

Revering The Family Dirt Pile

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What's the secret to a happy life?
A pile of dirt.
I don't know that my life was ever so simple or happy as the days of my youth spent molding a dirt pile into a farm, an alien planet or some other outgrowth of my imagination.

Each spring, Mom would instruct Dad where he could place several loader buckets of dirt in the back yard for my two brothers, Ben and Chris, and me to use as a play pile. It was one of the most exciting days of the year for us, because it was there that we would spend countless hours during our months off from school.

It would primarily be a toy farm. Sometimes we would plant actual oats on it and harvest them. We would carve out cattle yards and place our plastic cows in them. We had realistic wooden barns built by our grandfather, Bernard Kayser.

We would assign duties based on our father, Roy Jr., and our two uncles, Gordon and Lee, who together with their late parents, Roy Sr., and Hazel, operated the family farm we called home on Horseshoe Hill seven miles west of Crofton, Neb.

If you were "Roy Jr.," you did the windrowing of the hay and oats, and milked cows, for example. A "Gordie" also milked cows but was a general fix-it man. And a "Lee" had to feed the animals.

Life on the dirt pile was good, and we would usually be there shortly after waking up until probably shortly before going to bed. Farming was all we knew, and we loved it with all our hearts.

As we grew older, of course, we were pulled away from our farm on the dirt pile to the chores on the real farm.

We were helping Grandpa Johnson feed calves. We were milking cows. We were caring for newly-planted trees or cutting thistles.

Work was hardly ever in short supply. It was in those formative years that I felt my soul was plowed into the fabric of the soil on the farm. I still consider it my home and find standing upon that particular piece of land, versus any other place in the world, has an inexplicably calming effect on my spirit.

I am lucky enough to be able to return there regularly and help my dad and uncles with various tasks.

During one of those recent visits, I sat down with the three of them to talk about the family business and farming in general. It's been a challenging year, as their father



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This photo was taken in the early 1980s on the Johnson Farm west of Crofton, Neb., after a new sign for the business was completed. Pictured (from left) are Nathan, Roy Jr., Nancy, Ben, Mary, Roy Sr., Hazel, Matthew, Alice, Lee, Jeremiah and Gordon Johnson. Roy Jr., Gordon and Lee still farm the property, which has been owned by the family since 1899.

COURTESY PHOTO

passed away in the spring and then the worst drought they've ever experienced settled in and took its toll on the crops and livestock.

For the first time in their lives, they won't be combining corn in the fall. Instead, it's been chopped for silage or baled. The farm has been in the Johnson family since 1899. It is one of the few small dairy operations left in the Crofton area.

It was in 1975 that a new milk parlor was built on the farm and Roy Jr. decided to join his father and two brothers in the family business. Prior to that, he had been in the U.S. Navy and completed some college. Lee and Gordon never left the farm.

The parlor has been expanded since the 1970s and currently allows 20 cows to be milked at a time.

At one point, the brothers were milking as many as 230 cows. But with no future generation of the family planning to make farming their full-time job, the herd has been pared back to less than half that.

The reason they've stayed with milking while others have not is that it has provided a steady cash flow.

"When you've got four families, we all

needed to have a paycheck," Lee said. "We almost had to stay in the dairy business. Otherwise, I don't know if it would have worked. There are other farms that can survive feeding cattle or grain farming, but there are only one or two families together."

They'll probably keep milking until they are on Social Security, said Roy Jr., who is the oldest brother at 62.

"That's my idea," Gordon stated. "I've got a wife that wants to travel. You can't milk cows and travel."

The cows are milked twice a day, seven days a week. It leaves little opportunity for leisure.

The brothers say that farming today is not as much fun as it was when they got their start.

Part of that is the process of growing older, Lee said. "You have to worry about everything that Grandpa used to have to worry about when we were growing up," he stated. "You've got to figure out how you're going to make enough money to pay the bills and which cow is going to die next. It's technically not as much fun as it was 30 or 40 years ago." Adds Roy Jr., "Everything was easier

then. Now, you've got (government) restrictions on everything."

The input costs are much higher today and don't leave much margin for error, according to Gordon.

"Corn went from \$50 a bag to \$300 a bag," he said. "The milk price is about the same as it was in 1973. Then you wonder why your equipment can't get renewed and why you've got to keep making the herd bigger."

Lee said it's only in the last year that the milk price has improved.

Seeing each other seven days a week, the brothers do have the occasional disagreement.

What's their advice for keeping a family business together for so many years?

"A short memory," Gordon responds.

Adds Roy Jr., "If you have a disagreement, you walk away, and an hour later everybody forgets it and you go on."

Building a successful business together, the three said they've come to value each other more today than when they were youngsters.

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