

Bringing in the beets

By JENNIFER VINCENT

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series on sugarbeets. Next month's article will focus on the journey of the sugarbeet as it is processed into sugar.

ONE honk means move back, two honks move ahead, and three, move out of the way. It's the language of sugarbeet harvest. And, while there are radios between the harvester and the semi tractor-trailer being loaded, the horn and an occasional hand gesture are faster.

Sugarbeet harvest can be muddy, labor-intensive, hard on equipment and time-consuming to deliver, but it's a ritual that "is the best time of the year," says Ted Bauer, 36, who on this sunny, mid-September morning was harvesting the first beets off the headlands in Reese. His cousin, Adam Bauer, 24, is driving a semi alongside, loading "on the fly."

"Farming is all I've ever wanted to do, and sugarbeets are one of my favorite crops to harvest," says Adam, whose bug guard identifies his rig as the "Mud Dawg."

While keeping his six-row harvester in line, Ted watches a video screen that displays what the camera on the end of the elevator sees as it's dumping the beets into the trailer. Adam waits for Ted's signal — two honks — and he breaks the simultaneous stride with the harvester

A family affair

THE Bauer family farm spans three generations, starting with Ruben. His three sons, Larry, Randy and Charlie, formed a partnership and took over the farm, naming it LaRaCha farms. Larry's son, Ted, and Randy's son, Chad, are now junior partners. To be a junior partner you must be 25 years old and have worked on the farm for at least five years. Charlie's son, Adam, is 24 and will become a junior partner next year.

"It's all I've known, and I really enjoy it," Adam says about the farm.

Also working full time on the farm is Randy's stepson Dan Rummel; Charlie's wife, Terri, who keeps the books; and four full-time employees, Bill Dietzel, Matt Sergent, Paul Walz and Dave Wiacek.

Ted says, "I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else. I've never thought about anything else."

Together, the Bauers farm about 5,000 acres, about half of that rented, raising sugarbeets, dry beans, corn and about 1,600 acres of pickles.

While Ruben has the title of retired, at least on paper, he's still at the farm every day. "That man was born to work," says Ted. "He's not right unless he accomplishes something."

Ted's 7-year-old son, Jackson, may be the next generation to farm. "He can't get here fast enough after school," says Ted.



PILING GROUNDS: Sugarbeet piles are up to 20 feet high, 200 feet wide and more than 1,000 feet long.

Key Points

- Sugarbeet harvest is a family affair for Bauers.
- Three generations of the family farm 1,200 acres of sugarbeets.
- Harvesting sugarbeets requires patience, teamwork and endurance.

to move forward for an even load.

Harvesting beets requires teamwork. "I don't think it would be nearly as much fun if we weren't farming together," Ted says.

As he's harvesting the outside rows, Ted sees a low-hanging branch approaching and honks three times and motions for Adam to swing away from the harvester. Ted maneuvers around the branch and then backs up to get as many beets as possible.

Just ahead of them is another cousin, Chad Bauer, 30, who is driving an 8100 John Deere and pulling a defoliator that tops the beets. "Growing beets is a right,



CANINE UNIT: Echo likes to join his master Chad Bauer on the field during beet harvest.

privilege and an obligation," Chad says. "Some years are better than others, but we're looking at a phenomenal crop this year."

The Bauer family is one of about 1,100 Michigan farm families that raise sugarbeets for their cooperative — Michigan Sugar Co. "We didn't give up on sugarbeets," Chad says about his family's decision in 2004 to buy shares in the cooperative that merged Monitor Sugar Co. and Michigan Sugar Co., creating a completely farmer-owned sugar industry in Michigan. The Bauer family's sugarbeet shares include a commitment to plant 1,200 acres of beets every year.

Early work

Chad doesn't slow as the dog named Echo darts back and forth in front of the tractor. "He has separation anxiety," says Chad, who is often accompanied in the cab by Echo.

It's relatively quiet in the fields today, Chad says of the "early" harvest crew. "Once we get into full swing, we'll have two harvesters, two toppers and nine trucks out here."

Michigan Sugar pays growers a premium to bring in a controlled early harvest to begin the processing year, which is called a campaign. Once the factory goes on line, it will run nonstop until



FAMILY BUSINESS: Adam (left) and Ted Bauer are cousins. Ted is a junior partner on the LaRaCha Farm in Reese, while Adam soon will be.



CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT: Bernie Beechum, a Michigan Sugar pile operator, explains how steel pipes running through beet piles can deliver both warm and cold air to keep the temperature as constant as possible. Probes in the piles automatically turn the system on and off when needed.



LOAD TIME: After the digger wheels lift the beets out of the ground, the beets are placed on the elevator, which rolls them to the truck. During early harvest of the headlands, Adam Bauer drives the semi in reverse alongside the harvester so he doesn't have to turn around.