and his two grandkids are planting their own potatoes this year and making their own decisions.

Are you still raising Silvertop, Burbank and Norkotah potatoes, and for what market? We also grow Caribou, Umatilla, and King certified seed potato varieties. Johnson Brothers Inc. has always been a certified seed potato grower, with this part of the Upper Peninsula being such a great area to raise seed potatoes.

When we grade our seed, we pick out the oversize and pack those. We have a wash line and we're able to pack them up for RPE Inc., which buys all of those for the fresh market. RPE has been good to our farm.

Most of the seed goes to growers, with about 70 percent shipped into Wisconsin, 20 percent to Minnesota, and 10 percent staying here in Michigan. Our largest customer is Wysocki Family Farms, and all our Norkotahs go to Jimmy Burns of James Burns & Sons Farms to be grown out for the fresh market.

continued on pg. 12

“The guys we deal with in Wisconsin are some of the nicest farmers you run into. My father dealt with their fathers, and I’ve known their sons my whole life.”

– Dale Johnson

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Interview . . .

continued from pg. 11



We've been growing for them for a long time, and for quite a few other Wisconsin farms, mostly McCain growers.

As far as brokerages on the seed side, Greg Anderson of North Dakota and Potato Services in lower Michigan handle potatoes for us, and RPE Inc. is our broker on the fresh side.

I understand there are three generations working on Johnson Brothers Inc. farm, is that correct?

Three now, yes, work for Johnson Brothers. Spudland Farms is the

fourth generation and includes my brother Rodney's three children as well as his son-in-law.

Johnson Brothers itself has six family members working on the farm, and around 3 full-time and 2-4 part-time employees at any given moment.

What are you doing to work sustainably and closely with your neighbors? The big issue, and I know Wisconsin deals with it, is irrigation water. Quantity is a big thing, and quality too. The quality issue is why I'm happy about our new sprayer,

Left: Burbank certified seed potatoes are shown in storage at Johnson Brothers Inc., in Sagola, Michigan.

Right: A beautiful field of Umatilla seed potatoes is pictured at Johnson Brothers Inc.

which puts out minimal drift and has been good for us.

We try to plant cover crops so that we don't have any soil erosion, that's the big thing. We make sure the soil is as good when we harvest as it was when we planted it.

With some of the newer potato varieties, we've been able to cut back on fertilizer applications, particularly with Caribou, King and Umatilla. Caribou particularly uses a lot less fertilizer. I think we're down 30 percent on fertilizer in our Caribou fields.

With such a strong plant and root system, Caribou accumulates a lot of nutrients out of the ground that other varieties can't take up.

What are the challenges of growing potatoes in the U.P.? Advantages?

The advantage up here is that we're all by ourselves, and isolation is a very good thing on a certified seed potato farm. The disadvantage is frost. You see frost just about every month up here.

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The third and fourth generations of Johnsons who helped usher in Spudland Farms are, in the top row, left to right: Dale's wife, Dee, his niece (Rodney's daughter), Faith, and brother, Rodney; and in the bottom row, left to right: Dale, his niece's husband, John, and Rodney's sons, Jason and David.

We've seen a pretty good frost on the 4th of July, so our growing season is short, but there's a lot of opportunity up here if someone wants to go for it.

The frost is why we plant so late and try to miss the June frost that we get almost every year around the 8th or 10th of the month. In my lifetime, I've seen three or four frosts around the

4th of July. We try to start planting on May 15th, and just deal with the June frosts, hoping they won't be bad.

We start looking for frost around August 27th or 28th and keep a sharp eye out for the rest of the season, with a goal of completing harvest by the 10th of October.

How has technology changed the farm, and which technologies?

We still do a lot of things the old-fashioned way up here. Irrigation-wise, we only have two pivots. The rest are hand-moved irrigators, and we still do a lot of hand picking, and bagging, of potatoes for people.

continued on pg. 14



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continued from pg. 13



You can't imagine how many potatoes we sell out the door. Last year, we sold six semi-loads of potatoes out the door that people use as table stock. People come and get one or two 50-pound bags or 10 or 20 pounds. We sell to all the people in the neighborhood.

One guy stores them, and at night he and his friends have fish, French fries and beer. We also sell to a lot of restaurants and pasty shops in the Upper Peninsula.

Why is it important for you to be involved in the Farm Bureau or other organizations? Because Farm Bureau is the one organization working and fighting for us every day. For us in Michigan, Farm Bureau fights for growers regarding water and labor issues.

We've had issues on property taxes where Farm Bureau stepped in, or people telling us we're draining lakes or the state saying our farms have an adverse effect on trout streams in our area.

We're the only farm in this area, and you travel quite a long way to find another farm drawing water. Our farm put two monitoring wells in the ground last year to help Farm Bureau and other farms, which are trying to get data across the whole state of Michigan.

We test wells for nitrates a couple times a year, but our test results are great as far as showing low levels of nitrates, and neighbors have the same results. I live here, too, so I'm very happy.

Left: Elmer Johnson, Dale and Rodney's grandfather, started raising potatoes in Upper Michigan in 1931.

Right: Rodney Johnson poses with his sons, David and Jason, in front of a Lenco potato harvester.

Any new machinery planned for the farm? We're considering a new bin piler for the storage facility we built so that we have one in there.

Why is Johnson Brothers Inc. a member of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association, and why is that important? The WPVGA was helpful for us when GAP and other audits started, and my niece was able to go to all the classes down there. Dana Rady (WPVGA director of promotions and consumer education) has been very helpful.



Dale Johnson is in the small tractor, foreground, with his nephew in the second tractor hilling Russet Norkotah potatoes six years ago.

Plus, we have a lot of fun in Wisconsin. Your Industry Show in Wisconsin is tremendous. Oh my gosh, I make sure to leave the checkbook at home when I go.

The guys we deal with in Wisconsin are some of the nicest farmers you run into. My father dealt with their fathers, and I've known their sons my whole life.

I saw Louis Wysocki at the Industry Show in November of 1983. My dad must have been talking to him, and my brother and I joined the conversation, telling Louis that we planted our first 25 acres of potatoes on new land.

He called us a couple weeks later and bought all the potatoes my brother and I were raising on our 25 acres. That got us up and running. He didn't have to do that, but it's just the way he is.

Louis' grandson, Lucas, brought him up here prior to my dad's passing in 2019, and he and my dad talked for over an hour.

Of course, when my dad was alive, he gave Rodney's kids some acres to start farming on, which is now Spudland Farms, so the previous generations have done a lot to support the next generation of potato growers.

Speaking of which, what do you hope for regarding the future of Johnson Brothers Inc. in Upper Michigan? I hope the kids will be as successful as we have been up to this point, that they keep farming and things all go well for them and the next generation after that.

The growers in the Upper Peninsula do a fabulous job, all of them. We get along well together, and as far as the growers who we have left up here, none of us compete against each other. We all have our own market niche and do our own things.

Do you have any advice for the next generation? Don't spend so much money. I tell them that every day,



Irrigation-wise, Johnson Brothers Inc. only owns two pivots, with hand-moved irrigators providing the rest of the crop coverage. Regardless, the potatoes are looking good under irrigation!

but the only thing I would say, I hope they can keep the farm going up here for future generations and that the land remains in as good a shape or better than it is now.

Anything I've missed that you'd like to add, Dale? Well, I'm very grateful to have customers for the produce we grow. Without them, we wouldn't exist. I call a lot of our guys we deal


with my friends.

They know that they can call me any time, and we don't have to talk about potatoes. Gary Woyak of Taterland Farms and I have been known to talk on the phone for two hours at a time. I've known him since I was 18, and half the time we don't even talk about potatoes. **BC^T**

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