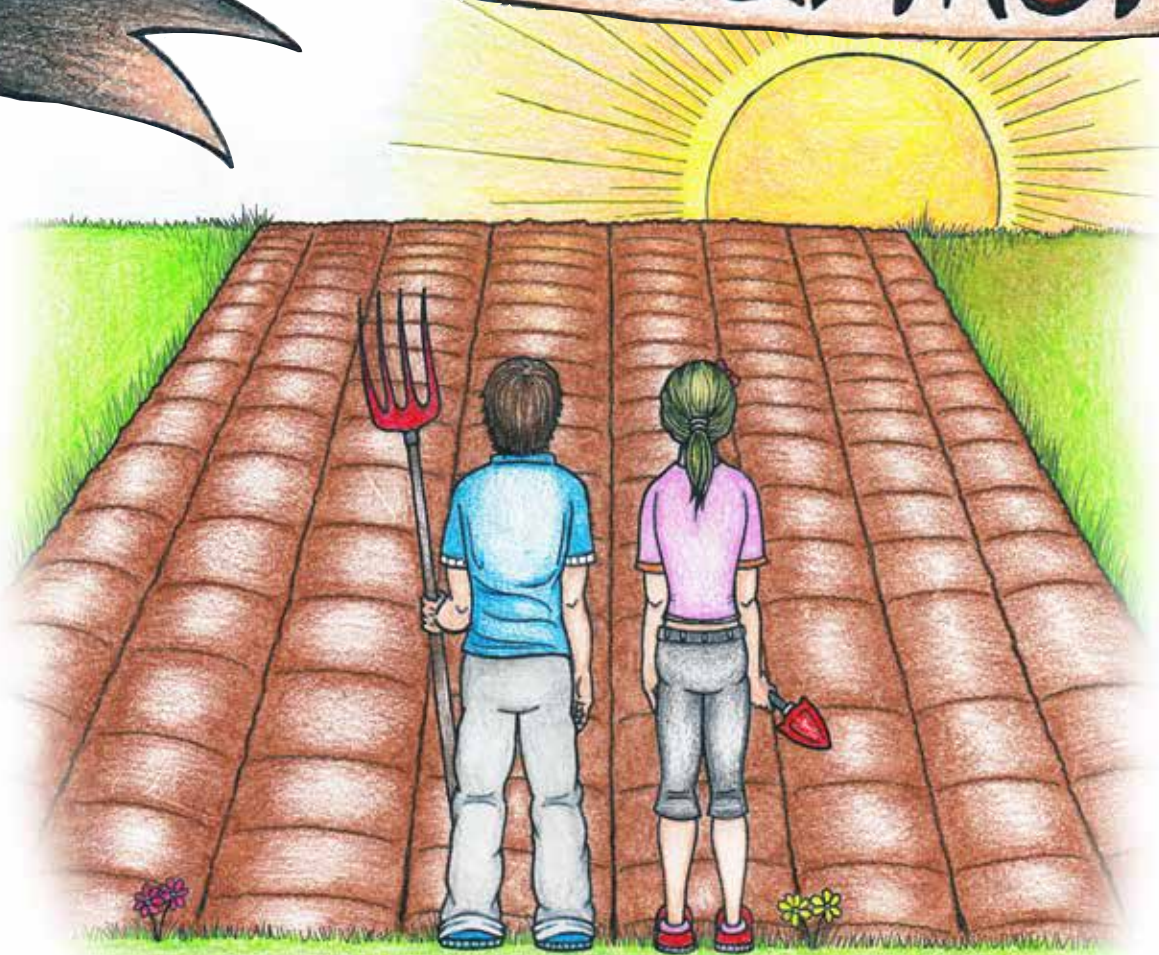


a **Farm**LIFE special report

Young Farmers



Quite possibly better educated and prepared than any generation before them, young producers still face major challenges in getting off the ground. We asked several about their challenges and goals, then listened as each spoke of hard lessons learned, their passion for farming and hopes for the future. >>

BY CLAIRE VATH & DEBORAH HUSO /// PHOTOS BY CURTIS COMEAU & JAMIE COLE /// ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARK ANDREWS



The Skobergs

NAMES: Dan and Shelly Skoberg.

CHILDREN: The blended family includes Dan's children, Brad, 6, Ethan, 8, and Preston, 9; and Shelly's daughter and son, 12-year-old Kiley and 14-year-old Tate.

OPERATION: Twin Oak Farms, Loughheed, Alberta

CROPS: Large yellow peas, hard red spring wheat, canola. Skoberg also offers contract work for a few local farmers during seeding.

AGCO EQUIPMENT: Challenger® MT865C, RoGator® 984, Challenger combine 560C, Massey Ferguson® 9420 swather. The real workhorse of Skoberg's operation is the 865C. Over the past six years, he's put about 1,800 hours on the machine. "It likes to climb hills," he says. "Farm equipment is getting bigger and bigger, and the hills aren't getting smaller. I'm not worried about making a mess or spinning out on a hill. It's got lots of power, lots of traction."

DEALER: Agriterra Equipment, Loughheed, Alberta

GOALS: To continue exploring farming opportunities as they arise, and to raise the couple's five children—the sixth generation on the Skoberg land.

If ever there were a question

about whether agriculture simply provides an occupation, just shoot a message to Dan Skoberg. “Fifth-generation farmer” is part of the Alberta farmer’s email address ... and a large chunk of the 36-year-old’s identity.

Skoberg works 3,000 acres of rich prairie soil, like the four generations that came before. And when his father, Ken, passed away from cancer in 2013, Skoberg found himself fully in charge of the family grain operation. “My dad was the head of the farm,” he says. “But he was slowly starting to do more relaxing and taking holidays, and I was picking up more work on the farm, so the transition was relatively painless.”

That doesn’t mean there weren’t growing pains though—those uncomfortable yet valuable lessons young farmers must learn by doing, in tandem with balancing the grief of losing his father.

Skoberg did set out on his own for a few years. “I earned my journeyman electrical certificate by 23 and spent time living off the farm in Edmonton, living out of hotels and camps and job sites all over the province,” he relates. But in his mid-20s, he headed back home, and in 2003, he settled back into the daily farm operations with his father, while working full time within driving distance of home.

“My dad was the one who wouldn’t serve you everything on a platter; he set it up in such a way as to teach you a lesson, so you learn what you’re doing,” Skoberg says. In 2004, only a year after he’d been back on the farm, “Dad had me make a decision about whether I should be harvesting my canola crop.”

Skoberg thought he should.

“I shouldn’t have,” he says. “The moisture content in the canola was higher than the recommended level that is safe to store in the bin because I harvested too soon.” His entire crop burned up in the bin that winter.

“I lost all my income, so over the next five years, I had to finance all my debt from that year to pay it back. I financed all that through an off-farm job. But I haven’t burnt one single kernel of canola since,” he says.

Now, more than a decade after that costly mistake, the family operation comprises large yellow peas, hard red spring wheat and canola.

The Skobergs own half the 3,000 acres they farm, with the balance rented. Dan serves as the farm’s primary operator with one full-time, on-farm employee. His mother, Birthe, is a shareholder but typically defers to Dan. “She has major trust in us and understands

we’re doing the best we can,” Skoberg says, referring to his and his wife’s work on the farm. “If we’re looking at major financial changes like buying land, though, she sits in and shares input.”

WORKING FARMER, WORKING FAMILY. Skoberg married his wife, Shelly, two years ago, creating a robust blended family in the process. When everyone’s home, it’s all hands on deck. The children live on the farm part time, and the older ones help with on-farm chores. And while grain is the operation’s mainstay, the kids also raise their 300 chickens.

Shelly works as a customer account manager with United Farmers of Alberta. In her role, she provides crop inputs and livestock essentials to growers and producers. She also supplies agronomy advice and livestock expertise to help producers make the best decisions for their operations—something that serves the Skobergs well on their own farm too. She helps treat and care for sick animals, while providing products and advice both to ensure animal health and to help sustain viable crops.

And, says Skoberg, “when she has time, she still enjoys driving the combine, running equipment and being involved on the farm.”

CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS OF LIFE ON THE

LAND. And, as in most places, purchasing land is a real challenge. “Big operations are taking over in our area, and small family farms are being depleted,” Dan says. Since he bought his first one-quarter in 2003 (about 160 acres), “land values have gone up 300%,” he says. “But income hasn’t. For a farmer my age with a farm our size, there’s a real fiscal challenge to owning more land.”

He attributes such price increases to generational transitions. “Lots of landowners are retiring and just want to get the best money for their land ... and they’re getting an enormous amount—\$3,200 to \$4,500 per acre,” he says. “But farmers like myself are missing out on that acreage, whereas bigger farms can purchase that a lot more easily.”

But despite those and other obstacles, Skoberg feels life is pretty good. “You’ve really got to have patience and understand how a farm works,” he muses. “So many factors are completely out of your control—and are extremely stressful to people who don’t love it.”

He pauses. “I do it ‘cause I love it,” he says. “If we had to trade our lives, we’d have five kids—and Shelly and me too—kicking and screaming to stay.” >>



The Robertses

AGES: Will, 33; Becky, 34

CHILDREN: Their first child is due in ???

OPERATION: Cow/calf

LIVESTOCK: 44 cattle, consisting of purebred and crossbred Angus

OFF-FARM BUSINESS: Rawhide Ridge Farm; Rawhide Fencing Services, LLC; Sta-Bull Livestock Equipment, LLC; Cascade, Va.

AGCO EQUIPMENT: Massey Ferguson tedder rake

DEALER: Boone Tractor, Bedford, Va.

GOAL: To build a strong enough revenue stream to have Becky on the farm full time with Will. Currently, the need for affordable health insurance is the main reason for Becky's off-farm job.

Everyone from Roy Rogers to

Cole Porter has crooned the lyrics to “Don’t Fence Me In”: “I can’t look at hobbles and I can’t stand fences.” But Will and Becky Roberts of Pittsylvania County, Va., love fences and gates, and farming.

Yet, like all too many young farmers, the couple, who married in April 2015, has struggled to make farming pay, particularly with increases in costs for health care. Obtaining affordable health coverage is one reason the Robertses anticipate Becky will continue her career as an assistant principal at the Pittsylvania Career and Technical Center for the foreseeable future.

The couple doesn’t want things to be that way forever, however. Both grew up among farming families and love working on the land, and hope they both can pursue farming as a viable long-term career.

LEARN AS YOU GO. Will, a native of neighboring Caswell County, N.C., where he’d often helped on his grandparents’ small cattle, tobacco and timber operation, went to college with the hopes of working in forestry. But when he couldn’t find a job close to home, he began what he supposed would be temporary employment as a farm manager for a beef and Boer goat operation in Pittsylvania County.

“I didn’t have a lot of guidance,” he laughs, given the farm owner was absentee. “It was basically a learning and growing opportunity.”

Through a commitment to saving money, putting together a business plan and seeking financing through Farm Credit of the Virginias, Will, in 2012, purchased his own farm, which included two parcels of non-contiguous acreage amounting to just under 160 acres. Today, he and Becky run a small cow/calf operation with 34 cows, two bulls and eight replacement heifers, alongside a haying operation. Including rented acreage, the Robertses farm about 500 acres total.

Income from that alone, however, is not enough to pay the bills, but Will had seen additional opportunity related to his own cattle operation. Taking what he’s learned, he started a fencing and custom gate business. Rawhide Fencing Services, LLC, and Sta-Bull Livestock Equipment, LLC, seemed like a logical extension of his beef cattle operation, particularly since Pittsylvania County is one of the largest dairy and beef producing areas in Virginia. Plus, it offered Will and Becky an opportunity to provide a much-needed service to producers like themselves.

“It was just me and one other guy for two to three years,” Will says of the fencing business, which has

expanded within the last year to include custom gates. Yet today, the fencing side of the couple’s business ventures has seven full-time employees, not including Will and Becky.

Will says a lot of his customers are looking for fencing assistance for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Soil and Water Conservation District cost-share programs, and indicates those government programs make up about 50% of Rawhide’s contracts. Meanwhile, custom gate, panel and feeder work are hot items as well.

Currently, the company is putting up 70,000 to 90,000 feet of fence annually. Will and his crew do everything—fixed-knot woven wire, board fence and high-tensile fence.

ALL IN. And it’s the couple’s willingness to do just about anything that keeps them growing. Both are actively involved in the local agricultural community too, serving together on the county’s Agricultural Development Board as well as being District 10 representatives for the Virginia Farm Bureau Young Farmers. Becky says one of her greatest concerns for future farmers is health insurance. “America’s current health care system holds the small business owner and the farmer in a strenuous and unforgiving position,” she notes. “Rates are far too high, and most simply cannot afford health care coverage as it stands today.” She points out that many farm families go without insurance or do as she and Will have done, where one member of the family has an off-farm job to provide health coverage.

With the farm, the fencing business and all their volunteer work, Becky says the couple is running day and night, Monday through Saturday every week. “We reserve Sunday for the Lord and each other,” she says.

As for Will, he says he couldn’t have landed a better partner on the farm and in the business, noting that Becky is “a rare sort.” Because she was already active in the local ag community and such a dedicated volunteer, she had no trouble adjusting to the busy farming and fencing lifestyle Will was already establishing before the couple met five years ago.

“We both already lived the lifestyle,” Will says. “And we also serve on a lot of the boards together.”

The Robertses want to grow the cow/calf operation in the coming years to include at least 75 brood cows, but, Will says with a laugh, he’s got to finish his own fence before he does that, noting, “It’s the fence builder’s fence that never gets built!” >>





The Boeres

NAMES: John (father) and Laura (daughter) Boere

CHILDREN: Laura, 31, is newly married; her first child is due in December.

OPERATION: John Boere Dairy, Modesto, Calif.

LIVESTOCK: 450 milk cows

AGCO EQUIPMENT: Massey Ferguson 396, Massey Ferguson 573, Massey Ferguson 4225. Laura's dad, John Boere, says they've run the MF396 10,000 hours "and never had the motor or transmission apart." The father-daughter team uses the MF573 daily to put up hay for the cows, and they use the MF4225 to mow pasture. "We like to keep them hooked up, so they just keep going," notes John.

DEALER: Holt Ag Solutions, Salida, Calif.

GOAL: To keep the longtime family dairy running well into the future, despite escalating land prices and lack of expansion opportunities locally.

Laura Boere has been working

alongside her dad on the family dairy farm ever since she was a little girl. Since then, however, she's gotten a promotion of sorts. Her full-time role on the farm now is primarily as a manager, keeping the books, overseeing summer irrigation and managing the farm's eight full-time employees.

Together with her dad, John, she manages 200 owned acres and another 130-plus of leased land. Their dairy has been organic since 1999. "We wanted to get away from chemicals and enjoy more stable prices," explains John.

Even though the Boeres enjoy higher prices for their milk as organic producers, John remains worried about the farm's future. "It's a difficult industry," he says of the dairy business. "There are only 1,400 dairies left in California. When I started [in 1988], there were 2,400." He remains concerned that increasing regulations on farmers in the state, along with escalating land prices, will continue to shrink the industry in the future.

LEARNING, LAND AND THE LONG GAME. "It's not just a job," Laura says of her role at the dairy. "It's a business with a lot of responsibility, and it requires a lot of dedication and hard work." Like most dairy producers, Laura gets that this line of work runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

She has worked full time on the family dairy since she was 19, and is inheriting a legacy that began when her great-great-great-grandfather started a dairy in Long Beach in 1905. The Boere staying power is noteworthy. "My dad had a dairy till he was 80 years old," remarks John. And the Boere family still holds a 179-year-old dairy in the Netherlands.

Laura says learning to run the dairy has been more a process of "absorption" rather than direct instruction on the part of her father. As she has gone about daily tasks with him at her side, she has learned about managing the herd, how to irrigate, the importance of real estate and what it's worth.

Laura is grateful she was born into the industry and has a foot naturally in the door. Farmland is a precious commodity in California, scooped up as soon as it hits the market. And it's not cheap to lease land either. "It

goes for \$300 to \$900 per acre depending on what you're growing," says John. "There's no way possible Laura could have started this on her own."

OLD LESSONS STILL APPLY. The Boeres have faced stiff competition from almond growers in the land leasing department, so much so that the father-daughter team is about to purchase 824 acres in the Sierra Nevada, an hour's drive from the dairy. They will have to move their cattle back and forth to graze.

Married to a tree farmer, Laura is acutely aware of how the agricultural industry has changed ... and in a way that certainly isn't conducive to getting started as a farmer without a family connection. "When I was young, I worked for my dad," says John. "I saved money hauling manure and had \$50,000 in the bank by age 25. I bought a small farm, a house and used that property as collateral to start a dairy." Given land appreciation in the Golden State, it's a feat few young farmers could pull off today.

High prices or not, John says the critical thing he has tried to pass onto Laura is the importance of conservative spending. "People today live too high on the hog," he remarks. "I started with one heifer while working for my dad, and every time I sold one I kept multiplying," he adds, referring to growth of his herd.

ADVICE TO YOUNG FARMERS. "Hands-on learning has been key for me," says Laura. "And I know there are a lot of aging farmers out there who would love to find a young farmer to work for them." She encourages young producers, who haven't enjoyed the benefit of being born into the industry, to find an older farmer and offer to work for him or her. She believes plenty of farmers who have seen their kids leave the land (as three of Laura's siblings have) would rather train someone outside the family to work the farm and find a way to pass it along to them, than see it sold off to a corporation or a developer.

Laura also encourages would-be farmers to get an education. "Go to college," she urges. Farming today has become so complex, one really can't be successful in ag operations without a four-year degree anymore.

Then Laura reiterates, "find a farmer to work for, and start learning." **FL**

more at
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There's much more online in this special report, including video interviews with young farmers, advice from two fathers to the next generation of producers, resources for information on things like loans and subsidies, and a link to a *FarmLife* guide to succession planning that you can't get anywhere else! See it all at this special report online at myFarmLife.com/youngfarmers.

