

Family lured back to farm

After losing the farm in the 1980s, Klassen brothers found way to return to the land

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The extended Klassen family stands in front of the 1947 Case threshing machine they bought and plan to operate at Harvesting Hope on July 31. They are Pete Klassen, left, Margaret Klassen, B.J. Klassen, Vanessa Reimer, Rachel Klassen, Brendon Klassen, Kristyn Klassen, Dustin Klassen, Judy Klassen and Dave Klassen. | Ed White photo

AUSTIN, Man. — As Brendon Klassen and his father, Dave, work to swap the floaters on their high clearance sprayer for narrow tires, a more challenging machinery maintenance job lies just through the shed wall.

They have been readying their 1947 Case threshing machine for Harvesting Hope, planned to be the biggest mass vintage threshing display in history.

“Everything is different,” said Brendon about the Case. “I think it’s cool. It’s cool to see where (modern machinery) comes from.”

For Dave, his brother, Pete, and the rest of the Klassen clan, Harvesting Hope will memorialize a deceased father, a lost farm and a lost implement, and recognize the family’s rebound from an early farming failure.

“Do it in the memory of your dad,” said Pete, while visiting his brother’s farm north of Austin. That was what his father’s friends said about buying a threshing machine and joining Harvesting Hope.

“That’s a pretty good challenge. How do you just walk away and not have that buzzing inside you for a while?”

Harvesting Hope is a joint project of the Manitoba Agricultural Museum at Austin and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. On July 31, organizers hope to have up to 140 threshing machines chewing through sheaves of wheat, trying to set a world record and raise donations to support the Foodgrains Bank’s overseas efforts and the museum’s operations.

One will be a machine bought last year by three Klassen brothers, all farmers, and operated by six or more members of the extended family.

They all seem to be doing well now. Dave operates 3,000 acres of cropland and owns a bustling trucking company. Pete also owns a trucking company and operates a farm a few kilometres away.

The children mostly live nearby, and generally work in agriculture.

For the first two weeks of July, Dave and his wife, Judy, plan to be cruising on a Harley Davidson motorcycle across Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Washington and Montana.

But harder times in farming are still close to the surface for the brothers, who remember their dad’s farm failing after three bad crops in a row and 20 percent interest rates in the early 1980s.

“When the bailiff drove into the yard, I was on the farm. They said, ‘we’re here to take possession.’ I was 21. My goal was to farm. There went my future,” said Dave.

They lost the farm and their father went into another business. The brothers moved away from agriculture, getting involved in trucking. Dave began as a driver, then dispatcher, then began his own trucking firm with Pete.

The two split their operations and formed two separate companies after two years, creating businesses they still operate.

But agriculture runs deep in their veins and both found ways to get back in. Dave ended up with this farm when two old bachelors put two quarter-sections and the farmhouse for sale in 1995.

“I planned to hobby farm this half-section,” he said. “It grew from there.”

The grain farm is doing well, but Dave grew tired of the struggles with cattle in 2009, finally getting rid of his cow herd.

Now they operate a grain farm designed more around family members than their land base or equipment.

“We like to say that if we have to hire anybody outside the family that the farm is too big,” said Dave. Dave and Brendon work closely on farming operations. Kristyn, a teaching assistant at the nearby school, operates the grain cart at harvest.

This fall, she plans to enter the market gardening business.

Other family members play various roles on Dave’s farm, and Pete’s family helps with his farm. They also have a brother farming in Kindersley, Sask., and he was the third partner in buying the Case threshing machine.

Not only is Harvesting Hope a way to recognize their father, Peter’s, role in their lives, but also a way of regaining something he gave up.

He had owned a threshing machine, but during the hard times found it hard to justify keeping and maintaining it. He sold it to a museum and it disappeared from family memory.

Decades later, they found it at the museum in Winkler.

They aren’t using that piece at Harvesting Hope. They bought another one in full working order from a farmer in Portage La Prairie for \$3,000. They used it last Thanksgiving, threshing about 180 sheaves of wheat.