

Mills' Work: Seven Generations of Farming in Gratiot County

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

If an ethic for hard work could run through a family's DNA, it must flow in rich abundance through the Mills family. Through seven generations now, they've been farming the land in some way or another in Gratiot County.

Hard work may be its own reward, but in July, Rick and Janet Mills were recognized with the Family Farm of the Year Award at Rural Urban Day. On hand for the festivities at the Gratiot County Fair for Youth Fairgrounds, all in the family, safe for Rick, seemed to be in on the secret - simply for the purposes of getting their patriarch to the event. With some family members, including his daughter and granddaughter, even hiding within the crowd, the cat seemed to slip out of the bag with a speaker's remarks about a "seven-generation farming family." Rick figured there were not many of those around. Still he said he was "humbled and honored" for the recognition of their longtime achievement.

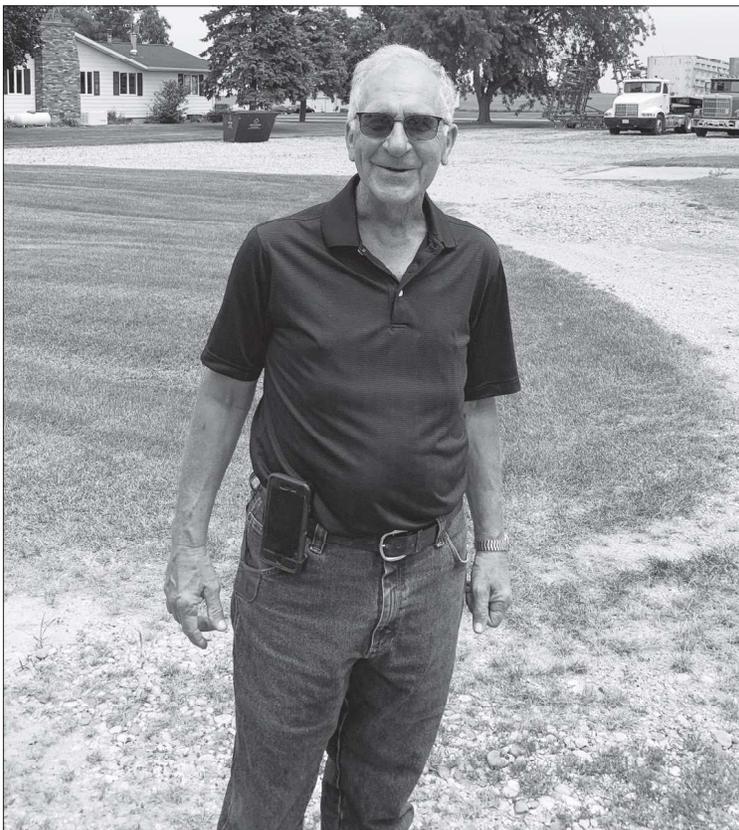
That present-day farm, which dates back to Rick's grandfather in the 1940s, covers nearly 1,400 acres of corn, soybeans, and wheat, mostly located in northern Gratiot County. Of the things Rick has learned through his 71 years, he knows just having the land is not enough. Farmers have to manage all sorts of intangibles. "There have been floods, droughts, ill health, and one thing or another that you have to work through," he said.

And work through they have. Aaron Mills, Rick's son, lives just a quarter mile up the road. Aaron and Grant Mills, the grandson who would be the seventh-generation farmer should he take on that role, all put in the work at harvest time.

First 40 acres

Sitting near the inviting swimming pool they installed in the 1980s, Rick Mills shared what he knows about Daniel Mills, his great grandfather who bought 40 acres of land in Pine River Township in 1866. "I assume they had sheep," he said of the land described as "unimproved" in an archived article from the Herald. He originally came from New York and had visited the place after moving closer to it in Ohio.

Daniel Mills would have toiled in what was then called "Starving Gratiot" because of all the wetlands in the days before such hazards could be managed successfully. Of the six children of James Mills, Rick's great grandfather, only his grandfather seemed to have an interest in farming. Yet the early death of James, just in his fifties, made things a little dicey as the



Rick Mills is a fifth of a potential seven-generation family farm in Gratiot County. In his time, he's witnessed the shift from dairy to crop farming

land was split up between six siblings. Even though his grandfather had purchased land on his own.

The family squabble can put a damper on the farming. The others seemingly wanted the land more than the work, renting the acreage out to others. "Over the years, my father and I have reclaimed those parcels," Rick said. "They're all back and the family again."

Within the proper framework, the family and the farm build upon each other. "Any generation adds acreage to the pot," Rick said. "My son Aaron has bought three different parcels of land in just the last 16 months."

Though the hard work was always a constant, Rick jokes that he earned a PhD in "post-hole digging." After graduating from St. Louis High School in 1968, he drove a dairy truck for a time to see what it would be like to work for someone else. But the farm called him back home.

Agriculture diversification

Through his teenage years, Aaron Mills milked cows before going to St. Louis High School. After graduation, he enrolled in Michigan State's agricultural tech program in 1992, fully intending to return to the farm. Around that time, Rick was looking to diversify away from dairy. "An expert on an advisory committee said, 'If you fellas aren't milking 500 cows by

the turn of the century, you are going to be left behind.'"

With 150 cows at the height of their operation, the Mills transitioned to crops. They kept some steers and heifers for some time, but what remains today of the dairy farms are the "empty monuments," such as the four large feeders raising toward the cloud. The northernmost feeder does have internet antennas — some sign of the future.



Aaron Mills, a sixth-generation family farmer, purchased Hidden Oaks Golf Course in St. Louis almost seven years ago. The hard work he has long embraced as a farmer brings him to these green fields each day to make the course look a little better.

Rick has witnessed many other changes in his time. Three windmills reach toward the clouds on various parts of the farm, which he and his wife don't seem to mind. He and Janet hear more noise out of the freeway than any coming from those gigantic spinning blades. The tractors and harvesting machines come equipped with GPS devices. He's not sure what all of the buttons do.

Because he grew up doing everything from pulling calves to fixing equipment, Rick is pretty handy around the place. He said there's hardly a day that goes by when he doesn't think, "Hey, my dad taught me how to do that."

Through all the progress, the Mills remain cognizant of their family's history. When Aaron bought the original farmhouse and did a major remodel, they found a postcard somewhere within the walls, dated from 1878. That path forward, with an eye to the past, can also be a motivating factor.

In 2014, Aaron and his wife Heather Mills purchased Hidden Oaks Golf Course, an appropriately named hidden gem in St. Louis then in need of some serious upkeep. That same farming ethic brings Aaron to the course (Heather handles things with the public upfront) with "the desire to come out here every day and see if I can make this place look better."

On golf and next generations

Where Aaron Mills grew up on a dairy farm, Grant Mills grew up on a golf course. "That kid was a machine out here," Aaron said. "He would fly around and play 54 holes a day every day. He'd get out in the morning, and we wouldn't see him until the end of the day."

Grant honed his skills enough on the greens to get scholarship offers from a number of Michigan colleges. Yet he opted out of college and went to work as a welder for Bandit Industries in Remus. His grandfather, who said he's a heck of a welder, believes Grant is looking to find himself. "He's learning what it's like to have someone other than family be the boss," said Rick, perhaps recalling his own days behind the wheel of a dairy truck.

Although there's no pressure campaign to convince Grant to continue work on the family farm, there's plenty of time for those discussions over leisurely rounds of golf and some lemonade after a long day of harvesting. Rick Mills never picked up the game. "What I know about golf, you can bury in a shoebox," he said. "I don't even play because I can't stand the aggravation."

Instead, between the planting and harvest, he fixes and maintains. Janet tends to the lawn and a beautiful garden. In early evenings, they've got a spot behind their house for a happy hour, and they can see just how tall the crops have reached since all that rain in June.

Rick does some woodworking, as well. In a spot where some cows used to moo, he's built enough furniture to raise more than \$10,000 for Big Brothers and Big Sisters. In the winter, he and Janet winter in a place appropriately called Carefree, Arizona. And should he talk weather with his Michigan family, and the difference between 17 degrees here and 71 degrees there, he knows he's living the good life.

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