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## Beyond question



Patty Lange Fischer always finds answers for her farm challenges

*By Shawndra Miller*

Patty Lange Fischer didn't know she would grow up to raise grass-fed cattle, or operate a seed/grain cleaning plant, or market organically grown popcorn. All she knew was, she liked to follow her dad around and ask question after question.

Now she owns and runs Decatur County's 450-acre Langeland Farms, while her father, Dale Lange, retains ownership of the land. Because of her organic operation's positive impact on the environment, Sustainable Indiana 2016 named Langeland Farms to its Green Light Legacy Hall of Fame.

Fischer represents the fifth generation on this sixth-generation farm, living in the white clapboard house where she grew up. Her grandfather built it over a century ago.

"I was the little shadow person," she says, shrugging on a leather barn coat on a sunny November afternoon. She walks to the historic barn where two black and white cats, Apple and Whiskers, take mouse patrol. "The farm was my playground." This barn, where she and her school friends made hay houses, now serves as shelter for her cow-calf operation.

She points out the solid beam supporting the structure; it is made from one tree. The long-ago builders used pegs and notches throughout the barn instead of nails. She recalls hearing stories from her grandmother about barn dances held in the loft.

As a child she absorbed both family history and farming know-how effortlessly, around the dinner table or while helping out alongside her three sisters. She recalls writing seed tags, which the children did as soon as their handwriting was fast and legible. Such tasks exposed her to concepts like germination, inert matter and purity, adding to a knowledge base that later would serve her well.

Her father had diversified the business with value-added income streams like small grain seeds. That laid the groundwork for Fischer's business today.

In between, there were a few detours. When she went off to Purdue, fashion retail drew her interest. She loved the coursework and was excited by the possibility of a career in fashion. But there was one big problem with that idea: She knew where she'd have to live to pursue this career.

"I was like, 'But this girl doesn't want to go to the city,'" she says, "and if you're going to make it in this business, you probably have to be there." Meanwhile she'd been taking electives from the ag school.

With each elective, her adviser had to call the ag department and inquire if there was room in the class she wanted to take: "She wants to

do meat science,” the baffled adviser would say into the phone.

“She was as frustrated with me as I was with her,” Fischer remembers.

Eventually she cobbled together a mass communication degree with a specialty in animal science, merely because it fascinated her. “I never thought I was going to be selling all these products.”

In 1978, she graduated, got married and moved with her husband back to the farm, where they raised four boys. For a while she worked in Purdue’s administration department and enjoyed it to the hilt, initiating programs in her own community. But when her oldest boy entered junior high with its whirlwind of school activities, and her mother wanted to retire from the bookkeeping end of the farm business, her work in the farm office began.

For several years she managed both farm and family life as part of a team. Her husband took care of the operational side of farming, while she oversaw the office.

In 2009, the bottom dropped out when her husband told her he was leaving. “At that point,” she says, “we had crops in the field, grains in the bin, the harvest was coming, and with nine head of cattle, what were we going to do?”

Through that traumatic time, Fischer and her father kept the farm going. The cattle had to be fed, so she would get up in the morning and feed them, then do whatever else needed to be done. The farming community lent strength to the family to pull them through.

“Farmers are known for their independence,” she says, “and yet I found such a safety net in the community. ... They didn’t come in and tell me what to do, but they were willing to answer questions and be that support.”

With the community’s help, she knew that she and the farm would make it, and she realized how broad her own knowledge base was. She

built on the varied experiences she'd had and continued her childhood habit of asking question after question to get the answers. Only now it wasn't mere curiosity that drove her, but the farm's survival.

The 2012 drought proved to be a turning point for the farm's fledgling popcorn enterprise. Having planted popcorn later than other Midwestern farmers, Fischer's crop was young enough to recover from the stress of heat and drought when a midsummer storm swept through with much-needed rain.

"It was July the 20th," she says. "I remember the date. We got two inches of rain. Our soil is a heavy clay which holds moisture longer. And that popcorn came around."

After that, every week to 10 days, rain fell on Langeland Farms, even when farms seven miles away stayed dry. Since popcorn across the Midwest wasn't surviving the weather, Fischer began getting calls from purchasers. She developed her buyer base and eventually needed contract growers to fill all the orders. Now she works with organic popcorn growers in Iowa, Ohio and Illinois.

Organic regulations require a broad crop rotation schedule, so to keep the fields active on non-popcorn years, Fischer looked into other crops. She began offering black beans, which became a popular item as fast food restaurants started featuring vegetarian options.

She also grows cereal rye and markets the seeds for cover cropping. Barley and oats are also among her products. She's begun using Carthage Mill's service to mill Illinois-grown hull-less oats into oatmeal and flour, which she may sell through Hoosier Harvest Market and other channels. Recently she's started

hearing more noise about the craft brewing industry, so she is researching malting.



Langeland Farms' growing operation and grain cleaning plant are both certified organic. Getting certified was more a matter of paperwork than a change in practices. Fischer says they were already used to completely cleaning the equipment, augurs and bins to maintain product integrity in the seed industry. So it was mainly a matter of documenting a protocol they had already adopted.

And because the grain cleaning operation is small, Fischer can be nimble in making shifts to respond to market demands. "I have no reason to ever go gambling," she jokes. "I farm. Everything's a gamble. It's a strategically planned risk."

But the business of Langeland Farms isn't her only work. She's deeply involved in many community initiatives. She served as market master for eight years at Batesville Farmers Market, where her marketing prowess helped to attract more customers. She helped launch Hoosier Harvest Market, where she's still a board member, and the Food and Growers Association, a local food initiative serving southeastern Indiana.

Kathy Cooley served as Food and Growers Association president while Fischer was vice president. "She is a forward-thinking

entrepreneur,” Cooley says of her friend, “who wanted to keep the family farm profitable and going for the long haul.”

Cooley praises Fischer’s dedication to the FGA, which sponsored annual breakfasts at the Batesville market. “She’d spend the whole night before getting ready and packing up her van,” Cooley says, “and then put on this big affair to feed the farmers and the marketgoers breakfast.”

Fischer doesn’t toot her own horn in this regard. “I believe in being part of the community,” she says simply.

That, too, began in her youth. Like most farm youngsters she participated in social activities centered around 4-H, school, church and Farm Bureau. She accompanied her dad to Farm Bureau meetings in nearby New Point. In another full circle, she now serves as Farm Bureau’s county president and also coordinates the organization’s county Ag Day Fair.

In recent years, she has enjoyed a new partnership, having reconnected with longtime family friend Gary Fischer. Two years ago they married. “We’ve known each other for 30 years. We weren’t on each other’s radar. ... God kind of said, ‘I think you two need to cheer up and build a new life.’”

A seed merchandiser, Gary brings his own background in farming to the operation. On this sunny afternoon he pulls in the gravel drive with the grain drill, having just planted cereal rye at one of Langeland Farms’ other properties.

Cattle, however, were new to him. While he complains about the way the cattle have to be fed every day, he also “makes pets out of them,” says Fischer. “He goes out and scratches their heads and calls them over to the fence.”

Some 45 head of cattle can be seen grazing in a field adjacent to the barn. Fischer picks up a long-haired black kitten, new to mouse patrol, and muses about what's next. "If you ask me about more diversification," she says, "I can't say yes and I can't say no. I have thoughts in my mind. ... Is retirement on the near horizon?" She shakes her head and laughs. "I'm having too much fun."

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