

A green combine harvester is shown from a rear-quarter perspective, moving through a field of golden-brown crops. The machine is kicking up a cloud of dust or chaff behind it. The background features a line of trees under a vast, cloudy sky with soft, diffused light.

A University of Missouri course helps agriculture students understand the realities of returning to the family farm.

Sometimes You Can Go Home



Sometimes when Garrett Riekhof is alone in the fields, he hears voices. One has the distinct drawl of his grandpa, the late Rienhardt Riekhof, who farmed the same acres that Garrett now tills and sows. This plainspoken voice upholds the way things were done for four generations on the Higinville, Mo., farm. The other voice sounds like Garrett's, a 2003 University of Missouri graduate with a degree in agricultural economics, interested in maximizing land efficiency through the latest technology.

Grandpa Riekhof trudged through dirt steering a 12-inch plow pulled by two horses. Garrett sits in a tilling tractor's climate-controlled cab, fitted with a laptop computer and a GPS, streaking the rolling land with a 40-foot-wide plow. Grandpa shoveled horse manure onto patches of stunted crops. Garrett takes soil samples to test chemical composition, then applies fertilizer treatments to optimize land productivity.

Garrett, who returned to the family farm after graduation, cannot escape his lineage. It is in the garage, where a broken 1958 tractor bought brand new by Grandpa gathers dust. It is in his Cape Cod-style two-story, built to mirror his grandparents' and perched on the same foundation. But mostly it's in the land. "I hear Grandpa saying do it like this, and me saying do it like that," Garrett, 32, says in a mild Midwest twang. "If I screw it up, I let down not only the generations that came before me. I've screwed it up for the generations after me."

These days, starting a farm from scratch is nearly impossible financially for a person of average means. A successful crop farm stretches more than 750 acres, and 2012 market value for good Missouri cropland was \$3,847 an acre, which computes to nearly \$3 million. Farm equipment easily tops seven figures. Some new farmers rent their fields, machines and equipment, but that also is an expensive undertaking.

Others, such as Garrett, return to the family farm.

Though no data are available, experts say Garrett's decision is increasingly rare. With the rise of the Internet and cable channels, young people who grew up on a farm have instantaneous access to exciting urban worlds that can make rural life seem quaint. They want nothing to do with days of tilling and working in mud. Moreover, the average age of American farmers is 57, with one-third 65 and older, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. Because farmers seldom retire early, if at all, that means many returning children can expect to work decades as hired hands before taking ownership. And the farm must financially sustain two or more households. Everyone takes a hit to the pocketbook when the children come home.

While a senior at MU, Garrett took the course *Returning to the Farm*, taught by Kevin C. Moore, an associate professor of agricultural economics. Garrett says it helped him understand the financial realities of his plan. Students determine if the farm is of adequate size to support another household. They work at developing a business plan. The family attends a workshop where straight talk is encouraged. An important issue is broached: Can parents and children work together as equal business partners? Or is such a relationship doomed from the start?

"I don't measure the success of the class by how many students we get back to the farm," Moore says. "The measurement of success is helping students make the best decision possible. Avoiding a bad situation is just as important as creating a good one."

OLD VERSUS NEW

Most of those gray, roof-sunken barns seen from country roads, often the muse of oil painters, were built during the agriculture boom of the early 20th century, the golden age of American farming. In the 1920s, advances in farm machinery began the bigger-is-better mentality, in which larger streamlined operations were more efficient and made the most money. Decades of seesawing fortunes followed, including a windfall period after the oil crisis of the 1970s, when agriculture workers enjoyed high market prices for products and increasing land values. Despite high interest rates, farm owners borrowed to expand their operation, many times because the children had returned.

But the bubble burst. "Farmers saw their net worth continue to increase simply from inflating land values, not necessarily increased profitability," says Michael J. Monson, MU associate professor of agricultural and applied economics. In the 1980s, food prices dropped, and as land values declined, refinancing of high-interest loans from the gravy years was nearly impossible. The fallout was especially harmful to the many farms supporting two or more households. "It was the attempt to bring in the new generation that was actually the financial downfall of the farm," Moore says.

In the late 1980s, Moore, at the time a fresh-faced MU professor, founded an MU Extension course with colleagues to help farmers get back in the black, or cut their losses. This morphed into *Returning to the Farm* after agriculture students kept asking professors and advisers if the return was feasible anymore. In time, it became an undergraduate course in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. About 350 students have taken the two-semester annual course since

← As rain clouds build in the eastern sky, Garrett Riekhof churns up dust while harvesting soybeans on leased land near his home. The vagaries of weather have led to a late harvest stretching into November.



See how two young entrepreneurs hatched the nation's largest free-range chicken operation in Centralia, Mo. mizzoumagazine.com/winter2014

its inception.

Matt Moreland, BS '08, took the class while an MU senior. As an undergraduate, Matt learned of the latest technologies and twice studied agriculture abroad. He also worked at a 5,000-acre farm near Centralia, Mo., and after graduation was offered a position there with a lucrative professional track. He turned it down.

Matt, 27, returned to a fourth-generation operation in Pleasant Hill, Mo., that has 1,500 acres of row crops, 140 dairy cattle and 150 beef cattle. Mike and Jay Moreland, Matt's dad and uncle, own Moreland Farms LLC. Matt manages the beef operation and is taking on other managerial duties. In October 2011, Matt married Becky Cox. The couple's daughter was born in August 2012. The young family lives in a house owned by Matt's grandmother, a farmer's block from the brothers' homes.

For decades, Mike and Jay Moreland split profits 50-50 to support their large families (each has four children). With Matt's family, farm income was divided three ways. It wasn't enough. "We had to do better," Matt says of the financial strain. Fresh from graduation, he brimmed with ideas to make the family farm more efficient. For example, he wanted to use GPS equipment when planting and harvesting; when planting, the GPS shows exactly where the sower's been, eliminating overplanting and underplanting. He wanted to grow corn specially bred for dairy cattle to improve milk production.



→ Garrett and Cara Riekhof hold a photo of Garrett and Grandpa Reinhardt Riekhof near the site of the original family home in Higginsville, Mo. Garrett struggles sometimes to balance tradition, as represented by Grandpa, and his modern farm sensibility.

His ideas met with a collective yawn. "My brother and I are slow to change," Mike admits. Over the months, however, as the brothers saw profits increase due to the implementation of the practices, their attitude changed. "We now call him our tech man," Mike says.

Both in their early 50s, the brothers probably will be farming two more decades, meaning Matt might not assume full control of Moreland Farms until he's in his late 40s. But Matt doesn't see that as an impediment because communication is active among the parties, something he learned about in *Returning to the Farm*. Five years home, he is happy with his decision, and Moreland Farms is more profitable.

LEARNING ON THE JOB

After graduation, Garrett Riekhof married Cara Copenhaver, BS '03, and returned to Higginsville to work for his father, Gary. In 2011, the couple took ownership and changed the operation's name to GR Farms, growing 1,420 acres of white corn and soybeans. Even though the couple are partners of a successful medium-sized farm, they still have to watch their expenses. They rent rather than own the acres (Gary is landlord of half their land) and rent and share ownership of some machines and equipment. Garrett and Cara, who have two children, also work part-time jobs not connected with GR Farms.

Following steps outlined in Moore's class, the succession went well, though a few management issues arose. In January 2013, the two generations got together at Gary's ranch house in Higginsville. Sitting around an oval dining room table, father and son, mother and wife spoke plainly of Garrett's return.

Garrett respects his dad, apparent in how he quiets when Gary speaks. About the only fault Garrett can find with his tall, broad-shouldered 63-year-old father is that he leaves the farm shop messy.

Throughout life, Garrett has never worked for anyone else but Dad. Gary knew that might be a problem. He'd read reports on farm succession suggesting that the returning child should first work in agriculture several years with another employer. "But I needed a co-manager and was willing to roll the dice," Gary says.

At times, Garrett has struggled with handling his one or two farm employees. "He's required to manage other people, but he's never truly been managed," Cara says. "I think there is something to having someone else, not a family member, be your boss."

Garrett agrees. "It is the hardest thing I do all day long."

Time management is another issue. "He gets



focused on one thing and forgets about other jobs,” mother Glenda says carefully.

Overall, though, Garrett has proven himself capable. Gary and Glenda, who are semiretired (they operate a home-based crop-insurance business that employs Cara), have no regrets turning the farm over to him eight years after his return.

HOPE AND REALITY

For some Returning to the Farm graduates, the path is not as smooth. Caleb Stamper, BS '13, returned home this year — but not to a farm. His parents, Chip and Carrie Stamper, are business owners and operators of Missouri Taxidermy Institute in Linn Creek, Mo. In 2007, his parents acquired 134 acres of pasture. Caleb's dream was to stitch more land to the patch and raise beef cattle. But in Moore's class, Caleb crunched the numbers. They didn't add up. His plan B was a hobby farm of beef cattle that Caleb hopes to make self-sufficient in 10 years. In the meantime, the 22-year-old works a day job to pay the bills.

Andrew Perry, a senior majoring in agriculture economics, and his brother Alan, 18, hope to work at a farm in Kirksville, Mo., that's been in the family for three generations. The brothers' father, Lindall, left the operation and is now a dermatologist in Columbia, where he raised his family. Andrew and Alan got the farm bug by spending weekends and summers at the Kirksville operation working corn and soybean fields and tending beef cattle.

“Planting seeds and helping them grow, raising calves to cows — you can't beat farm life for me,” Andrew, 20, says.

The brothers are 6 feet tall with muscular physiques and short hair. Both have a penchant for wearing thick boots and plaid long-sleeved shirts. The young men are nearly mirror images of each other. For both, it was never an aspiration to leave behind wide-open fields and vaulted Missouri sky for big city lights. “I've been to Chicago and didn't like it,” says Alan, an MU freshman. “I felt trapped by the buildings, and there were so many people.”

The Kirksville farm has been successful largely due to the business acumen of Andrew and Alan's 83-year-old grandfather, Gail Novinger. But the farm's success doesn't mean the brothers' decision is without risk. Extreme weather and a volatile crop market can quickly turn profit to loss. “It's exciting, but you never have certainty of what's coming,” Andrew says.

Andrew signed up for Moore's class as a junior so he could have more time to prepare for the Kirksville move. At a March 2, 2013, workshop in Memorial Union, students in Moore's 2012-13 class talked of farm finances, estate planning for farm succession and the cutting-edge techniques learned at MU they want to bring home. Andrew spoke of responsibility and tradition.

The Kirksville operation is on a sprawling wrinkled blanket of hills and bluffs. Sometimes after a long day's work, Andrew walks to a ridge and sits in the grass. In the distance are checkered family fields, a looping river, low valleys and a long zipper of railroad. His favorite spot is within view of his grandfather's house. Like Garrett, Andrew says his return isn't about himself and isn't about money. It is land. It is lineage. **M**

† Garrett Riekhof and his father, Gary, discuss the moisture content of the harvest. Garrett and his wife, Cara, took ownership of the Riekhof farm in Higginsville, Mo., in 2011.