

A Ticket to Transition

A Fateful Farm Beginnings Meeting Results in a New Era of Dairying

Note: In 2010, the *Land Stewardship Letter* profiled two brothers from southeastern Minnesota — Jim and Al Ideker — who had recently graduated from the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course. Through Farm Beginnings (see page 27) and the help of LSP organizer Karen Stettler, they met western Wisconsin farmer Paul Olson, who invited them to his community to take a shot at launching their farming careers. There, they connected with Paul and his wife Judy, along with a network of people who were eager to see two hardworking beginning farmers succeed. The article described the situation as “a network that has brought together established and retiring farmers, lenders, and even another young farmer to help them channel all that energy toward their ultimate goal: the creation of an agricultural enterprise that’s sustainable from an economical, environmental, and quality-of-life point of view.” (To read the original *Land Stewardship Letter* profile of the Ideker brothers, see landstewardshipproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Ideker.pdf.)

When Stettler recently touched base with the Idekers and Olsons, she learned that a lot had changed since 2010, and that in fact that network of support had paid off. What had started as a way to give two beginning farmers — Jim was 22 and Al was 21 at the time — a leg-up has turned into a full-blown farm business transition. In 2014, the brothers bought 60 acres of the Olsons’ land and erected a dairy barn with a twin-eight herringbone parlor. The Olsons — Paul is 72 and Judy is 68 — retired from dairying in 2015 and sold their herd, plus some machinery and buildings, to the Idekers. The low-interest machinery contract between the Idekers and Olsons was paid off during the summer of 2022, and the cattle sale was completed later that year.

In addition, Jim and his wife, Cassie, now own the Olsons’ 15,000-hen organic egg production facility. The brothers rent 700 acres of crop and pasture ground from 15 landowners, and have purchased roughly 300 acres of their own. All of the land was originally certified organic by the Olsons or other farmers in the area.

This summer, *Land Stewardship Letter* editor Brian DeVore stopped by the Olson farm. While Judy, Paul, Jim, and Al sat around the kitchen table, they shared a few reflections on their transition journey.

On a muggy day in August, dairy farmer Jim Ideker walks over to his pickup truck, reaches in through the open window and snags a well-worn piece of paper from the sun visor. He shows it off like it was a winning lottery ticket. In a sense, since Paul Olson handed him and his brother, Al, this business card a decade-and-a-half ago, it *has* served as a prized path to the future. After all, it set in motion a chain of events that culminated in the Idekers standing here on their own western Wisconsin farm on this particular day, a farm where they milk their 230-cow organic herd and raise feed on some 1,000 acres.

But this isn’t a story about dumb luck and a chance meeting. After all, wannabe farmers and established farmers looking for successors cross paths all the time, with many of those encounters leading nowhere. What sets the Ideker-Olson relationship apart are numerous factors, some controllable, some less so: timing, community support, economics, positive interpersonal connections, and, perhaps most important of all, flexibility

on the part of both parties.

First Impressions

When Paul Olson first connected with the Ideker brothers through the Land Stewardship Project’s Farm Beginnings course, he was impressed with two things: first, that the brothers were taking a course that focuses on the goal setting, marketing, and financial skills needed to establish a successful farm business. At the core of the course are presentations made by established farmers, and that was what brought Olson to the class that was held in 2007-2008 in La Crosse, Wis.

He was also impressed with the brothers on a deeper level. Although the Idekers didn’t grow up on a farm, they had worked on various dairy operations near the family home in southeastern Minnesota.

“To be honest, I think the first time I met them I knew they had it in their gut that they wanted to farm,” Olson recalls. “You catch on to that real quick. We’ve had a lot of help around here over the years, and none of them were of the caliber that they could step

in and take over, and I felt these guys had it from day one.”

And the brothers brought to the table different areas of strength — Al is a good herdsman and knows how to handle livestock, while Jim is sharp with the financial aspects of farming.

“There are so many people who are good herdsman, but they don’t have the business acumen,” says Jim. “The next one has the good business acumen, but he doesn’t know the head from a tail of a cow. Finding someone with that balance, that’s hard.”

Good Timing

When Paul invited the Idekers to western Wisconsin’s Jackson County to help milk his 75-cow organic herd, he was, and still is, president of National Farmers, a responsibility that takes him away from the farm frequently. Paul was 59 at the time, and his wife, Judy, was a few years younger. None of their three children were showing an interest in farming, and the Olsons noticed that many of the other dairy farmers in the community were getting older and didn’t necessarily have successors identified. Although the Olsons knew they would be dairying for several more years, they saw in the Idekers a chance to begin planning an exit strategy they knew would not happen overnight. If they waited until they were closer to retirement age to begin bringing someone on, they might not have someone like the Idekers available to step in.

Timing can make or break a successful farm transition. Without it, there are a lot of missed connections.

“You don’t have to have perfect agreement on everything,” says Jim. “But the older generation has to be willing to step aside, and the younger generation has to be willing to put forth the effort.”

Al says good timing played to their favor in another way: interest rates were relatively low and milk prices were relatively high.

“If we were four years, five years later, in getting started, we would be in a world of hurt,” he says.

But even when all the financial and infrastructural issues are taken care of, there are still the emotional factors to deal with, something all the planning in the world can’t prepare a retiring farmer for. Paul and Judy milked cows together for 45 years and went organic in 2003. By the time they retired, they were milking 80 cows.

“I still miss the cows,” says Judy. “It’s bittersweet going in the barn. That last day of milking was hard.”

Ticket, see page 29...

It Takes a Community

The work ethic and skill sets the Idekers were equipped with gave Paul and Judy the confidence to rent them a house while they began milking other farmers' cows in the neighborhood. By 2010, the Idekers were milking on three different farms and were starting to build their own herd utilizing the seed provided by an interest-free livestock loan offered through Farm Beginnings. The Olsons eventually gave them access to land, equipment, and feed at a low cost. Perhaps most importantly, they connected the brothers to a community network.

Farm Beginnings has long promoted the idea that a key piece in beginning farmer success is to tap into a community network. The Idekers are the living embodiment of how that networking can pay off.

They benefited greatly from the Olsons' giving them generous terms on things like the contract for machinery payments, access to facilities, even feed costs. However, for big investments, such as building a new dairy barn and buying land, the brothers needed outside financing.

The Olsons introduced them to the local bank, which had experience working with dairy farmers, and organic dairy farmers specifically. In fact, the bank's ag lender had seen how methods like managed rotational grazing worked well in that part of Wisconsin through successful dealings with Matt Fendry, another Farm Beginnings graduate and organic dairy farmer who had settled in the community. In addition, the late Paul Dettloff, who at one time was the staff veterinarian for the organic dairy cooperative Organic Valley, sat on the bank's board of directors.



Jim (left) and Al Ideker, shown here with Judy and Paul Olson. "The older generation has to be willing to step aside, and the younger generation has to be willing to put forth the effort," says Jim. (LSP Photo)

Paul Olson says having a good relationship with a local lender who understands the positive role small and medium-sized farms can play in the community is priceless.

"You need a bank that will work with you, give you some flexibility, that understands what you're going through," he says.

Training to Fall Back On

The brothers, who are now in their mid-30s, feel they are "over the hump" when it comes to dairy farming. They now sell to Organic Valley, are building up assets, and are done with major investments like buildings. These days, they're focused on making

smaller tweaks to, for example, the way they raise organic crops and rotationally graze their herd. That makes sense, given that feed costs can be the most volatile aspect of livestock production, particularly at a time when extreme weather and disrupted supply chains play havoc with operating a farm.

A big part of the Farm Beginnings course is training in Holistic Management, which is based on the idea that when planning and setting goals for an agricultural enterprise, a farmer's quality-of-life, the health of the community, and environmental sustainability are at the same level of importance as economic viability.

Ticket, see page 30...

LSP Winter Farm Transition Workshop Series Set

Are you a farmland owner or retiring farmer looking to transition ownership or rent out your farmland in ways that reflect your values? In February and March, the Land Stewardship Project is hosting an online holistic Farm Transition Planning Course designed to help participants act on their conservation and social values. Six 2 ½ hour sessions will bring professionals, farmers, and LSP staff together to dig into values, goals, and communication strategies, as well as generational, financial, legal, and long-term care considerations.

The dates and times for the course are:

- Feb. 1: **Goal Setting for Life & Land**
- Feb. 8: **Financial Considerations**
- Feb. 15: **Legal Considerations**
- Feb. 22: **Working with Next Generation Farmers**
- Feb. 29: **Long Term Care Considerations**
- March 7: **Resources and Planning Next Steps**

For details and to register, see landstewardshipproject.org/transition-course or contact LSP's Karen Stettler at stettler@landstewardship-project.org, 612-767-9885.

The brothers concede that in their first years as farmers, they didn't pay much attention to holistic planning — they were too busy “just surviving.”

“We were milking 50 or 60 cows and well, you can't hire somebody at that size,” Al recalls. “It takes two people to do it, so you're just always there. But we couldn't have made it another two years that way, no way.”

Today, the brothers have an employee and are able to take turns with the milking, giving each other time away from chores and the farm. In fact, the Idekers say they can now take enough of a breather that planning for the future is possible. A decade-and-a-half after they took Farm Beginnings, holistic planning is coming in handy.

“Now that you have the option to live more, you can set your goals according to what you want out of life,” says Jim. “You have the option to implement the things that were taught in Farm Beginnings.”

Paul says he's glad to hear the Idekers are taking a look at what life offers beyond the farm. Farming, especially dairy farming, can be a seven-days-a-week commitment, but one needs to learn how to take the foot off the gas once in awhile.

“You need to get away some of the time,” says the retired farmer.

Al, who is married to Maria and has four young children, agrees.

“Because if not, you'll be 70-years-old and what did you do your whole life? Well, worked to get all this stuff,” he says.

Holistic planning has also helped the brothers focus on what they can control while ignoring what's out of their grasp. For example, in 2017 and 2018, organic dairy farmers were getting paid \$34 a hundred-weight for their milk.

“We haven't cracked \$30 in the last four years and our costs have gone up 30% to 40%,” says Jim. “So what are you going to do? We're not going to spend a lot of time and energy on things that are out of our control. But we can do all the little things to get more milk — adjusting rations, figuring out how to feed more efficiently. Accept things you can't change, work on things you can.”

Al adds that holistic planning is not just about adopting changes that make the farm business more sustainable — personal wellbeing must be considered as well. Sometimes small changes can have outsized impacts, like when the brothers added a special tool on the skid steer loader to better manage the sand the cows lay on in the barn.

Before that adjustment, the brothers used to hand rake 200 stalls twice-a-day by hand.

“The last five years we've changed so much stuff it's ridiculous. When you're young, you're kind of stupid,” says Al. “You say, ‘I'll just put my back into it.’”

“And I wonder why my back hurts?” Paul adds with a laugh.

Keeping the Connection

The brothers have found that having Paul and Judy as sounding boards has been invaluable as they work on the thousand little ways to keep from making costly, irreversible mistakes. The older couple has seen it all: high interest rates, devastating droughts,



“Every situation is a little unique. There is no cookie-cutter deal when it comes to transitioning,” says Paul Olson. (LSP Photo)

sick cows, rock bottom milk prices.

“I remember once it was the first of September and we were going to try some fall seeding but didn't know what to do,” recalls Jim. “It was a five-minute conversation with Paul and Judy, but it saved us from dumping \$2,000 worth of alfalfa seeding on the ground.”

Getting advice from the older generation is critical, but beginning farmers also have to be aware that times change, and what worked in the '70s doesn't make sense today. When the Idekers first started out, they were certain they could make a fulltime living with a 75-cow organic herd. After all, the Olsons were making a go of it with 80 cows, and other farmers in the area were successfully managing herds that averaged less than 100 cows.

But the brothers say today a herd of 230 cows provides them with enough income to support both their families, while allowing them to hire an employee, thus giving them time off. They are also fortunate, thanks to the Olsons, to have access to enough certified organic land to feed that size of a herd.

And when they built their barn, it wasn't that much more of an investment to make it for 200 cows, rather than 100.

Right now, they are happy with their size from an economic and quality-of-life point of view. But that doesn't mean they have to always be satisfied with exactly how milk is produced from that herd. That's why constantly tweaking and innovating around the little things is so key.

“You can never really get comfortable,” says Al. “It's the nature of the beast.”

The Future of the Future

As the Idekers head into what they call the “middle part” of their farming career, and the Olsons look back on a long, fulfilling, life in dairying, the question is raised: what would you tell a beginning farmer today about the prospects in dairying? After all, consolidation, closed creameries, extreme weather, competition for land and, of course, low milk prices, offer up some significant challenges.

“It would totally depend on their age. If they were young, I'd be like, ‘You want to work into our operation?’” Jim says with a laugh. “If they were young and fired up, I would say, ‘You have got to find *exactly* the right situation. Don't settle for a long shot. Look for a person who can give you a deal on the farm, or a really long land contract.”

“And those people are out there. We found that,” says Al.

For their part, Paul and Judy are fully aware times are tough in farming, but they have been in the past as well. For a beginning farmer, they recommend finding a place like Jackson County, where prime corn and soybean ground is less prevalent, and thus land is more affordable. For both the retiring farmer and the beginning farmer trying to negotiate a transition, finding someone you can have a good personal relationship with is just as important as figuring out things from the business side of the equation.

“Keep an open mind. Have some give and take. Every situation is a little unique,” Paul says, adding that the earlier a farmer can start planning a transition, the better. “There is no cookie-cutter deal when it comes to transitioning. It all depends on the situation, the given time, the people, everything involved.”

That last statement resonates with Jim. “I've been thinking about and anticipating where you are at now,” he says, pointing at Paul and Judy. “Because retirement's coming and it's not that far away for us.” □