

Next-Generation Management

STORY AND PHOTOS BY THARRAN E. GAINES

As corn feeds into the 12-row head on his GLEANER® combine, Jeff Shaner admits that he didn't pay close attention to what it took to manage a farm while growing up near Fort Calhoun, Neb. Granted, he spent plenty of time on a tractor helping his father grow corn and soybeans on the fourth-generation farm founded in the late 1800s by his great-grandfather.

However, as soon as he graduated from high school, Jeff was off to the University of Nebraska where he earned a degree in agricultural economics in 1995. After graduation, he and his wife, Kelli, moved to Seattle, Wash., where Jeff spent about 5 years working for a large produce company. In the meantime, his father, Neale, and brother, David, continued to operate the farm.

It wasn't until 2002, when his father decided to take semi-retirement, and two of the farm's full-time employees took other jobs, that Jeff realized the opportunity to return to the farm with a new perspective on management.

"I knew I wanted to eventually get back into farming," he says. "However, it never really worked out until a few years ago, due in part to the farm economy."

Shortly after his father retired, though, his brother decided to take a job with a company in Omaha, leaving Jeff as the manager of what has since grown into a 5,000-acre operation. Finally, in the summer of 2008, Jeff and his wife purchased all assets of Neale Farms, Inc., from his parents, acquiring all the machinery, grain bins and equipment.

Except for 40 acres Jeff and Kelli own, Jeff's parents and a number of different landlords own the rest of the land, which supports 3,000 acres of corn, 1,400 acres of soybeans and 600 acres of alfalfa.

"We basically just established a price that we could both agree on," Jeff recalls. "I wanted him to be paid fairly for all the years he had invested, and he wanted to see us prosper and carry on the family name," he adds, noting that his father was named Neale after the surname of his great-grandparents.

"I have the utmost respect for my father and all the help and advice he has contributed," Jeff continues. "Even though he is semi-retired, he is always there if I need help."

That is until corn harvest this past fall. During much of the fall, Neale, who still

After several years of working as an agribusiness manager, this Nebraska farmer has brought a fresh pair of eyes to the family farm.

remains very active at 70 years of age, was in South Africa helping a humanitarian organization harvest wheat.

"The time I spent away from the farm was definitely a learning experience," Shaner says. "I think the biggest thing is it helped me to look at farming as a business and not just an occupation. So I feel fortunate to have a strong background in that area."

As a result, Shaner has continued with some of the practices established by his parents while implementing several new ones.

"It's no longer about just putting seed in the ground and harvesting it. That's the easy part," he says. "What really makes the difference at the end of the day is how you manage it. Every year, we try to do things just a little differently as we strive to become more efficient."