

FARMING INTO THE FUTURE

High-tech family farming in a low-tech business

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Staff Writer

With today's economy, fuel prices, fertilizer prices, equipment and the ever escalating prices on all farm necessities, combined with the low price of crops, many wonder how any farmer is able to survive, let alone make a profit.

Thompson Farms, Osage City, is starting its third generation of farming. Jim Thompson, the patriarch of the family, started farming in the 1940s with a horse and plow. His sons, Doug and Keith, joined the operation while still in school, and now Keith's son, Ben, has joined the operation. They operate over 2,000 acres in Osage County and have added acreage in Lyon County.

Each member of the team has his own responsibilities, but they help each other whenever necessary.

Doug is in charge of the spraying duties - probably the most critical part - and the family's seed company.

"I get a little nervous in the spring because I need to get all of the spraying done before any of the fields can be planted," Doug said.

Keith manages the computerized portion of the business, or the high-tech part. He also does the bookwork and helps with field work.

They describe their operation as a high-tech and low-tech no-till operation. Sometimes, they admit, they don't know what they are doing or going to do.

Asked why they consider their farm hi-tech, Keith takes a moment to think. "Well maybe because we were one of the first in the county to use GPS for planting," he said.

They first utilized the GPS system to help with recordkeeping and to track yield data. They then started using it to help plant and spray and do other farm work.



Rosie Blacketer/Herald-Chronicle

The Thompsons - from left, Jim, Ben, Doug and Keith - use older equipment like this planter, with the hi-tech capabilities they have designed themselves.

"You don't realize what straight rows are, how you don't overspray or over-plant an area and how efficient your daily field work can be by using GPS," Keith said.

"We have cut our time down, and had savings on chemicals, seed and everything, since we took on GPS," Doug said. "On my sprayer, it tells me where I have sprayed and how much, so if I overlap, the sprayer knows and will automatically shut the sprayer off. This saves money especially at the cost of [chemicals]."

Ben manages the cattle end of the operation, planting and mechanics.

"I said that I wanted to bring in cattle and see what we could do with them," Ben said. "Everyone

was for it, but they said 'OK, you take care of it.'"

Ben considers livestock as part of crop rotation. He describes it as a holistic way of everything working together, to make each thing better.

Jim, his family says, holds everything together and helps with everything. His sons admit that if he is not there, everything seems to stop.

"The new gizmos that the boys come up with are fascinating," Jim said. "You can even plant after dark and still have straight rows."

In the 1970s, they switched from conventional tilling to minimum tillage. Through the '70s and '80s they toyed with the idea of no-till farming. In 1990, they went to a

no-till conference and came away believing they could convert their farming operation to no-till and make it work. For the last 18 years the investment in no-till has been paying off.

"The key is the equipment in no-till," Doug said. "A lot of people can't get their equipment right, so they say it doesn't work."

"Mentally, getting your brain to [understand] that no-till will really work is the first step," Keith said. "Remember that the native territory was never plowed. Animals lived there 24/7, and took care of it. Man did not do anything to it and that is the way we are trying to do things."

They have been no-till farming long enough they are now fine-tun-

ing the operation. One adjustment has been in crop rotation. They used to rotate only two crops; now the rotation has grown to numerous crops in a year.

"We have done more and more complex crop rotation with no-till," Ben said. "With GPS and crop rotation, we are trying to find crops that will work in this crazy Kansas weather."

"Right now we use about six or seven crop rotations per field," Doug said.

Their goal is to have something growing constantly, because they believe it improves the soil. They found out that the more crops they keep growing, the quicker they can get into the field to plant because soil texture is improved. This is also done with hope they determine which crops to plant so to not, as they say, "get skunked."

They are now working on planting a "field cocktail," or several crops in the same field. They had heard about a farmer who did this during a time with little rain. His field was productive while single-crop fields did poorly.

The Thompsons describe this method of farming as using high-tech to do low-tech work.

The farm family has also begun growing grass buffer strips to improve water quality by filtering nutrients from runoff, returning productivity to some areas. They also grow cover crops to conserve soil after low-residue crops are grown, and to control weeds. One farm they bought was all grass; they decided to cultivate it and they left a buffer strip along the edge. Through that experience, they learned buffer strips are beneficial and they recommend their use.

They continuously try to think of new ways to do things. In their back shed, inventions are in

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In 1968, Jerry Giesy came to Osage City with, as the late John Wills once said, "A French woman, three snout-nosed kids, and little else but the desire to work hard and be successful."

Almost 40 years later, with the goodness of the people from Osage City and the surrounding area, Jerry's Thriftway is still going strong. Jerry purchased the 2,500 sq ft Larson's Food Market from Ed and Kay Larson in 1968. With the help of his father-in-law, Jules Martin, and his supplier, Jerry's Quik Chek was off and running.

The 6th & Market location was expanded twice. Adding 4,500 sq ft in 1974 and another 1,500 sq ft. In 1988, including a bakery and deli.

With the 20th Century, Jerry and his sons Steve and Brian, saw the need to expand once again, not only to better serve their customers, but also to stay competitive in an increasingly tougher marketplace.

Believing that Osage City is "Right on Track" to a brighter future, the Giesys purchased the former Osage City Chief Motel at 880 Lakin and built a brand new 21,000 sq ft store which opened in 2001.

Eight times larger than the original, the new store tripled all departments and gave customer a more pleasant shopping experience.

While the name may have changed from Quik Chek to Super Saver, and now Thriftway, Jerry's is still committed to serving the needs of the Osage City area for years to come and would like to take this opportunity to thank their customers for their continued support. Thank you for making the past 39 years possible.

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