

Lambdin builds up by branching out

By JOSH FLINT

RATHER than fearing a drought, Randy Lambdin spends most growing seasons worrying about too much rain.

Randy farms 1,980 acres in the Mississippi River bottoms of Union County. He lives just west of Wolf Lake, less than a mile from the river. As an example of the types of challenges that come with river-bottom farming, Randy explains what he went through last year.

"An ice storm rolled through here last February and knocked out power," he says. "Then we got 14 inches of rain in one day last March." If that wasn't enough to cause an ulcer, he was on pins and needles last summer as the Mississippi swelled, causing levees further north to pop.

During the flood of 1993, Randy remembers patrolling the east side of the levee for sand boils. As water builds up on the west side of the levee, the pressure often forces water under the levee. Sand boils become a concern if they start removing earth from the levee's foundation. To deal with them, workers stack sandbags around the boil. As the sandbags get taller, the hydrostatic pressure eventually equalizes.

In 1993, an Army Corps engineer noticed a particularly large sand boil. An

Key Points

- River-bottom farming comes with a unique set of challenges.
- The Lambdin legacy reaches back to cotton farming in Arkansas.
- Randy hopes to preserve the Wolf Lake area for future generations.

on-site engineer recommended sandbagging immediately. Randy and a group of farmers grabbed a 6-foot-tall hog feeder and forced it into the hole. Then, they began sandbagging around the feeder.

Upon reaching the top, the pressure appeared to level off.

"We walked away from it, and we heard this strange noise," Randy says. "I looked back and the feeder was completely gone. It had been sucked into the hole." To this day, there's a noticeable bump in the field, where the feeder lurks just beneath the surface.

A farming legacy

During the Great Depression, Randy's grandfather left the family cotton farm in Arkansas and settled in southern Illinois.

"I always teased my grandfather about buying the first farm he looked at," he adds. "I told him, 'You could have gone anywhere in the state. Why didn't you buy something further north?' He



Flying for business and for pleasure

WHEN he's not sitting behind the wheel of the combine, Randy Lambdin enjoys taking his Cessna 172 for a spin.

Randy's father has been flying since 1965. Several years ago, Randy obtained his pilot's license from Southern Illinois University. Since then, he makes frequent parts runs and crop scouting trips.

"From above, you can see drainage issues really well," he notes.

Randy's plane isn't just for personal use though. He's taken several friends to distant equipment auctions. He remembers one trip to Michigan where a friend bought a tractor. "He bought the tractor at about 1 in the afternoon," Randy remembers. "As soon as we left the auction house, it started snowing sideways. Rather than risking it, we went to Applebee's and flew out the next day."

Once he retires, Randy hopes to make flying a full-time passion. He hopes to buy a little bigger airplane, so he can vacation in Canada, Cancun or anywhere in between. "I'd also like to hopscotch all over the United States," he adds. "Plus, I look forward to visiting my sons and their families, wherever they settle."



FAMILY FOUNDATION: Kathy and Randy Lambdin met at Southeast Missouri State University. Kathy is the nurse manager for Southeast Missouri Hospital's obstetrics unit in Cape Girardeau, Mo.

would always say, 'Because I liked it right here!'"

Randy graduated from Southeast Missouri State University in 1983. For four years, he worked as the Illinois Farm Bureau's Pulaski-Alexander County office manager. A seventh-generation farmer, he took over the 1,000-acre operation from his father in 1989. In 1992, Randy purchased his grandfather's original 240-acre farm and remodeled the home. He moved his family there in 1994.

Randy and his wife, Kathy, have three sons: Matthew, 22; Eric, 18; and Aaron, 16. All three help out on the farm. In fact, Randy can't remember any of his sons ever uttering the phrase "I'm bored." The three run a straw business and help out with an on-farm Precision Planting dealership. Plus, they mow lawns and sell sweet corn in the summer.



THREE OF A KIND: Eric (left), Matthew (center) and Aaron help out wherever they can on the farm. Matthew hopes to become a state trooper. Eric has expressed interest in taking over the family farm. Aaron, 16, is keeping his career options open.

Diverse future

Bound by the Mississippi River to the west, Randy is always looking for ways to branch out. "It's tough to pick up acreage in this area; that's why we've had to diversify so much," he adds. "In the future, I hope to have it big enough and strong enough for one or all of my sons to join the operation."

In recent years, Randy has added custom lime application and seed production to his resume. He currently raises soybean seed for Delta Growers Association. Never being fully satisfied with paying for custom lime application, he decided to do it himself. By offering the service to other farmers, Randy added another business opportunity.

Last year, Randy bought 140 acres of timber and enrolled it in the Wetlands Reserve Program. Over the years, he added six water holes to the property. In the future, he plans to dig a well and install drainage pipe so he can control the ponds' water level.

Currently, he and his sons hunt ducks and deer on the acreage. Randy says hunting has been a great bonding experience for them.

Giving back

Growing up, Randy remembers Wolf Lake as a picket-fence almost Mayberry type of town. Over the years, residents moved away. As a result, Wolf Lake has seen its share of economic hardships. "If you're not farming or living out in the country, there's not a lot to keep you here."

Despite the turn of events, he has spent countless hours trying to improve his area's quality of life. For the past 10 years, Randy has served as the Shawnee District 84 Board of Education president. He's also a trustee for the Wolf Lake Methodist Church.

His most recent endeavor is serving on the Union County Board of Commissioners. "Instead of sitting back and complaining about the way things are, I figure I'll do something about it," he explains.

In doing so, he's sat through his share of six-hour meetings. And, yes, some have been during planting and harvest. "The boys have been a tremendous help as far as covering for me when I go to meetings," he notes.