Wisdom of Our Fathers

Dad would have turned 99 tomorrow. Last Sunday, November 3rd was the 19th anniversary of his fatal farm shop accident. It really doesn’t seem like that much time has passed, but time speeds up as we age. I remember the day after his death vividly. I recall watching the sun set and thinking that I had survived the first day of my life without him.

The following year, Tim Russert’s book, *Wisdom of Our Fathers: Lessons and Letters from Daughters and Sons* was published, including a few brief thoughts I shared with Mr. Russert and his editor Bill Novak about Dad.

While I will never hold a candle to Dad as far as his mechanical ability or his farm-wise savvy, my gray hairs and 55+ years of farm observations and applications are starting to shape me as a qualified advisor for today’s farmers.

There are several things that Dad felt strongly about. Hurricane Helene brought a few to mind, but frankly they are all related. His home-truths covered a variety of topics but they all came back to the same objective…. lower your costs and minimize your risks.

On the subject of risks, David Overbay believed strongly that fences and trees didn’t mix. Why? They were both designed to be there for a long time. Over time, fences deteriorate, and trees fall; that is a bad combination. His solution was to remove any tree which at its mature height could touch any fence he built.

We had an old pull-type grader that we would use to prepare our fence lines for rebuilding. It looked like we were getting ready to lay down a highway, but that time spent shaping those areas shined last September 27 as it has many times before Helene.

We had trees fall, but none of them hit a fence. They weren’t close enough.

Another wisdom from Dad was the belief that all machinery needs a dry place to be stored. As we transitioned away from ear corn to towards high-moisture corn in the mid-1990s, I often thought that at least from a labor standpoint, a combine would be a nice addition to the farm’s equipment line-up. For one thing, we wouldn’t have to spend a couple of days putting the mounted corn picker on a tractor (which also meant taking off the tractors rear fenders, rollbar and canopy) and then taking the picker off and putting the tractor back together at the end of the corn grain harvest.

Dad loved gadgets, especially ones that did a great job, but he never budged on the subject of purchasing a combine. He wanted no part of a combine until he had a shed to put it in. “A combine isn’t anything but a rolling metal box of belts, pulleys and bearings,” he’d say. “If you can’t keep it dry, you better not own it.”

He also had some thoughts on sheds. Sheds needed to be big enough for equipment to grow as the farm did, but having a shed big enough for all the equipment wasn’t a smart move. The reasoning was simple… the risk of fire.

If all the equipment was in a single building and the building caught on fire, there was a chance you’d lose everything you owned. Having several sheds spread out over a reasonable area didn’t eliminate the risk of a fire but it did help minimize one’s losses in case of a fire.

Nothing about a structure fire is good, but having something to rebuild with made the situation more survivable.

Dad liked machinery to work with not work on. To that end, he stressed regular maintenance and despised the notion that “cleaner doesn’t make it run better.” He drilled into me the belief that if I wanted my machinery to take care of me, I needed to take care of it.

The tractor that probably had the roughest life was our scrapper tractor (Miss Andy and I nicknamed the tractor “Roy”… don’t ask me why!!) that removed the manure from the dairy barn floors twice a day. Not only is manure acidic, but it also contains fibers and grit that can find their way into wheel and axle bearings in no time.

Over thirty years of dairying, we had two scrapper tractors. We purchased a used model and retired Roy about 1994 after 26 years of service. Over that time, Roy saw some tough times, like when an employee’s foot slipped off the clutch and it took a dip in the manure pit!

The acid of the manure turned the paint pink! Even the breather had manure in it! But one of the reasons it survived and saved us thousands of dollars in replacement cost was that over the course of those 26 years of daily chores, it took almost 19,000 bathes. “Cleaner” made Roy run better and last longer!

Finally, one thing Dad believed firmly in (mostly because Mom forced him to do so!) building your cash cushions for a rainy day. This meant doing without a lot of things. I can’t remember us ever traveling as family to anything more than a day’s getaway and eating out was a rarity that usually meant Mom or Dad had a doctor’s appointment.

While that might seem gloomy, I can’t say as I ever felt slighted in the least. Besides, if I ever was dumb enough to tell either Mom or Dad I was bored and there was nothing to do, I’d still be grubbing brush.

The results of those sacrifices were many. My brother and I had everything we needed and a few things we wanted, all because our parents adhered to the ultimate measure of farm sustainability… profitability.

Everything on the farm needs to be shaped in such a way that it helps pay the bills or saves money to pay bills. Because what Dad often said about debts remains true to this day. “If you can’t keep up, you’ll never catch up.”

Upcoming Events

Nov 11 VQA Steer Take Up

Nov 13 VQA Heifer Take Up

Nov 18 Private Pesticide Recertification Course, Extension Office 6 PM

Nov 20 Private Pesticide Recertification Course, Extension Office 8 AM

Nov 28 Thanksgiving Holiday

Dec 2 VQA Sale

Dec 9 VQA Steer Take Up

Dec 11 VQA Heifer Take Up

Jan 7, 2025 VQA Sale

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodation to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at 276-706-8339 /TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.

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