

Master Farmer Profile

Pete Clark

Age: 52

Wife: Pat

Children: Curtis Clark, 24; Jake Clark, 28, married to Sarah, 28, and father to Ava, 6 months; Peter Clark III, 30, married to Rebecca, 31; Clay Reid, 33; Adam Arbour, 27, married to Davina, 27; Zachary Arbour, 25; Amy Arbour, 32; and Nicky Hanhart, 33

Farm: Clark Farms

Scope: 9,000 acres of cash crops

Location: Eagle in Clinton County

Employees: four full time and five part time
Award nominator: Don Seidl, grain manager, US BioEnergy

Leadership/awards:

Watertown Township trustee; Watertown Township Zoning Board; Watertown Park and Recreation, donated time and equipment; Wacousta school playground, donated time and equipment; Eagle Park, donates equipment for annual events; Michigan Historical Center Foundation, sponsor and supporter of Michigan history and education

Work ethic key to Clark success



A FAMILY AFFAIR: From left are Jake Clark, daughter Ava, wife Sara, and his parents, Pat and Pete.

By **BETH STUEVER**

JONAS Clark and his family were floating down the Looking Glass River near Eagle Township in Clinton County in the early 1800s when the family cow hopped off their homemade raft to relieve herself. That was enough for the family to declare that very spot, and the 80 acres that surround it, home.

Pete Clark is the first to admit that he's not sure if the story is historical fact or family lore, but it makes him smile every time he tells it. True or not, he has the deed, signed by Andrew Jackson, showing that the Clark family has owned that piece of Eagle Township in Clinton County since 1835.

"That's the same year Michigan was granted statehood," Pete explains proudly. "No other family has ever owned this land."

To this day, Pete, 52, still farms that parcel along with 10,000 additional acres of corn and soybeans. He is a 2007 Master Farmer.

A sign from above

Pete, ninth of 11 children, didn't start out in production agriculture. The son of a general contractor, he began taking pre-dental curriculum at a Catholic college. After a few rough courses, a nun asked if he had any other ambitions in life. Pete, who had always enjoyed helping his Uncle Vic work the fields, said he'd considered being a farmer.

"She looked right at me and said, 'I suggest you wrap your arms around that,'" he says with a laugh. "I took that as a sign that dentistry might not be my thing."

In 1974, Pete rented 300 acres from his father and planted his first crop. Though he had little experience, he found himself surrounded by helpful family and friends who were anxious to see him succeed.

"I think I inherited my dad's business sense," he explains. "And my Uncle Vic taught me a lot of farming. He had sheep and cattle and I wasn't really interested in that, but he helped me every step of the way."

As Pete grew the business, his uncles often led him to more land.

"My dad's brothers were well-known and well-liked in the area," he says.

Key Points

- Pete Clark farms more than 10,000 acres in Clinton County.
- Before becoming a farmer, he was in dental school.
- Pete and Pat Clark's family totals eight children, three in-laws and a grandchild.

"Their reputation helped me a lot when I started renting more land. People knew and liked the family and were willing to give me a shot.

"My uncles were great mentors," he continues. "They were just having a blast watching me farm. And my dad was always in my corner. I had all these cheerleaders ... that made things easier."

Pete's son Jake says his father has the same traits.

"My dad is just like that," he says. "Criticism is something we appreciate more than anything else. He makes things fun. We don't think exactly the same, but we usually come to the same conclusion."

Farming in a team

Today, Pete farms with Jake, four full-time employees and five seasonal workers. Rick Kleinfelt has been with Clark Farms for more than 30 years.

"When I started, I was just part time," Kleinfelt says, adding that his responsibilities grew as the farm grew, as did his affection for the job. "I love coming here every day. ... We have some late nights, but it's all worth it to work for one of your buddies."

"Buddies" or "the guys" are terms Pete prefers to use, not "the help."

"I don't like that word," he says. "Nobody has ever punched a time clock here and nobody ever will. We work together."

Togetherness means that each person has their own area of responsibility, and though Pete and Jake have the final say, every opinion is welcomed and weighed heavily before decisions are made.

"We don't want people who just help us get by," Pete says. "We want thinkers. These guys are thinkers. They have great ideas. We'd be fools not to listen to them."

Pete says that his crews' work ethic and sense of loyalty have been a key to Clark Farms' success. He knew that when he hired Gordy Locke in 1979, Gary DuBois in 1981 and John Bergen in 1994. Of his four main employees, only Bergen has a farm background.

"We kind of trained each other," Pete says. While each man has a specific area

of expertise, Pete praises their willingness to take on any task when needed.

"Even changing diapers," he says with a laugh. Pete says it is important for him to work with people who value family and loyalty as much as he does. "These guys knew Jake was going to be a farmer before I did."

Family first

The first thing Don Seidl, grain manager for U.S. BioEnergy, noticed about Pete when the two met eight years ago was his strong dedication to family — his own, as well as those of his employees.

"Pete does a lot of things right," says Seidl, who nominated him for the award. "He was the first in the county to have all his chemicals and fertilizers diked; he does a good job of marketing his grain; and he's a leader in the industry. But it's his passion for farming and his family that really makes him stand out."

Stuever writes from Marshall.

A timeline of Clark Farms

- 1835:** Jonas Clark moves from New York to Michigan and is deeded land along the Looking Glass River in Clinton County.
- 1954:** Pete Clark Sr. purchases his first land and leases it to a local farmer.
- 1957:** Pete Sr. begins investing in land throughout the county.
- 1974:** Pete Jr. begins farming 300 acres, all of which he rents from his father. He learns the ropes from his uncle, Vic Clark.
- 1975:** Pete Jr. rents more land and doubles his acreage to 600.
- 1976:** Pete Sr. gives his son 2 acres and a hay barn.
- 1976:** Pete Jr. hires Rick Kleinfelt, his first employee that stays with him throughout his career.
- 1986:** Clark Farms begins a snow plowing and excavating business that now totals 20 commercial accounts and 25 employees.
- 2004:** Dave Morris, local farmer and philanthropist retires and grants Pete and his son, Jake, a 25-year lease on his 2,300 acres of prime farmland; Pete Jr. expands Clark Farms to more than 10,000 acres.