

Fifth-Generation Minnesota Farm Continues to Evolve

Rick, Janet, and Ryan Martens represent the resilience and longevity of many farm owners in Minnesota – adapting to changing conditions and creating new opportunities when necessary. In other words, the Martens farm, located roughly 15 miles northwest of Mora in Hillman Township, in business for five generations, has evolved when necessary or when the opportunity arises to take advantage of changing economic conditions.



The Martens' farm was founded when Rick's great grandparents, Peter and Anna Wilkens, purchased the property from a logging company in 1915. "They were the first family to break ground and create a farm on this property. It was wild land that had not been farmed before," said current owner Rick Martens of the property. "But he cleared the stumps from the logged land with dynamite, fenced in a meadow of grass, and bought 2 rail cars of heifers to raise." Dividends paid off the following spring as one load of spring heifers was sold in order to build a barn and start milking cows.

The second generation, Duke and Cora (Wilkens) Martens, purchased the farm from Cora's father in 1932 and continued farming and raising their family. After 30 years passed, brothers Don and Gary purchased the farm from their mother and dad in 1964 and created Martens Bros. farm, expanding and modernizing the dairy. A milking parlor and a free stall barn were built.

Rick had lived on the farm since he was three years old but didn't officially join the operation until he was discharged from the army in 1983. Rick then joined his dad and uncle in the farming operation. In 1985, Rick and Janet got married and Janet moved onto the farm as well. They purchased Martens Farm, Inc., in 2000. Rick's son Ryan and his wife Sarah now represent the farm's fifth generation. Ryan and Sarah also own a small Hereford beef cow and calf operation.

And when it comes to farming, the Martens' are obviously doing something right. Others have taken notice as well. In 2011, they were named by the University of Minnesota as Kanabec County's Farm Family of the Year, a distinction which honors farm families throughout Minnesota for their contributions to the agriculture industry and their local communities. "It was really an honor to receive that award," said Rick. "It's always nice to be recognized for your hard work and accomplishments."

As time went on, and dairy farming became less profitable, the Martens saw an opportunity to evolve their farm into another business to enhance their bottom line.

"My dad saw an ad for a system to pump manure from the pit to the field without tanking. The fall before he had emptied our lagoon and the rain and runoff was filling it faster than he could tank it out," said Rick. "He called the number on the ad. It was more than we could afford to invest for just our lagoon, so he asked neighbors about custom pumping. A business was born." Martens Manurigation, is thriving to this day.

As for cropping, the farm manages ~400 acres of grass hay, of which 160 are rented. It is grown on clay soils with limited top soil. They disbine and use a tedder. "The best management advice I give to people is to use a tedder. I've found it is the best friend for dry hay," Rick said. It gets the last of the wet hay to the top. "We use a rotary rake to windrow the hay for baling. It seems to get the most air for drying without roping the windrow," Rick added. They harvest the hay dry, using an acid preservative only when needed or if rain is threatening, and make 3'x3'x8' bales averaging 800 lbs. They generally put up ~750 tons of hay a year with an average yield approaching 2 tons/ac. Hay

is sold as low-potassium hay for dry cows and horses. They usually only take one cutting. “If we get favorable weather we’ll take a second cutting on some acres, but grass is slow to start in the spring and June is traditionally wet. If weather cooperates we try to start cutting the end of June,” said Rick. “We shoot for quantity. With low-potassium grass we can get premium prices.” Late August is about as late as they cut. Heavy dew and rain traditionally start in September in their area, tending to be their biggest management difficulty. Stands are usually taken out of production when fields become too rough or sod-bound. The hay is stored in canvas hoop buildings which proved to be the least cost per bale for storage. “Selling hay has been a great fit for our business,” Rick said. “It adds some additional income to our farm, which is always welcome.”

The Martens have been MFA members since 2005 and value the cutting-edge information it provides their operation. “The *Forage Focus* magazine always seems to have information we can put to good use, and the educational meetings we attend are a great way to exchange ideas with others within the industry,” said Rick. Five generations is a long time. But with a willingness to evolve and the perseverance to make things work, it wouldn’t be surprising if Martens’ farm continues for another five.



Back row, from left: Sarah and Ryan Martens, Addison (Ryan's daughter), Janet (Rick's wife), Rick Martens, Randi Marten's-Goeppinger (Rick's daughter) and husband Eric Goeppinger. Middle row: Rick's mother-in-law Arlene and father-in-law Hank Bos; Rick's mother Ella. Front row: Granddaughter Keira Martens (Randi's daughter), Ella Martens (Ryan's daughter); Jordan Martens (Randi's son).