



An aerial shot of the Bozdech family homestead

40th Annual Farm and Garden



Bozdech Farms: A Century of Excellence

By Tony Hooker, Staff Writer

For 130 years, the Bozdech family has been farming near Villa Grove. I recently caught up with Bill, who along with his wife Amanda and sons Case and Gage, represent the fifth and sixth generations of Bozdechs to work the land northwest of town. Our conversation ranged from what it's like growing up in a farm family to the rewards and challenges of being part of a modern farm operation, and everything in between.

What's your first memory of being on the farm?

My first memory is coming out and playing around in all the grain wagons with my dad and uncle. My grandma and grandpa lived here. (in the house where Bill and his wife Amanda live) We spent a lot of time with grandma. She always made lunch for whoever was there, and always had chocolate chip cookies in the jar! <smiles>

How long have you been farming?

Probably since I was about seven or eight years old, I've been out here doing something. I went to Villa Grove High School and then graduated from the U of I, then worked a couple of jobs before I started farming full time in 1991.

Has your farm always been diverse? Have you always had livestock and grain?

We've always had cattle around. We've always had grain, but our specialty crop niche has been seed corn. We've had seed corn production since 1935. We also do some custom work, where other people use our machinery. We bailed a lot of hay when I was growing up! <laughs>

How many head of cattle do you have?

We have 6 cows that we breed every year, and then we feed out about 15 head.

Is cattle production still profitable for the operation?

It is. We sell almost all of them privately, and we charge a little bit of a premium because people can get good meat that they know has been treated well.

Those are Angus cows?

Yes.

Have you always raised Angus?

Yes, we have.

Is Amanda (wife) involved in the operation?

Oh yes! She's my partner, and I'm her partner! <smiles> She works full time at the Douglas County courthouse, but she's out here a lot of the hours that we're out here.

What's the biggest change you've seen over the course of your career as a farmer?

Automation. It used to be that you would go out and drive a combine all day and you'd be so stiff and sore by the time you got in that night that you couldn't hardly move. Now, you turn the combine on at the end and you push two buttons and it drives itself to the other end. A lot of the physical labor is gone. You used to have to handle a couple of hundred fifty pound bags of soybeans every day. Now, we use a fork lift to put them in a cart, and the cart puts them in the planter. It's extended the careers of a lot of farmers who couldn't have made it otherwise.

I assume that automation and that technology comes with an increase to the overhead for farmers, as well. Is that correct?

Yes it does. Equipment's really expensive, and technology is expensive so farms have to grow and spread that cost over more acres.

Are your sons, Case and Gage, involved in the operation?

Yes they are. They've always been helping and willing to do about anything that's needed. This year, they rented their first farm so they're getting started, hopefully.

They're going to farm together?

It looks like it right now. You never know what opportunities might arise.

What's your biggest challenge?

Right now it's financial. We've been farming quite a while and we have a good base, but it's a very competitive industry. Everybody raises almost the same commodity, so you have to be a low-cost producer and you have to have enough volume to make a profit.

You've continued to diversify your production. Have I seen you raising Oats and Wheat?

Yes, we've raised a little bit of both. We've double cropped some soy beans behind both. Recently, I signed up for a precision conservation program through the soil and water conservation district and I planted 350 acres of cover crops last fall. It's almost all cereal rye on the corn stalks. It helps the soil, because there's a growing crop out there for a longer period of the year, and it prevents erosion.

Do you harvest that rye, or just turn it?

We kill it chemically in the spring, and then no till soybeans right into it. Through that program, it's almost no cost to me for three years.

Dan Schaefer, who just won Champaign County Farm Leader of the year, has done experiments and trials with different rates and timings of nitrogen.

How many acres do you farm?

We're farming a little over 1900 acres right now. We used to do about 2000 acres of custom seed harvest, but that's tailed off over the last three or four years.

When will you start planting?

We'll get it going as soon as the ground gets dry and the soil temps reach 55 degrees at the four-inch level.

When do you anticipate that happening?

We hardly ever start before Easter, and Easter is really late this year. In farming, you have to get used to the cycles. There's a cycle every year, and there are long-term cycles. You kind of have to go with the seasons and learn how things feel.

You're not getting antsy to get out there and start scratching dirt?

Not when it's raining and cold like this! <laughs> Last year, we went from six inches of snow to planting corn in seven days! What's interesting is that a lot of guys are planting their beans first now, and it's showing a real yield advantage, so I think we're probably going to be in that camp also, this year.

Do you see great change coming on the horizon for your sons, as they start their farm careers?

Oh yes. I think you're going to see a lot bigger farms, farmed by a lot fewer people. You go to a farm meeting now, and seventy percent of the room has gray hair. There's hardly anyone, the boys' age, twenty-one or twenty-two



Case, Bill, Amanda and Gage Bozdech, the fifth and sixth generations of Bozdechs to work the family farm. Photo courtesy of Bozdech Farms.

years old. I really think that before I die, we'll see an army of little robots turned loose in the field to take care of the weeds and maybe even do a lot of the planting. They won't be able to do the harvesting, but they'll significantly reduce our chemical use. It will be pretty interesting.

This is the cereal rye I was talking about. (points out truck window) It was planted on September 6th. You can see what kind of cover you get. The deer love it! They grazed on it all year. In this field, we'll spray a burn down herbicide that will kill the rye, along with any other weeds that are out there and then provide some weed control until our post applications when the beans are 3-6 inches high.

You'll just plant the beans right over the corn stalks? That seems like it might reduce your labor costs.*

Yes. It reduces your labor costs and saves a lot of diesel fuel.

Do you broadcast that Rye?

You can broadcast it with fertilizer like we did and just count on a rain, or you can drill it in. A lot of guys have it applied with airplanes early in August to get a couple more weeks of growing in, especially with the radishes and turnips.

Will that compost material help your bean production?

Yes. You have to go through two cycles to get the most help. What it does is take up a lot of nutrients into the plant, and then when you kill the plant it slowly releases the nutrients back into the soil. It keeps it out of our tiles lines and out of the ditch, out of the rivers and out of the Gulf of Mexico!

Do you do any sort of organic farming?

We've looked into it, but it's so labor intensive that you sure can't do it on big acreage. I don't think it's any way to feed the world. You're going to have some decent yields, but you'll also have some years where mother nature goes against you.

<points out window of truck, again.> You can see the sign that says Bozdech Farms, 1890.

1890? Almost 130 years?

Yes. No pressure! <laughs>

Are there opportunities out there for young men and women to get into farming?

There are opportunities out there, but they're going to be few and far between because they're so capital intensive. You can't just go out and buy 160 acres and the equipment and start farming. You've got to work your way up to it. There are several organizations that try to pair older farmers that don't have any heirs that want to farm with younger people

that do want to farm. It's kind of a rent to own deal where you trade some of your labor, your sweat equity, for part of the farm and work your way into it that way.

You probably see the technology presenting new opportunities in ag, like GIS mapping, precision ag, and the like that didn't used to exist, right?

We need our consultants to push the right buttons! <smiles>

Right now, you're in the pre-

it might go longer, but most of the time we quit around eight or nine. There's been nights we've gone all night or until midnight or one o'clock. It gets pretty lonely out there when you don't see any other lights! <laughs> That's one big change that I've noticed over the years. Randy Mayhall and I have talked about it. We used to only be able to do five or six acres and hour, and you'd see tractor lights all over, with everybody running. Now, if you're out at ten or eleven at night, you might only see two or three sets of headlights, because the farms are bigger and you can cover ground so much faster. With no-till, I had eight hundred acres of corn stalks that I didn't touch last year after I harvested. Once in a while, if you cut a bunch of ruts or compact the heck out of it, you might have to go in and do some tilling.

The idea of compaction negatively impacting your yields is a relatively new thing, isn't it? Does this new equipment with the tracks help?

It helps a lot, but a new set of tracks for my old auger cart, which is one of the primary compactors of the dirt with 1000 bushels of corn running around on two wheels, would run about \$60000, while tires would run about 10 grand.

What would your dad or your grandpa say about all of this new equipment and technology?

Grandpa would be flabbergasted by it! I remember one time, back in the early eighties we were filling an ear corn crib and we filled a five thousand bushel crib in 24 hours when it used to be a six week process. My dad said "Your grandpa would turn over in his grave if he knew we filled that crib in one day!" Prices were pretty low, so we stored it and got a

government loan that we kept rolling over until the prices went up.

Does anyone store corn that's still on the cob anymore?

A lot of the Amish do, but that's about it. They use it to feed. There's a couple guys that sell squirrel corn, but that's about it. You have to handle twice the bulk. I remember my first pay check, was for helping Mark Hettinger shell out a crib of corn. He and Leo (Hettinger) had a Sheller and went all over, shelling corn. I was just a little kid, and he gave me a check for five bucks! I thought I was in tall cotton, then! <laughs> I've loved the smell of ear corn drying in a crib ever since.

How labor intensive is your livestock operation?

At certain times of the year, it's pretty labor intensive. We try to calve all in one group, in thirty days. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. It's maybe a half hour a day, and then on certain days it's an all-day thing, depending on what you're doing with them. I've been buying my feeders off Doc Zimmerman lately, and he's got them all ready to go when I get them.

Does Case still work with him, with the cattle?

Yes, he does.

How many more years do you think you're going to keep going?

I've probably got another eight or ten years left before I'll be able to retire. That was one thing about having kids later. It kind of pushed the retirement back! <laughs> The boys are already good equipment operators. I can kind of see the writing on the wall and my sweatshirt's going to say "auger cart specialist" in the future. <chuckles> My dad and uncle George farmed together until

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Two of the Bozdechs cattle, in repose.