



Ag's appeal has never been stronger

Like most beginning farmers, Ed Tanton is happy and excited to be on a tractor and making decisions on his 630-acre family farm north of Bloomington, Ill. Two years ago, for the first time, he planted his own crops on his own land.

It's always good to get new blood into ag, right? The fact that Tanton is 52 years old makes this story even more compelling.

How Tanton went from travel agent to tractor seat is yet more evidence that, despite drought, volatility and huge capital requirements, more people are gravitating toward agriculture as a career.

At Iowa State University, undergrad enrollment in agriculture reached record numbers this fall, and the number of new students entering the college between 2005 and 2012 increased more than 46%.

After protests from students, alumni and the industry, Clemson University is resuscitating an agribusiness degree program that had been dismantled for lack of funding. One official says it's a modern-day renaissance, as young people's concerns grow over the environment and the planet's ability to feed a population set to reach 9 billion by 2050.

Tanton's path to farming was less conventional. He owned a successful travel agency throughout the 1990s, but travel websites began to make agencies

obsolete; then 9/11 happened. "I kept a positive attitude, and we did fine, but it wasn't any fun to go to the office after that," he says. "All the security and changes in the airline business — it just wasn't a fun business for me to run anymore."

Tanton kept thinking about the family-owned (and rented) farm that has been in the family since 1860. His longtime tenant had kids in college, but secretly Tanton always thought about farming. "I would say to my employees, 'If I knew what I was doing, I'd be at home now farming my own ground,'" he recalls.

"Farming was definitely on my bucket list."

— Ed Tanton

Then Tanton got married, and in 2003 he and his wife, Karen, had a son.

"I really didn't want to start from scratch building another business, but when you have a son, it changes everything," he says. "My dad died in '88, and he made me promise to pass the farm down to the next generation. My son is the only legacy that will keep our family going, and that changed my outlook."

Pretty soon Tanton be-

gan spending less time at his agency and more time driving the auger wagon for area farmers.

"I loved it," he says. "I started understanding it more and hearing people talk about agronomy and different aspects."

He met Lowpoint, Ill., farmer Todd Mooberry, who was looking for a land partner to expand and make larger equipment more efficient. The two formed a partnership and the rest is history.

"I wanted to handle my own fields with my own equipment," says Tanton. "I had a little capital to spend, and he let me hang around to learn how to farm."

Younger generation

Tanton's move to farming has had a profound impact on the next generation. His wife's daughter from a previous marriage, Erika, had never been exposed to agriculture until her mom married Tanton. After learning about farming, Erika took an ag class at her local high school. Her favorite instructor? The ag teacher. She joined FFA and caught farming fever. Now she will major in soil science at Texas A&M or University of Illinois.

"I really think it was my move to farming that sparked her interest in agriculture," Tanton says.

Sure, Tanton knows he had it easy compared to many new farmers who have to go deep in debt to get established. But his ma-

ior worry wasn't capital; it was competence. He's well aware of the management demands on farming.

"I didn't realize how fortunate I was to have land free and clear until I got into this," he says. "If we weren't successful financially, I'd feel differently, but the legacy factor is still in play. I know this is something my dad would be very proud of."

David Wirth, Springfield, Ill., also wanted to get closer to his farming roots. Wirth worked at Farm Credit and in banking since graduating college in 1981. But when presented with a chance to become partner in an ag tiling company last year, the 53-year-old leaped at the chance.

"I told my colleagues I was leaving the bank, and they looked at me like I was crazy," says Wirth, who grew up on a farm. "They couldn't comprehend it. But farming gets in your blood. I can't help it."

Wirth was partially motivated by the chance to own his own business. But he also liked the outlook for agriculture.

"When I grew up, agriculture really struggled," he recalls. "I started my career in lending in 1981, and that's when things hit the fan. There's a lot more optimism today, and good reasons for it. The financial situation is so much better."

It's never too late to do what you want in life. Wirth and Tanton are living proof. 