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2023 Reporter's Notebook: On the road again with Lisa Foust Prater

By Lisa Foust Prater | Updated on December 23, 2023

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This was a big year for me and my career with Successful Farming. I joined SF in the spring of 1999 and worked full-time in the office until the fall of 2006, then shifted to a part-time role working from home after having three sons in four years. I was incredibly blessed to be able to be with my boys while still doing the work I loved.

When my youngest son graduated from high school this spring and prepared to join his brothers at Northwest Missouri State University, the thought of going back to work full-time crept into my mind. Once again, Successful Farming came through for me and brought me back into the fold. Part of me was a little worried about giving up some of the freedom I had enjoyed, but that didn't last long.

Now I split my time between the office and home. I'm still writing the family section for each issue of the magazine, but now I get to write longer features as well. This means I'm traveling again, like in the photo above on the Washington Island Ferry in Lake Michigan. I'm sitting down at kitchen tables and walking through farmsteads with all kinds of interesting people. I had forgotten how incredible that is, and I am loving it.

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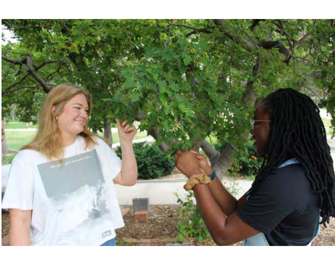
Here's a look at my adventures this year:

Nebraska Rural Fellows program: North Platte, David City, and Curtis, Nebraska



This was my first work road trip in 17 years. Armed with a good audiobook, strong coffee, and plenty of snacks, I hopped off the interstate and took the scenic route to North Platte, Nebraska. I can't tell you how good it felt to be on the road again!

My subject was the Nebraska Rural Fellows program, which places college students in small towns throughout the state for seven weeks in the summer. This is the first time in a rural setting for many of these young men and women, several of whom are international students. They live, work, and volunteer in the communities, doing a wide range of jobs including social media management and website design, creating hiking and bike trails, studying community health, mapping city utilities, and more.

It's an incredible program and a win-win for the students and communities. The fellows in the photo above identified and mapped 200 trees for an arboretum on the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture campus in Curtis, recorded an audio walking tour, and designed signage with QR codes linking to more information on the type of tree.

> **Fun fact:** More than 57% of students in the Nebraska Rural Fellows program return to live or work in a rural community in Nebraska.

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In between interviews, I hit the gravel roads around North Platte just to see what I could see, and was rewarded with this irrigation rainbow:

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Look for my article in Successful Farming and on our website in March!

Proactive planning: Erik and Lynn Peterson, Gilbert, Iowa

Erik and Lynn Peterson reminisce while looking through photos of Kevin.

I am very proud of this article for our Farm School series. I had such a fantastic conversation with Erik Peterson and his mom, Lynn, at Lynn's kitchen table. They were so open and honest about topics that can be difficult to talk about. Ryan Borts did a beautiful job on the photography for this article.

Erik's dad, Kevin, sought advice from farm continuation advisor Mark McLaughlin, who I also spoke with. Mark came up with a brilliant plan for their family. Tragically, within just a few years, Kevin was killed in a motorcycle accident. Thanks to his forward thinking, the farm lives on and his family is taken care of.

> **The moral of the story is this:** It is never to early to plan for the future.

Read about this amazing family as seen in our October issue.

RELATED: How to be proactive with a succession plan

Island agriculture: Washington Island, Wisconsin

My family has visited Washington Island for several years, and we have always wondered about the logistics of agriculture on an island in Lake Michigan. We'd drive past a pasture of cattle and talk about how much more difficult and expensive it would be having to haul them to market on a ferry. I finally got the opportunity to dig in and investigate island ag for myself. A road trip and a ferry ride later, I was on the island.

Casey Dahl and Shawn Murray manage an orchard of more than 2,000 apple trees for Island Orchard Cider, which makes delicious hard cider with fruit grown on the island. We walked through the orchard, Casey cut slices off of a dozen or so different kinds of apples for us to try, and we enjoyed a glass of cider together. The pair also grows tons of produce at their homestead, Folk Tree Farm.

> **Fun fact:** Dahl and Murray have an Oberhasli goat, May Pop, who has not been bred in eight years but is still producing milk like a machine. I didn't know this was possible but I saw her udder with my own eyes.

Sue Dompke harvests 10,000 pounds of honey per year from her 124 hives of Russian honeybees. She is doing amazing work with these bees, including research on the effects lavender has on them. There's a lavender farm not far from her place, and the bees sometimes pass out when they've had too much pollen. When they come to, they fly home like nothing ever happened. Who knew bees could get drunk on lavender?

Joe Elmore raises a herd of shorthorn cattle on the island. He and his wife, Linda, were such gracious hosts. We sat on their patio overlooking Schoolhouse Beach, one of my favorite spots in the world, and talked about cattle and life. The funniest thing Joe said was:

> "I do believe my cattle are the most photographed animals on the island. There's somebody taking pictures constantly. It's like they've never seen a cow." - Joe Elmore

Russell Rolffs grows 130 varieties of 35 different kinds of vegetables, plus 30 kinds of cut flowers and 50 types of wildflowers at Hoot Blossom Farm. He produces 2,500 pounds of lettuce per year. His wife, Alessandra, started Gathering Ground, a non-profit organization dedicated to education and sustainable agriculture on the island.

Look for my article online and in the magazine in January!

A century of dairy farming: Luxemburg, Wisconsin

A few of the 300 cows at Salentine Homestead Dairy. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SALENTINE HOMESTEAD DAIRY

The Wisconsin peninsula that separates the waters of Green Bay from the rest of Lake Michigan is about 20 miles wide at its base. The village of Luxemburg and the century-old Salentine Homestead Dairy are nestled into the rolling Kewaunee County hills halfway between the two shores.

My family has vacationed 15 miles away in Algoma and up the peninsula in Door County for years, but driving to meet with Josh and Jim Salentine, I felt like I was in a different world. Dairy farm after dairy farm lined both sides of the road -- there are 35,000 more dairy cows than people in the county.

I pulled into the driveway and met Jim getting out of his truck. We walked over to the shop where his son, Josh, who lives on the home place with his family now, was working on a skid steer. We talked about the dairy industry, farming with family, and the importance of faith and community. We also talked about grief. Josh's mom and Jim's wife, Mary, passed away unexpectedly just a few months before my mom. Much like I am, the Salentines are finding strength in their children and their work.

See the article in the November issue of Successful Farming and below.

RELATED: A century of dairy farming in Wisconsin's heartland

West River adventure

In October, I headed to Lemmon, South Dakota, about 12 miles north of where I lived as a kid in Shadehill. I hadn't been back in years, and I was happy that my dad agreed to ride along with me. It's a long drive and we had a good time together. Every conversation I had led to more ideas of interesting people to interview there, so I'll be making another trip northwest in 2024.

I did at least one interview a day while we were there and took lots of photos, but there was time at the end of the day to get together with my aunt and cousins, which was wonderful. They surprised me with a walleye fry and cake for my birthday, and we also got to celebrate my little cousin Addy's eighth birthday! (That's us above.)

Kvale Century Farm: Thunder Hawk, South Dakota

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Dale Kvale (pronounced Qualley) is the real deal. He's soft-spoken and kind, but he has driven cattle across icy South Dakota rivers on horseback and battled plagues of grasshoppers that look like something out of a horror movie. He showed me videos and it was crazy. *Let's pause for a moment and read this part again: he has driven cattle across icy South Dakota rivers on horseback.*

The day I visited, he was getting ready to combine sunflowers and very patiently explained that process to me. That evening, I had the pleasure of sitting down with him and his wife, Mary, at their kitchen table.

The family's Century Farm (which overlooks my aunt and uncle's old ranch where I spent a lot of time as a kid) was started by his Norwegian immigrant grandfather, but there's more to the story than that. My favorite quote from Dale is the best advice anyone could ever give a cattle producer:

> "The fastest way to work cattle is slow." - Dale Kvale

Dale and his siblings attended this one-room schoolhouse, Paris School, riding horses the few miles to and from each day. I loved peeking in the empty windows and imagining life then. "People are always impressed when I tell them I went to school in Paris," he jokes.

The article appeared in our December issue.

RELATED: The Kvale family's journey that shaped a century-long ranching legacy

Brownotter Buffalo Ranch: Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, South Dakota

This photo was taken in the middle of Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in northwest South Dakota. Sitting Bull lived just over the ridge on the left. As a kid, I lived about an hour over the ridge on the right. I interviewed Ron Brownotter about his buffalo herd, efforts to help stop discrimination against Natives by the USDA, and work restoring 2,000 acres (and counting) of cropland back to native prairie.

Ron and wife Carol were so generous with their time. We spent the whole morning talking at their kitchen table, Carol made me a sandwich for lunch, then Ron and I loaded into his pickup and drove around the ranch.

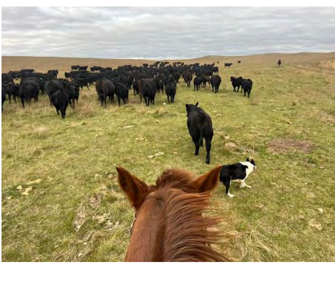
Ron's story is incredible. In high school, he used his $40 monthly check from the government (for Native students) to buy ranch supplies like gloves and axes. Today, he is a Marine veteran, holds an agronomy degree from Cal Poly, serves as a member of his Tribal government, and owns 20,000 acres, including his grandmother's original allotment from more than 100 years ago. He drove me to this breathtaking spot overlooking the Grand River Valley and said, "This is my office."

Ron Brownotter on his buffalo ranch on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in northwest South Dakota. Photo: Lisa Foust Prater.

Look for this article in 2024. Meanwhile, learn about a USDA program featuring Brownotter, below.

RELATED: USDA pilot program provides Native-raised bison for local tribal communities

Advocates for farming and ranching: Hettinger, North Dakota



Jordan Christman is a 5th-generation farmer, and wife Jacki is a 4th-generation rancher. They're both pursuing those passions today. I really enjoyed meeting Jordan, who is in charge of the crops, and Jacki, who is in charge of the cattle at JC Farms.

They help each other when needed and work together raising their three awesome kids, who are farm entrepreneurs in their own right: they recently sold enough sweet corn and eggs to buy a pony! When she isn't busy being a rancher and mom, Jacki shares daily life to raise awareness about agriculture on the JC Farms Facebook page, which has 74,000 followers.

Look for the article in 2024. Jacki shared the above photo (featuring ranch dog June).

When I left the Christmans' house to head to my cousin's place for dinner, I was struck by the juxtaposition of old and new windmills here and had to stop for a photo.

Teenage inventor Mason Gahler: Pierz, Minnesota

Mason Gahler created this prototype of the Grain Gyre using a steel drum for an open house celebrating his schoolâ s new ag building. PHOTO: LISA FOUST PRATER

After watching a video about grain entrapment in school, the wheels in Mason Gahler's mind started turning. Eventually, his vision became clearer. The idea was simple: The Grain Gyre is essentially an auger on the bottom of the bin that moves the crop up and dumps it back out on top in the center of the bin.

I really enjoyed going to Minnesota and meeting Mason and his family for this article. He showed me how the prototype works and also demonstrated the Grain Gyre in the full-size bin set up near his dad's workshop. He's an outstanding young man with supportive parents and his invention could save lives!

Mason was featured in the mid-November issue.

RELATED: Teenage inventor aims to eliminate grain bin deaths

40 Seasons: Robert Lager, Maryville, Missouri

Fritz, Anna, Robert, Teri, Shelby, baby Hesston, and Tannah Lager on the family farm in northwest Missouri. PHOTO: COURTESY TANNAH LAGER, TANNAH TERRY PHOTOGRAPHY

Robert Lager has been farming in northwest Missouri for more than 40 years, and has been successful in many ways. He is a community leader, champion for conservation practices, and father of three children who are following in his footsteps with their love of agriculture.

The day I visited his farm, it was pouring rain. I darted into the machine shed, sat down with Robert and oldest son Shelby, and had a wonderful talk. I also got to meet Shelby's wife, Tannah, and their adorable baby, Hesston.

> "My dad told me, 'It's not the bad years that break you, it's the good years, I thought, 'What are you talking about?' Then after experiencing it, it's very true. Good years can spoil you." –Robert Lager

Read the article in the December issue of Successful Farming and below.

RELATED: The Lager Family's farming legacy and conservation commitment

Diabetes education: Debra Hull, Maryville, Missouri

Diabetes educator Debra Hull holds test tubes containing the amount of sugar found in a 20-ounce bottle of soda. Pinned to the jacket are representations of 16 pounds of sugar, the amount consumed by drinking one soda a day for a year.

While I was in Maryville interviewing the Lagers (and taking my college boys out for lunch), I visited Mosaic Medical Center for an interview with nurse and diabetes educator Debra Hull. Since November is Diatebes Awareness Month, I wanted to include information in the family section in that issue.

My dad has diabetes and I know it affects many farmers. In fact, rural residents are 17% more likely to have type 2 diabetes than their urban counterparts. In a typical small-town turn of events, Debra Hull and Robert Lager are cousins. I had no idea when I scheduled both of their interviews for the same day.

> "Both farming and diabetes are high demand occupations. When you attend to diabetes first, then that can free you up to have the focus and energy you need to attend to the demands of farming." - Debra Hull, BSN, RN, CDCES

Read more in our November issue or below.

RELATED: Education is key to preventing and managing diabetes

Meeting an American icon: Astronaut and farm girl Peggy Whitson

This wasn't a road trip, but I couldn't post a recap without it. I've been trying to get an interview with astronaut Peggy Whitson for about five years. She has more time in space than any other American astronaut, and she grew up on a farm in southwest Iowa, so I wanted to learn more about her farm background and how it helped in her career. I finally got an email from her publicist in October saying she could meet with me for a Zoom interview.

We had a great conversation and I was trying very hard to be a professional journalist and not a total fangirling nerd. I wish I looked cooler in this screenshot with her, but I was too excited to think about that at the time. One of the most interesting things we talked about was how at one point, Whitson was growing soybeans in space at the same time her dad was harvesting soybeans in Iowa.

> "After my first spacewalk, I wrote a letter home and talked about using wire ties and how much it reminded me of being on the farm. My Dad always said, 'You can fix almost anything with wire and pliers.'" - Dr. Peggy Whitson

It just happened that the interview was during National 4-H Week, and she was in 4-H as a girl, so while my main purpose for the interview was a larger article that will be Successful Farming in February, I asked a few questions about that time in her life and wrote up a quick article for our website to celebrate 4-H Week.

RELATED: Peggy Whitson: From 4-H to space

Looking ahead to 2024

There are no words to express how grateful I am to Successful Farming for sticking with me through 17 years of part-time remote work and bringing me back full-time this year. I have truly had the best of both worlds at work and at home and will never forget how lucky I am.

It's wonderful to be so excited about work after almost 25 years. I can't wait to hit the road again in 2024, meet more interesting farmers and ranchers, and share their stories.

Do you know someone I should write about? Email me at lisa.foustprater@agriculture.com.

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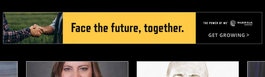

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