
WALNUT & INDIAN CREEK WATERSHED

Producer Spotlights



Photos: Left – By Dan Case, Right – Courtesy of IDALS

PUTTING THE LAND FIRST

By Dan Case

On April 4th in a year with seven-dollar corn and sixteen-dollar beans one would expect to find any farmer in the Midwest topping off the fuel tank of their tractor and greasing the last zerk of their planter preparing themselves to begin the infamous race of who can be finished planting first. But that day was different. As I made my way up to Jerry Laughlin's machine shed, I encountered a completely different and refreshing scene. Yes, Jerry was topping off his tractor with fuel, but he wasn't hooked onto his corn planter.... he was hooked onto his 15 ft no till drill preparing to convert some crop land to pasture! Jerry met me at the door with a handshake and was more than happy to spare a few minutes, which turned into well over an hour, to sit on a bucket and shoot the breeze.

There was no showing off the operation or telling stories of all the great things he has done for conservation, or even the practices he has installed, but I quickly learned why this extremely humble Imogene Iowa farmer was nominated by the Fremont County SWCD for the State of Iowa's Conservation Leader Award! With every word it was obvious that Jerry puts the land, his family, and the community first.

Jerry is the fourth generation to farm west of Imogene. The operation was started by his great great grandfather Thomas Hughes in 1877 and was eventually combined with his Great Grandfather Michael Laughlin's operation which was started in 1889. Jerry graduated from Farragut high school in 1995 and attended

Northwest Missouri State University for a short time where he quickly learned that he wanted to be a farmer when he grew up! Jerry moved back to farm in 1999 and took over the operation from his father Marty and his mother Margaret in 2013 after his father's passing. Jerry's operation spans eight hundred acres, two hundred thirty of which he owns with the remainder being rented from his eight sisters and one brother! Of the eight hundred acres one hundred twenty has been seeded down to pasture to support Jerry's growing grass-fed beef operation. Jerry says he seeds a little more down each year.... he says that he knows it doesn't make sense to convert high dollar crop land to pasture, but he does it because he truly feels it's what is best for the soil, the environment, and his family that will inherit that land after him.

The generations before Jerry also worked hard to do what was best for the land. Jerry's farms were terraced with broad base terraces by his grandfather. Jerry's father and mother then upgraded those terraces to the narrow base style that you see today. In 2013 Jerry committed whole heartedly to cover crops and no till selling all his tillage equipment and taking everything off his planter that created a disturbance. Jerry has raised his own cover crop seed and even uses full season cover crop mixes to heal up poor spots on his farms. Jerry does this by planting a small grain which is harvested in early summer. He then plants a diverse cover crop mix which is allowed to grow and is then grazed in the fall. This is the best way to return organic matter and nutrients to the soil. Jerry says he sees very good productivity from those areas after letting them rest a year by being set aside for grazing. Jerry practices rotational grazing and sees this as his favorite part about his operation.

Talking to Jerry he will not admit that he is doing anything the right way, but he will say that he is doing what he thinks is right for the land. He has the personality of someone that thinks they are never doing enough and will never admit that he is successful in what he

does, but he does admit that what he has done has not been easy. He is the first to admit that he cannot keep up with his neighbors on yield with his current land and crop management practices, but Jerry is constantly researching and thinking about ways to make what he is doing better. Jerry struggles seeing others impressive yields using fungicides, but he knows in his heart that it's a detriment to soil health. It's the sacrifices of famers like Jerry that will someday turn modern agriculture into a regenerative agriculture that is harmonious with the environment and enable future farmers to continue to feed the world.

Jerry is married to his wife Becca and together have four children: Owen, Ethan, Solon and a new baby Rex! When not farming Jerry obviously keeps busy chasing kids and volunteering to support their activities. Jerry is also a member of the sons and daughters of Imogene and attends and volunteers at St Patrick Catholic Church. Jerry volunteers on the Walnut Creek Watershed Advisory Board and is a member of Practical Farmers of Iowa. Jerry says Becca is the big volunteer of the family and from my personal experience I'm sure that Jerry is voluntold to do much more than he takes credit for!

When asked what advice he has for future generations he said he didn't really have any, but he would like them to know the Native American Proverb: "We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."

Congratulations Jerry on receiving the Environmental Leader Award and thank you for being such a good steward of the land!