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Soil Health Payback A Partnership for the Ages

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Parsons Keeps It All Together

Raised as a city girl by her widowed mother and four elder sisters in Humboldt, Iowa, Kathryn (Kate) Parsons clearly recalls being sure about one thing.

"I remember saying I was never going to marry a farmer," says the spry 96-year-old, making it clear from the get-go. "I later changed my mind about that."

As an owner of Parsons Farms, Kate and her late husband, Paul, married in 1940. They first farmed with his parents, then in partnership with Paul's brother, Carl.

"We had planned on being married on Armistice Day (Nov. 11) in 1940," Kate recalls. "But there was a bad storm and the ice was terrible. Paul spent the whole day out knocking chickens off the trees. They were frozen to the branches and couldn't break free. Would have died if Paul hadn't knocked the ice off of them."

Undeterred, the couple moved the wedding forward to the day before

Thanksgiving and were married in nearby Fort Dodge.

"We lived with Paul's folks for almost two years," she recalls. "His mother was a wonderful woman. She had the patience of Job. Even though it would take one-tenth of the time to cook dinner herself, she'd take the time to teach me how."

When it came time for a home of their own, Paul's father bought a nearby school house and had it remodeled for them before their son, Bill, and daughter, Linda, were added to the family. Now 76, Bill is retired from the U.S. Air Force and lives in Newport, Wash., and Linda, a retired middle-school music teacher, lives in Longwood, Florida, near Orlando.

In addition to corn, soybeans, hay, and oats, the Parsons family raised beef cattle and ran a farrow-to-finish hog operation, selling their pigs to the Hormel Packing Plant in Fort Dodge. They also did custom baling and custom silo-filling.



Kate Parsons and Brian Larson at Kate's Ankeny, Iowa, condominium.

KEEPING IT ALL TOGETHER

"The main farm was 240 acres," Kate says, describing the size of their farming operation. "And there was Paul's aunt Nellie's farm, which was an 80; Mary Jane Van Patten's farm, which was 230 acres; Fred Meredith's was another 80; and Oscar Thompson's that was a 160," she recalls. Brian Larson of Sunderman Farm Management Company managed the Van Patten farm and rented it to the Parsons brothers, which is how the relationship began.

In 1985, after 45 years of raising crops and livestock, caring for the land, and raising families, both Parsons brothers were experiencing health challenges. The farming industry was in the grips of economic crisis, so the decision was made to retire from farming.

With an existing trust and respect for Brian's work, the Parsons family felt good about turning the operation over to Sunderman Farm Management.

"When we decided it was time to retire," Kate says, "there was no question that we would work with Brian to manage the farm. It's been almost 35 years now and we've never been sorry."

An important aspect of managing the Parsons operation was keeping the farm intact.

"It was important to us that the land was cared for and kept together," Kate says. "Brian has been able to accomplish that for us. Originally there were four owners and now there are something like 11. There are a lot more people involved these days."

Brian agrees. "It's been very important to Kate and her family to keep the original farm together and communicate openly about what's happening on the farm," he says. "We've worked on enriching the soil, integrating conservation practices, adding drainage tile, and other improvements to keep the ground productive through the years."

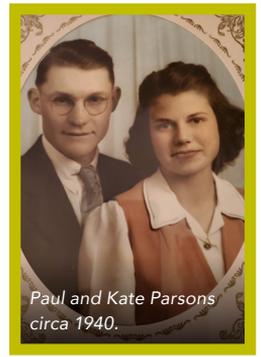
IN THEIR 'SPARE TIME'

Kate worked on the farm, delivering grain, driving tractor, and helping as needed. Later, she held jobs in town, including 10 years with Jet Co. She and Paul spent many hours repairing the original house that began the Historical Association complex. Kate continued working in the county and state historical associations and Paul devoted time to the Isaak Walton League.

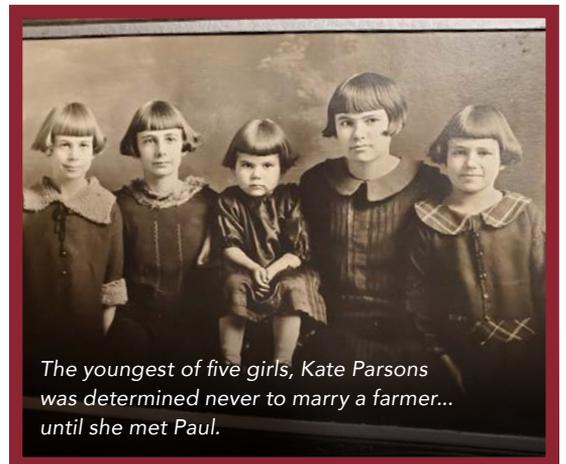
While Paul was raising livestock and grain, Kate took great pride in raising and showing pug dogs. One of which, Duffy, went on to become AKC Champion, with Kate as owner/handler, an almost unheard-of practice in those days.

After retiring from the farm, the couple lived for many years in the Iowa Great Lakes area and enjoyed RV-ing with caravans of friends, including a special trip to Alaska. "We had a little toy poodle that went with us," she says. "I think just about everybody had to have a photo of that little dog with his paws up on the wheel of the RV."

Sadly, Paul passed away in 2014. Kate makes her home in Ankeny, Iowa, where she has the support of nearby family. 🌱



Paul and Kate Parsons
circa 1940.



The youngest of five girls, Kate Parsons
was determined never to marry a farmer...
until she met Paul.

Soil Health Payback

Sunderman Farm Management's very own Mark Thompson was featured in the October issue of the *Successful Farming* magazine as an expert on how to promote soil health. Check out the article below.



So will healthy soils help farmers make more money?

"My gut feeling is that healthier soils should be more productive in the long term, but at this point, it is hard to quantify," says Liz Stahl, a University of Minnesota Extension educator. "We are just scratching the surface. There is a lot we don't know yet about soil health."

Abbey Wick is a Soil Health Specialist with North Dakota State University Extension. Her goal is to be financially net neutral when it comes to soil health.

"This includes maintaining yields or cutting costs while using soil health tools like no-till and cover crops," says Abbey.

Mark Thompson admits there's a transition time when switching from tillage to no till. "The first couple of years are tough, and it's worse if you throw a wet year on top of that," says Thompson, who's a farm manager for Sunderman Farm Management, Fort Dodge, Iowa.

Cover crops help. "We have cut our transition time in half using them, as opposed to just no-tilling," says Thompson, who also farms near Badger, Iowa.

This spring was a good example of how soil health tools can pay, Thompson says.

"You had planting windows that lasted just hours," he says. On long-term no till punctuated with cover crops, Thompson

planted corn due to improved water infiltration and drier soil while nearby tilled fields sat idle.

A 2014-2016 Iowa State University trial at seven locations showed yields of corn declined 30% when planted during a May 25-June 5 window compared with April 20-May 5.

"People are going to see this as a benefit for the future, especially with all of the crazy weather cycles and how healthy soils handle them," says Thompson.

Thompson is also experimenting with small grains to diversify the corn and soybean rotation. Adding them can trigger more microbes that transfer nutrients and water to crops.

It's not easy, though. Small grain infrastructure in north-central Iowa is scant. Ditto for markets.

Conversely, small grains open up other opportunities. Thompson planted Piper Sudan grass after small grains that he will harvest this fall for a livestock feeder. He will then plant the field to corn in 2020.

Landlords willing to commit to a multi-year contract are key, Thompson says.

"They see the future," he says. "By working with us in those early years, they now can reap the benefits."

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