

Great Lakes Lifestyle

Zeeb family secures future of their farm

By RHONDA DEDYNE

FARMLAND, neat and tidy, stretches as far as the eye can see. While there's nothing unusual about that in an area like rural Clinton County, Zeeb Farms is special.

Besides encompassing two centennial farms, the property has nearly 800 acres — near the juncture of Interstate 69 and U.S. 127, a prime development site — enrolled in the farmland preservation program. The farm also uses no-till and sustainable ag practices on its 1,000 acres.

That commitment by Bob and Virginia "Ginny" Zeeb to the future of agriculture comes from lessons learned in a lifetime of farming over multiple generations. "It's a good feeling knowing that the land is all in the family, and that it will remain as farmland for perpetuity," Bob says.

Although one of the Zeebs' children, Patrick, "is the farmer now," the elder Zeeb still keeps busy every day.

"I'm the unpaid farm labor," Bob says with a laugh about the job title he's had since Patrick took over Zeeb Farms LLC as the sole proprietor. "I plant beans, fit the soil, chase parts, do some book-keeping and haul the grain from the fields to the dryer. We've made a good living on the farm."



WAGON RIDE: Bob Zeeb's grandparents, Chris and Mabel Zeeb, pose for a photo during a workday on the farm.



GENERATIONS UNITE: An old family photo shows Bob Zeeb's Uncle Ronald Zeeb as a young boy with Grandfather Chris Zeeb and Great-grandfather Jacob Zeeb.

Ginny agrees. "It's a good life, and we're pretty proud of all our kids. They've all been expected to work hard and assume responsibilities," she says about Patrick and his siblings, Chris, Mike and Karen.

In the beginning

The roots of the Zeeb family tree lay in Germany and Switzerland. Bob's great-grandparents Jacob John and Anna Barbara Horning Zeeb arrived in America in 1886 with their children in tow, including Bob's grandpa, Christian Zeeb.

"Both my grandfather and great-grandfather farmed the land, and they always lived here," Bob says about the farmstead that's continued to grow over the years from its original 80 acres.

Christian's marriage to Mabel Stampfly in 1897 helped augment the family's parcels, and also the farm's double-centennial status. Her father, Benedict Stampfly, came to America from Switzerland, eventually settling on what is now part of Zeeb Farms. By 1891, the successful farmer owned and operated nearly 400 acres, an immense holding at that time.

Christian and Mabel had two sons: Bob's father, Bernard, and Ronald.

"My grandfather along with my dad and uncle farmed here as C.J. Zeeb & Sons until grandpa's death in 1954. After that, my dad and uncle farmed as Zeeb Brothers," Bob says.

Virgeline (Cushman) Zeeb's great-great-grandfather, Gilbert Cushman, and his family arrived in Clinton County in 1836, building a home and farming land that still remains in the family.

"My dad bought that [Cushman] farm from my mother's uncle in 1945," Bob says. "I remember them farming with horses — threshing wheat and watching grandpa plow the garden with a horse."

"And, we still have our old 1936 John Deere B tractor. Like they always used to say, 'Fix it; don't get rid of it.'"

Following his high school graduation, Bob entered the ag tech program at Michigan State University and con-



CENTENNIAL HONOR: Bob and Ginny Zeeb are pleased that Zeeb Farms spans eight generations.



ZEEB PRIDE: Ginny and Bob Zeeb's son, Patrick, is the latest Zeeb to operate the family farm in DeWitt Township.

tinued to work on the farm.

A different duty called in 1954 when he volunteered for the Army and served in Korea.

He and Ginny were married in 1956 after his tour of duty ended, and they set up housekeeping back at the family farm where Bob worked alongside his father and uncle. A year after his dad's death in 1976, Bob bought out his uncle.

A partnership, formed in 1980 involving Bob and his three sons, was maintained until 1994 when Patrick took over the farming operation.

"Patrick and his family live at the main farm site now, and both Mike and Chris and their families still live on farm property. I wouldn't be surprised if a couple of the grandkids farm someday," Bob says about the eighth generation of Zeeb-Cushmans.

While Bob is quick to point out that the 1,000 acres operated by the family is "a pretty small farm by today's standards," he also notes that it's unusual to work that amount of property with no paid help. He and Patrick — and sometimes the wives and kids — do it all.

"One advantage we have here that makes that possible is the land is all contiguous," he says. "The back end of the furthest field is only about two miles from our grain bins. That's really helpful."

Soybeans and corn, and some wheat,

are raised on those fields, several of which abut the busy freeway systems that loop around the edge of the farm.

"Most of the land is very tillable, but we do have 40 acres of marginal land we set aside as a pheasant hunting preserve. Mike takes care of that," Bob says.

Stewardship of the land has always been a priority for the Zeebs. The farm is primarily no-till, and water and soil erosion programs are in place.

Community service

Both Bob and Ginny have served in elected and appointed capacities, along with active involvement in a wide variety of agencies and organizations.

Bob was township supervisor for 14 years, and served on various local and state boards; Ginny was a member of the county board of commissioners, along with serving on local and state boards. Both have been members of the board of education for Bath Schools.

"We enjoy being involved and giving back to the community that's been home all of our lives," Ginny says.

Enrolling the bulk of their acreage in the farmland preservation program in 2001 was the right thing to do — and the right time to do it, Bob says.

"At that time it was a statewide pilot program that was funded by state and federal sources. All the family members agreed it was a good idea to attempt getting the land enrolled."

The development rights of 784 acres of Zeeb Farms was purchased by the state and provides a sense of security for the family and its farming future. No nonagricultural development can occur on the property.

"In the short term, we get equity for the land and still own it, and in the long term we know it remains in the family and will always be farmed," Bob says. "The land could be sold in the future, but not for development."

That's important to individuals like Bob and Ginny, and other centennial farm owners who take pride in their heritage.

"We enjoy being out and about, traveling a little, but we still like it best right here at home," Bob says.

Dedyne writes from St. Johns.