Thinking Outside the Lines

By Matt Grimley

Atop the river-bluffs near the south-eastern Minnesota community of La Crescent, the 90-plus Ayrshires of Enchanted Meadows Organic Farm munch on fescue, clovers, plantain and other greenery on a recent summer day. Then, on schedule, they’re led from pasture to barn.

Last year, after 10 years of a dairy farming partnership between Chad and Melissa Crowley on one hand and Art and Jean Thicke on the other, this twice-a-day trot began crossing a boundary of sorts. In 2013, the Thicke’s, who are in their mid-60s, sold the younger couple (they are in their mid-30s) 190 acres with a house, barn and shed off their 524-acre home place. There are times now when the cows may be grazed on pastures technically owned by the Crowleys, but are herded into the Thicke’s barn to be milked. However, the two families consider Enchanted Meadows — its land, livestock and buildings — all part of one whole entity. After all, according to the plan, the whole dairy business will eventually transfer to the younger couple.

Jean and Art Thicke had to re-start the transition process for their dairy farm after a family tragedy. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

This farm transition is not the usual passing on of one generation to the next, because of one key fact: the two families involved are not in any way related.

But then again, this is not the usual property. In the late 1970s, Art abandoned fertilizer and pesticides on this scenic farm, which is perched on a ridge near the Mississippi River. In 1985, he stopped growing corn and started his cattle on managed rotational grazing, a process that moves the animals from paddock-to-paddock, allowing the pasture to recover for periods of 25 to 50 days. He hasn’t plowed the land or planted row crops since the 1980s either, choosing instead to rely on the perennial plant systems of pasture and hay to feed the cows.

Ever since they started managed rotational grazing and abandoned row-cropping, the land has had an “unreal” capacity for holding water, says Art. The cattle are consistently unleashed into knee-high pastures that contain well-rooted plants supporting a whole ecosystem, below and above ground, including breeding meadow birds such as the bobolink and horned lark. And the farm is economically sustainable as well: it supports two families, including the Crowleys’ three children — Dylan, 11; Jessica, 8; and Erin, 6.

“It’s not how much milk you get per cow, it’s how much money you keep. I found this out quite a while ago. If you spend less than you make, you make some money,” Art says of his certified organic operation, laughing. “A lot of farmers haven’t figured that out yet.”

Starting Again

Eleven years ago, the Thicke’s were in a similar farm transition situation with their nephew Dan, who had farmed with them during the previous decade. But then the unthinkable occurred: Dan and his wife Wendy were killed by a drunken motorist in a motorcycle accident.

Art and Jean were devastated. In their mid-50s at the time, with no kids of their own, it was then they knew they couldn’t run the farm by themselves forever. They had spent years planning a transition with Dan, and now, they knew, they’d have to do it again. After a period of mourning and rest, they began to interview new farm partners.

One day, an old family friend dropped by. He suggested they talk to his oldest daughter, Melissa. They had never met her before, but Jean remembers the first time she and Chad came to look at their would-be house.

“I remember her saying when they came to look at it that she — could be wrong on this, but this is my memory of it — that she knew that this was where she wanted to raise her babies,” recalls Jean.

“It’s felt like home ever since I’ve been in the house,” says Melissa, with Chad nodding in agreement beside her. “Even when we didn’t own it, it felt like home.”

Chad and Melissa Crowley, shown here with their children, Dylan, Erin and Jessica, have during the past decade been gradually working their way into full ownership of Enchanted Meadows Farm. “We’re committed now,” says Melissa, adding that this process has provided a template for their own family to someday find “someone who wants to farm it this way and carry on.” (Photo by Matt Grimley)

Outside see page 20...
Looking Outside the Family in an Era of High Land Prices

As Art and Jean Thicke make clear, rising land prices are squeezing out agriculture in southeastern Minnesota’s Winona County, where Enchanted Meadows is located. According to the USDA’s 2012 Census of Agriculture, land prices in Winona County were 57 percent higher than in 2007 and 136 percent higher than in 2002. Due in part to the scenic nature of the Mississippi River bluffs near the Thicke’s home, country estates and housing developments are crowning the horizon.

It’s part of a larger trend across the Midwest and the United States. The Agriculture Census shows that: land prices are increasing and shutting out beginning farmers; farm acreage is being lost; small-acreage farms are decreasing in number; large-acreages are increasing; farm operators are now an average 58-years-old and keep getting older; and younger farmers are not entering the profession as quickly as the older farmers are retiring.

More specifically, beginning farmers, or those who have been farming for 10 years or less, decreased by 20 percent from 2007 to 2012. According to Land Stewardship Project surveys, around 40 percent of Farm Beginnings course participants report having no access to land.

Connecting the younger and older generations, especially those farmers who are unrelated, becomes essential for the continuation of farming. According to The FarmLAST Project, more than two-thirds of retiring farmers do not have successors in line, and nearly 90 percent of farm owners neither have an exit strategy nor know how to develop one.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of resources for beginning farmers seeking to connect with existing farmers:
- Seeking Farmers Seeking Land Clearinghouse, Land Stewardship Project (see page 17).
- FarmLink, a state-by-state listing of farmer-landowner connection programs: www.farmintransition.org/netwpart.html.

Looking Outside the Family in an Era of High Land Prices

...Outside from page 19

farm in nearby Ridgeway, Minn. He grew up in a small Nebraska town surrounded by beef, corn and soybeans, gaining some experience with Wisconsin dairy farms in college.

When they first got married, they just wanted to farm together. This was unlike the majority of the other agriculture students at River Falls, even those who had come from farms. “They wanted the jobs in the ag industry,” says Chad. “But if agriculture graduates don’t go back to the farm, who do you think the industry is going to service in the future?”

In late 2003, the Thicke family hired the Crowleys to work the farm. At the same time, they began the gradual process of handing over greater responsibility to the younger couple. Working through a land contract that allows the land to be financed through the Thicke family and not a bank, the Crowleys worked ahead in increments, paying off student loans and debt. Meanwhile, the Thicke family, to build Chad and Melissa’s assets, began to give them calves every year.

“I didn’t want them to come merging with us in some big debt,” says Art. “I wanted equity.”

Chad and Melissa, in this gradual way, eventually got to the point where they were on equal footing with Art and Jean. Now they split the milk check and all the expenses down the middle with the older couple. Art and Jean still own the machinery, but as they buy more equipment from here on out, they plan to do it together. And in an attempt to pass on more equity, the two families have restored much of the farm’s infrastructure during the past few years.

“I can’t transition all my junk,” says Art with a laugh.

For this particular transition, there’s an emphasis on time, an important sort of true paths and intentions. The 10-year transition period provided the Crowleys a chance to determine if farming wasn’t for them or that they simply couldn’t get their finances in order. Besides, those years of farming together allowed the younger couple to pay off their debts, build up savings, live frugally and really learn how to farm.

“The nice thing about buying the farm over there, too, is that it gives them practice instead of just landing with the whole heap all at once,” says Jean.

With the Crowleys’ specialized farm system, it was important for them to find someone who would manage the land in the same way—not using chemicals, allowing the cattle to roam freely and the grass to grow high. Currently, the two parties make management decisions together, often through daily meet-ups in the barn. In the years to come, an increasing amount of responsibility will transfer to the Crowleys as they learn to take on the whole of the farm.

But perhaps most importantly, this transition period has allowed the two families to build mutual trust. Art and Chad ride motorcycles together. The families give each other bluebird boxes and cheese curds. The kids steal some veggies from the Thicke’s garden, and then ride on the ATV with Art to put the gate back in place at the end of the day. All these little things add up to the Crowleys being like family, which is important to Art and Jean.

But that trust, along with any farm transition, takes time. “People who are thinking about keeping their farm, they need to start thinking about that 20 years before they’re going to retire, or 10 years before, because if the first beginning farmer doesn’t work out, they have to get a second one,” says Art. “We just happened to be lucky to get someone who liked farming, agreed with the way we were farming, you know.”

And part of farming is recognizing it’s not a 9 to 5 job.

“I think it’s hard to teach,” says Melissa of the necessary time management and work ethic.

Building trust outside of the family may be seen by many as a barrier, but the Thicke family don’t see it as a problem.

“It might actually be easier,” says Art.

...Outside, see page 21...
noting the difficulty of in-family disputes and inheritance issues.

Apart from the land sale in 2013, the two families haven’t discussed further transition steps yet, partially because Art says he’s not ready to stop farming yet. He doesn’t see himself ever leaving the farm, in fact, joking that the Crowleys will have to build a fenced-in yard for him and Jean.

Both parties say that before the transition process can advance further, some issues external to their own relations will have to be addressed. One is land prices. Art says they’re booming in Winona County, where Enchanted Meadows is located. Inflated prices made the land the Thickes recently sold the Crowleys on a contract-for-deed basis a hot property, but the older couple provided a break on the sale price. However, the larger effect of the bubble is that many farmers, not necessarily caring about the future of the land, will sell for the top price. Most likely, that top price will not be a deterrent to developers who have no interest in preserving farmland.

Another barrier, linked to land price, is the estate tax. Currently, an individual can leave $1.2 million worth of estate to an inheritor without being taxed in Minnesota (under federal tax law, that amount is $5.34 million). That estate exemption in Minnesota will rise to $2 million by 2018, but Art remains worried that the inflated land prices will disallow some from passing on their farms at a reasonable price.

“We’re competing against the big guys who have money, just go out and buy farms,” he says. “That’s what’s going to destroy agriculture more than anything… If I charge Chad and Melissa $2 million for the farm, how long are they going to be farming? They aren’t going to be farming. It can’t be done.”

The Landing

The three Crowley kids rush to the barn on a summer day. Jessica swings on the rope tied to the central beam and Erin hoists up two of the many barn kittens. Then they’re off again, down the hill and below the barn where the chickens strut about. As Dylan points out the one with the funny leg, Art, Chad and Melissa look on with a grin.

This is Art’s family farm. Out of high school, he thought he’d get away. He worked for an air conditioning factory, and he thought about further schooling, but he saw that life off of the land wasn’t for him.

“Once you live on the farm, then live in town, work in the factory with all the people that don’t like their jobs…that’s not fun,” says Art. “I think it’s important people have a job they like… You don’t have to look out for so many things to entertain yourself because your life’s pretty well entertaining you.”

Art adores the land. He glows as he talks about the scarlet tanagers near his pond, the small cave that he and his brother used to explore on the edge of the hill, and the morels that magically appear every spring. Everything he needs is right here.

As he told the Crowleys when they first arrived on the farm, there are only three rules: keep it simple, keep it simple, keep it simple. So far it appears that Chad and Melissa are following these rules and will follow in the Thickes’ footsteps.

“We’re committed now,” says Melissa, adding that this process has provided a template for their own family to someday find “someone who wants to farm it this way and carry on.”

“The land provides a way of life for us, so that’s what you’ve got to value,” says Chad. “Without the land and without the practices that we do, we probably wouldn’t be a successful dairy.”

The three-mile side road leading to Enchanted Meadows was once home to eight dairies — now the closest might be 10 miles away. The farming trend increasingly favors bigger farms, but Art and Jean say there can be a future with grazing farms like this. And at least for the Thicke farm, the future is now a little bit clearer.

“Being sustainable isn’t just one generation — it’s got to be handed down through,” says Jean. “It doesn’t have to be with relatives. It just has to be with family, and we’re a family.”

Matt Grimley served a Land Stewardship Project journalism internship during the summer of 2014.