



NAME: Bob Guenthner

TITLE: President of the Board of Directors

COMPANY: Guenthner Potato Company Inc. (GP Ventures, LLC)

LOCATION: Antigo, WI

HOMETOWN: Antigo, currently living in Wausau

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Fifty-three, and has worked since he was 13 years old

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Part-time jobs

SCHOOLING: Antigo High School, and University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, major in math and minor in physics, crediting the two subjects for having helped him tremendously in life and work. "Physics is all about determining cause and effect, about exploring assignable causes," Bob says. "Math is a universal language. One plus one equals two everywhere in the universe, no matter what word symbol is used to express the numbers."

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: FFA; Coast Guard Auxiliary member since 2010 working hand-in-hand with the active-duty Coast Guard in Florida. "I especially enjoy working for the Lee County Sheriff's Office Civilian Support Unit," Bob notes. "I have trained over 400 hours to become a marine training officer."; Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Hall of Fame member and past president of the Board; member of the Freemasons and Shriners International; and chairman of the Agronomy Committee for the Food + Farm Exploration Center

8 BC'T June

INTERVIEW

ROBERT J. "BOB" GUENTHNER, President of the Board of Directors, Guenthner Potato Company Inc., and his brother, **DR. JOSEPH "JOE" GUENTHNER**, Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics, University of Idaho

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, Badger Common'Tater

"This isn't about me. It's about the hundred-year-old farm that's still going," Bob Guenthner says regarding his family's multi-generational certified seed potato operation, Guenthner Potato Company Inc., of Antigo, Wisconsin, which became a "Century Farm" in 2026.

Guenthner Potato Company Inc. (GPCI) has not always been a certified seed potato farm. In 1926, the core business was dairy, and Bob's grandfather, Joseph Sebastian Guenthner, owned a milk bottling plant and delivered his bottled milk.

"We still have ledgers listing customers and delivery addresses," Bob says. "From time to time,

AWARDS/HONORS: WPVGA Hall of Fame member

FAMILY: Wife, Cheri; daughters, Jackie and Bobbi, and sons-in-law Mike and Bill; and grandchildren, Sam, Mallory, K.K., Chase, Max, Sawyer, Camden, and Kallie

HOBBIES: Golf, but doesn't have time, flying the ag drone, and working out

someone will still bring us a 'Guenthner Dairy' bottle. Grandpa also grew potatoes."

A major turning point came when the family built a potato grading shed. "Grandpa could sell more potatoes than he could grow, so he began buying from other growers," Bob explains. "According to his ledger books, it appears he purchased potatoes from nearly every grower in Langlade County."

"He also had two warehouses in

Above: One of this issue's co-interviewees, WPVGA Hall of Fame member Robert J. "Bob" Guenthner (center), poses with his farm manager, Jim Kennedy (left), and production manager and primary drone operator, Joe Holbrook (right).



Antigo, both located on the Chicago & North Western (CNW) Railway line,” he adds. “We were still loading potatoes on railcars in the 1960s. We had one Baker machine, and it could take four hours to bag a railcar load of 10-pound bags.”

ROWS OF SPUDS

“I can still picture laying the bags end-to-end just to figure out how many rows would fit into a 40-foot semi-trailer,” Bob recalls.

That all changed on Good Friday in April 1967, when a spark from

Above: Certified seed potatoes are planted at Guenther Potato Company Inc. (GP Ventures, LLC) in Antigo, Wisconsin.

an engine on the CNW line ignited a grassfire, and the family lost the warehouse and packing shed. A nearby building, used to make crates for milk bottles, was also destroyed.

“We rebuilt the warehouse but not the packaging shed in time for the fall harvest,” Bob remembers. “After that, we moved to growing certified seed potatoes.”

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NAME: Joe Guenther

TITLE: Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics

UNIVERSITY: University of Idaho

RESIDENCE: Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, area

HOMETOWN: Antigo

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Forty-six

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Guenther Potato Company

SCHOOLING: Bachelor of Science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a Master of Science from Montana State University, and a Ph.D. from Washington State University

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Agribusiness consultant, expert witness for agricultural damages litigation, and volunteer for International Farmer-to-Farmer Program

AWARDS/HONORS: Visiting scholar, Cambridge University, and affiliate professor, Michigan State University WorldTAP (World Knowledge and Technology Access Program)

FAMILY: Wife, Terri, who is the daughter of Antigo potato farmers Ted and Sue Baginski, and three daughters, three sons-in-law, and eight grandchildren

HOBBIES: Fishing, triathlons, weightlifting, horticulture, and genealogy

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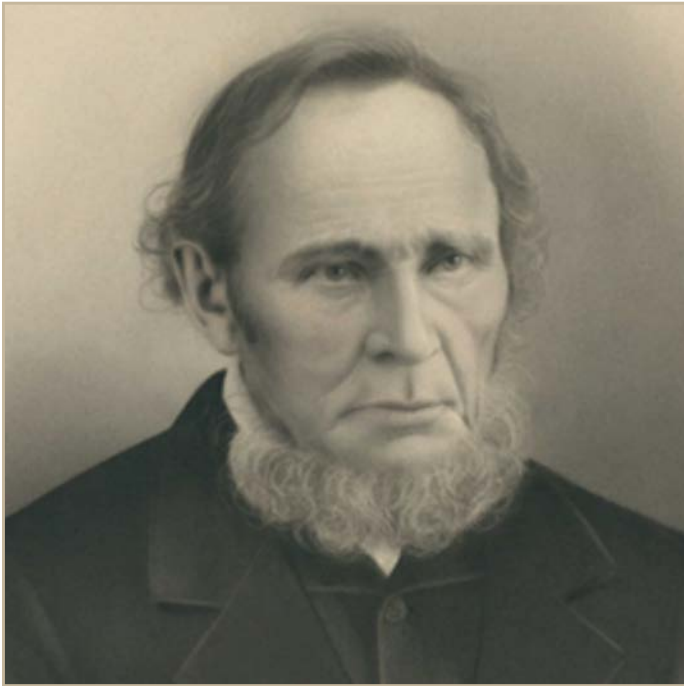


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Interview . . .

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“Dad had me added as an employee to the company that built the warehouse,” he remembers. “I had a lot to learn. I worked on the bottom of the trusses; they never

asked me to go to the top. They must have been good judges of ability. It was good experience.”

Joseph Sebastian Guenther passed away in 1964, and Bob remembers

Above: A “Century Farm” as of 2026, the history of Guenther Potato Company Inc. begins with Joseph Guenther (left), born in 1836, and his son, Joseph Sebastian Guenther (right), born in 1877.

writing on the bottom of his dresser drawer, “This is the saddest day of my life.”

Grandpa Joe and his wife, Lily, had four children. Julius was an attorney and served as the Langlade County District Attorney; son Harvey and his wife, Jeanette, farmed on their own next to Grandpa Joe’s land; and daughter Margaret and her husband, Oscar Wendt, farmed on their own.

“Joseph F. Guenther, my father, farmed with Grandpa Joe,” Bob explains. “Grandpa Joe’s estate was split so that Joseph F. received Grandpa’s share of their business. The others received land.”

Today, Guenther Potato Company owns much of the land and operates as GP Ventures LLC.

“We’re fortunate to partner with Heartland Farms, which is fully integrated into both ownership and operations,” Bob explains. “Their



Used as an advertisement for the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association, Bob Guenther says this photo of he and his grandson, Sam McGivern, walking through a potato field has become popular. “I’ve received quite a few positive comments about it,” Bob notes, “but more about Sam than me.”

technology has expanded our capabilities in ways we didn't know were possible."

Are you still discovering the extent of some of the operations your family farm was involved in? Bob:

Yes, we sold Champion potato harvesters, chemicals for Rhome and Hass, and were a dealer for Noffsinger chain. We grew potatoes in a lot of places in Wisconsin: Hatley, Mole Lake, Eagle River, Nekoosa, Grand Marsh, Deerbrook, Bryant, and Argonne.

GPCI also grew potatoes in Sand Mountain, Alabama, and was involved in growing potatoes in Mexico with Richard Pavelski and Bob Walther.

What do you most take pride in, Bob and Joe, regarding the family operation reaching the status of being a "Century Farm?" Bob: It would be that GPCI is still in business providing good jobs for hard working people. We are also very proud that GPCI has made donations to the Food + Farm Exploration Center. Cheri and I have donated funds and a lot of fun time to this most worthy cause.

We are deeply proud to support the Food + Farm Exploration Center. Through our contributions of both time and treasure, Cheri and I are committed to its powerful mission—reconnecting people with the true origin of their food and honoring the farmers who make it all possible.

Joe: I am proud our ancestors were among the first to grow potatoes in the Antigo area. I found a Homestead Act document, signed by President Grover Cleveland in 1885, that granted 160 acres of Langlade County farmland to Joseph Guenther. His son, Joseph S. Guenther, founded Guenther Potato Company 41 years later.

Guenther farmers rode the "technology treadmill" with success. After adjusting for inflation, potato prices trend downward. Farmers

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"Grandpa could sell more potatoes than he could grow, so he began buying from other growers. According to his ledger books, he purchased potatoes from nearly every grower in Langlade County."

– Bob Guenther

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Interview . . .

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survive by adopting new technologies that increase yields and reduce costs.

A century ago, horses were a new technology. They replaced the “one man, one ox, one acre, one day” benchmark. Guenthners’ switch from oxen to horses enabled them to plow more ground in less time and with less feed.

Later, a much different type of horsepower arrived with tractors. Now, the treadmill includes tractors that drive themselves and plant protection delivered by drones.

Have you always worked on the farm, and what are some of your earliest or most poignant memories?

Bob: Yes, since I was 12 years old. An early memory is that I would volunteer to change irrigation guns all night. Of course I needed a pickup truck.

I wasn’t old enough to have a driver’s license, so I kept to the fields, kind of, mostly.

Joe: What I remember the most are



the people who worked on the family farm. Dad told me to drive one of his employees, Hermilio “Pancho” Gonzalez, to another part of the farm one hot summer day in the 1960s.

We jumped into Dad’s convertible that had four-on-the-floor. Enjoying the cool rush of air, I put the pedal to the metal and entered a curve with too much speed. I downshifted, accelerated and did a power-slide on the gravel road. I was scared but

Above: Certified seed potatoes are harvested at Guenthner Potato Company Inc. on September 21, 2023.

managed to keep us between the ditches without a rollover.

I’ll never forget Pancho saying, “Joe, the next time I ride with you I will go to church first.” As far as I know my friend Pancho never told Dad about my reckless driving.

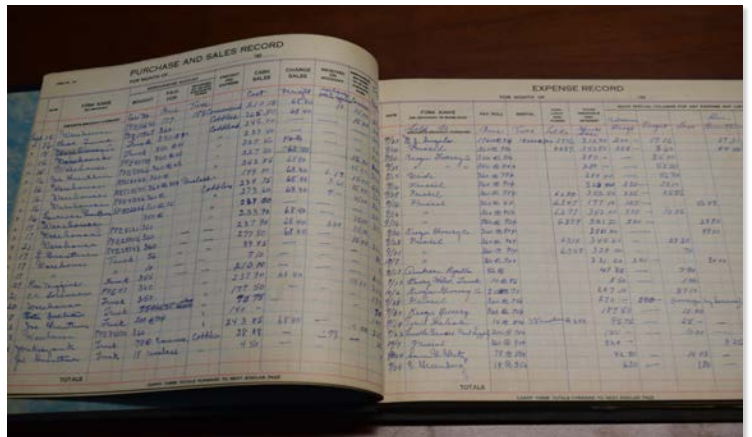
Another poignant memory I have



Above & Below: Though Guenthner Potato Company is largely a John Deere operation, the first tractor in the lineup is a Case IH Magnum 225 CVT set up for tillage, while second in line stands a John Deere 7R 310 hooked up to a Harriston cup planter.



Potato harvest was a little different nearly a century ago at Guenthner Potato Company Inc., in Antigo.



is when another farm worker, who came to Wisconsin from Appalachia and whose nickname was Uncle Remus, said, "I have something in my eye."

I was just a kid when I had handed Uncle Remus a piece of paper with a joke written on it. I didn't realize until later why he said what he did. I was watching Mom do the weekly payroll when I saw a timecard marked with an "X" on the signature line. She

explained to me that Uncle Remus signed with an "X" because he was unable to read and write.

I thought those two guys were wonderful. It didn't matter that they came to Wisconsin from somewhere else. So did my ancestors.

Joe, you had quite a career on the academic side as a professor and as a published author in the potato industry. Reflecting on your career, what are you most thankful for? I am

Above: According to the ledger books that the family has kept all these years, Bob Guenther's grandfather, Joseph Sebastian Guenther, purchased potatoes from nearly every grower in Langlade County.

most thankful that the University of Idaho hired me as a member of their faculty. I was in my 20s, but now, nearly a half-century later, I am still with UI as an emeritus professor. I can't imagine a better university

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Interview . . .

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Left and Right: Bob Guenther (left) poses with David Matszewski (right), who has been with the operation for a quarter century and who Bob says can do “just about anything,” running the harvester, modifying equipment, and overseeing storage. After the seed potatoes are cut, they’re left in storage for 7-14 days to suberize.

for someone from a potato farm.

I am also thankful for what I call my Four Lions—professors who were role models and mentors—John Schoenemann, University of Wisconsin, Duane Preston, North Dakota State University, Bob Thornton, Washington State University, and Creighton Miller, Texas A&M University.

They were all Potato Association of America presidents and honorary life members.

Joe, what are key takeaways from what you learned over the years regarding the potato industry in Wisconsin, Idaho and beyond?

A common thread is pride. From Wisconsin to Idaho, Europe, China, Australia, South America, Africa, and wherever else I go, there is pride in being a potato grower.

The farmers grow other rotational crops, but when I ask them what they do for a living, the answer is, “I am a potato grower.” Maybe growing potatoes is the most challenging and rewarding thing they do.

Joe, how did your career in

Idaho correspond to or reflect your experience growing up at Guenther Potato Company Inc.?

Communication is the key. My potato farm background gave me an advantage because I understood the ag industry culture and enjoyed communicating with its people.

My friend Duane “Sarge” Preston at North Dakota State University taught me that the Good Lord gave us two ears and one mouth, so that we would listen twice as much as we talk.

Joe, how could you, then, contribute to the farm from afar?

I tend to stay in my own lane. We talk about biotech, electronic tech, market forces and such, but Bob is the farmer. Although I am the professor, I think I learn more from Bob than he learns from me

Bob, what are some of the new innovations or technologies that you want to show and tell in this article?

We currently use a DJI drone for spraying and seeding oats. When we send a grain drill across the field to seed oats, the ground is intentionally loose, but no matter what you do—

use wide tires, inflate them correctly, drive between rows—the tire tracks stunt the growth of the oats.

Using the DJI drone, we seed the oats and broadcast fertilizer over the top of that, and there are no wheel ruts and, thus, no stunted plant growth.

We don’t scout with the spray drone as we have another that is better suited for that. I will be teaching my grandkids to run the drone.

Bob, I hear you moved to a new office in January. Is that part of a bigger expansion or upgrade?

Our old office was on Edison Street in Antigo. We purchased land with a newer building and Jackie turned it into an office. The new one is located on the farm.

Bob, you told me the timing was perfect for this article, almost a providence rather than a coincidence. Why is the timing perfect?

Because Jackie set aside boxes of old records, and I have been going through them. The records have always been around, but it has been good timing for me to go through them. So, when you asked

me for an interview, I was eager to say “yes.”

When I started going through the documents, I did not know that, later, you were going to request an article about our family farming for a century. When you asked, I had much better information.

Bob, what varieties of certified seed potatoes are you raising, on what rotation and with what other crops? We grow both public and private varieties of seed potatoes, and practice three- and four-year rotations depending on individual fields. Our crop plan for 2026 is 377 acres of seed potatoes, 400 acres of oats, 300 acres of soybeans, and 200 acres of second-year clover.

Bob, what are your biggest challenges in keeping the Century Farm legacy alive and well? GPCI’s challenges are the same as other farms. We must continue to keep our excellent customers. We also must attract and retain great employees.



Mike Leahy runs the seed cutting operation at Guenther Potato Company Inc. Mike is part of the partnership with Heartland Farms, and Bob says Mike is the best he’s seen at this highly complicated and very important operation.

My brother, Joe, and I created a list of past and current employees. It amazes me how many employees’ first jobs were their only jobs in their lifetimes.

Joe deserves a lot of credit for the success of the farm. With his experience, having been raised on our farm in Antigo that grew potatoes

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Interview . . .

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for the fresh, processed and seed potato markets, and as a professor of agricultural economics at the University of Idaho for 46 years, he has been involved in the potato industry all his life.

Joe owns land that GPCI rents from him, and with contacts throughout the potato growing, processing, science and academia circles of the

industry, he's referred customers to us through the years and shared valuable insight and information. He has a great reputation.

He has always been there for us. I am extremely grateful and proud that "Little Joe" is my brother. OK, that is what we called him before he became a 6-foot, 4-inch, 240-pound tremendous athlete.

He has been published extensively in academic and trade journals and was elected President of the Potato Association of America for 2001-2002.

Bob, do you continue to work full time on the farm, and what other family members are involved? No, I am not full-time on the farm. I am still responsible for some things, but that list gets shorter every year. My entire life, I said I loved my job so much that I would do it for nothing, and I've made good on my word!

Our daughter, Jackie, is our administrator, and she has more responsibilities than I ever had. One of our grandsons will be a first-year employee in 2026. He is 14. We have a great organization with Jackie in administration, Jim Kennedy as operations manager and Joe Holbrook as production manager.

Jim is central to our operation and an excellent fit. He brings valuable experience from Heartland Farms and Frito-Lay. I can't imagine the company running without him.

We have a very young crew. Three are in their thirties and forties. We also have two other full-time employees in their twenties and are blessed to have other full-timers older than them.

Dave Matuszewski has been with us long enough to get a watch, Lol! He is full time aside from an occasional Friday afternoon off. We have four more previously full-time employees that help on short notice. First among



Bob Guenther's mentor was Felix Zeloski (shown), who, after Bob's father died, in June 1973, wrote a letter to the family offering any help they needed. Bob has kept that letter for over 50 years.

them is Gary Preboski. He was our manager for 25 years.

Bob, why do you enjoy being a certified/foundation seed potato grower in the Antigo, Wisconsin, area? The Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program is the best in the country. Leadership has been what sets us apart, from Henry Darling, Steve Slack and Bob Slattery to Tom German and Bob Coltman to Renee Rioux, Amy Charkowski, Amanda Gevens and Brooke Babler. I know I missed a few names.

I have attended Certification Section meetings where all the states were represented, and it was apparent who the leaders in the room were.

Bob, what do you feel has been your biggest success in the operation? Keeping our customers and retaining long-term employees. But success is never about just one person. It takes all of us for the business to be successful.

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Bob, do you feel new technologies have helped you reach the farm's goals, and if so, what technologies?

Yes, adapting to new technologies is essential. The most recent one was using a spray drone.

Bob, have you made good friends and neighbors in this industry? Oh, my goodness. I am glad you asked. The friends I made are at the top of the list of why I enjoy this industry.

After our father died, in June 1973, many of his friends contacted our family to offer help. We had a crop in the ground and the boss was gone. Felix Zeloski wrote a letter that I have kept for over 50 years. The man took the time to write a letter to our family. I took him up on his offer to help and learned many things from him.

If I was present at a meeting that Felix couldn't attend, the next Monday morning he would call me and ask a simple question, "Well, what did you learn?" To this day,



This beautiful photo of a flowering potato field was taken at Guenther Potato Company Inc. on July 10, 2025.

I have the habit of actively listening to gain information at every meeting and preparing a takeaway that I will remember.

It was my honor to speak at Felix's funeral. Dennis also asked me to be a pallbearer.

I hesitate to list names for fear of omitting others, and if I mentioned them all, you would run out of space. Good friends, indeed, include Robert H. Diercks, Richard Pavelski, Bob Slattery, Steve Slack,

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Interview . . .

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Kevin Klages (left) and Sam Zaverousky do a final grading and inspection of certified seed potatoes before cutting and planting at Guenther Potato Company.

Kevin Bula, John Schroeder, T.J. Kennedy, Neil Gudmestad, Corrie Enander, David Parish, and the list goes on.

I vividly remember Bucky Steinfest. He was our foreman, and I spent the summers in his shadow. Every fall when it was time to go to school, I would say I didn't want to go to school.

Bucky would ask what I wanted to do, and I'd reply, "stay here with you." Bucky was a tough guy but very kind to me. He would simply say, "You need to go to school."

I remember riding with Bucky when I was 14 years old after school to pick up a load of 100-pound bags of potatoes from another farmer. The packing shed would grade them the next morning.

We loaded our semi-trailer by hand in the dark, and I remember Bucky turning on the radio to listen to Cassius Clay defeat Sonny Liston for the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship. Bucky never said, but I got the feeling he had been in a few fights himself.

18 BC'T June

When Bucky lived with my Grandma Lily and Grandpa Joe for room and board, he held Grandma in his massive arms while she peacefully passed away. And, my wife, Cheri, and I were at his bedside when he passed away. He was an important part of our family.

Joe: Bucky was tough. While in a storage, he fell 20 feet onto a concrete floor, got up, and walked away. Another time, his clothing got caught in a tractor's power take-off shaft. The only things left on Bucky's body were his belt, his work boots, and bruises. Oh, he was also hit by lightning while moving irrigation pipe, twice!

Bob: My best friend is Richard Pavelski of Heartland Farms. We talk just about every day and find humor in most every topic. In the 1980s, GPCI sold seed to his father, Albert.

Richard and I first met when we were on the WPVGA Board of Directors. He was the president and assigned a task to me. I don't remember what the task was, but I do remember him telling me that he "fully expected good results."

Bob, what is your goal or long-term vision for the farm? My goal is to keep our same customers, provide good jobs for our faithful employees, and create opportunities. We have a young man in high school who is ready to take his FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) Part 107 remote pilot exam.

Bob, do you think Joseph Sebastian Guenther would be proud of the operation today? Without a doubt, Grandpa would be proud. He knew how difficult it is to run a successful business. One of the old records I found was a letter dated September 2, 1930. The Great Depression started in 1929 and lasted 10 years.

The letter reads, "Mr. Jos. S. Guenther, with reference to your note of \$2,000 dated today, due on June 15, 1931, if you find you cannot pay this note when due, then I hereby extend the time of payment to September 1, 1931."

The business he started survived The Great Depression. He would be overjoyed to see that it is still operating. Father Joseph F. Guenther Sr. would be just as proud, even today, more than 50 years after his death.

Bob, are there fourth and fifth generations ready to take the reins of the operation? Jackie represents the fourth generation, and her 14-year-old son is fifth generation. I have no expectations for them. Jackie found her way to GPCI after teaching for 15 years.

My dad gave me good advice before I went to college. He said I should study something other than farming. He said, at times, he felt like there was nothing else he could be successful at.

Our other daughter, Bobbi, is a geneticist. She spent a lot of her career in oncology, trained at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, and she and her husband, Mike, have three children.

Joe, is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add? I have a soft spot in my heart for potato producers and consumers in poor countries. There, the concern is "not enough calories" rather than "too many calories," as in the U.S.

For more than a quarter century, I have worked on potato projects in Africa, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa. Those growers use a fascinating combination of old technology, new technology, and in some places, religion.

I have watched Ethiopian growers use oxen to plow and plant potatoes like my ancestors did long ago in Wisconsin.

How about you, Bob, is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add? Yes, there certainly is. I want to recognize the members of my immediate family: Joe, Margaret, Jack, Carolyn, my mother, Carol, and my dad, Joe, all worked on our family farm. They all contributed.

My sister, Margaret, passed away a couple of years ago. I still can picture her cutting seed tubers into "tuber units." She would do that all day with her great sense of humor on display.

Margy acquired her sense of humor from our mother, Carol. I asked Carol once how she wanted to be remembered. She replied, "I liked to make people laugh."

If she was being bombarded with questions, she'd ask, "Are you writing a book? Leave that chapter out." And others of her favorite sayings were, "He took the serious side where there was no serious side," and "He would argue with a stop sign."

Carol worked in our office until she was 65 years old. On her last day at work, she said, "Thank you, I wish I could say I enjoyed every minute. Try to get along without me. I won't be coming back."

My wife, Cheri, has always been there for GPCI. One time when

our harvester broke down, I sent everyone home, worked on it and fixed it around 10 p.m.

I went home and asked Cheri if she could go back to the field with me to drive truck alongside the harvester and pick up the potatoes lying out in a wind row. Her telling of this story would be much more colorful than mine.

She always ran for parts for us. Our

first ventilation systems did not have remote monitoring, and I would ask her if she would drive past the warehouses around 2 a.m. to make sure the lights were all green. She's always been available on a moment's notice when we needed her.

Thank you for acknowledging our company has been in business for 100 years. It is my privilege for my brother, Joe, and I to tell the story of GPCI. **BCT**

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