



# A fair trade act

Keven Dearing is trading labor for the use of machinery to start farming

**By Mike Holmberg**  
Farm Chemicals Editor

**K**even Dearing is proof that you can go home again. He took a roundabout path to get started farming, but in 2001 that path finally brought him back to his hometown for the opportunity to farm on his own.

Keven grew up on a farm near Buffalo Center in north central Iowa. He studied farm equipment and diesel mechanics in college then headed to Minnesota where he ended up working in a food processing factory for 14 years.

Making cereal for Malt-O-Meal gave him a secure job with good pay and benefits and a home of his own. But his desire to farm wouldn't die. "It was still in my blood, I

guess," Keven says. "I'd always thought about it and was wishing I was farming when I was working in the factory. I just needed a change."

The opportunity to make that change opened up when Keven had a conversation with his cousin, Steve Shortenhouse. Steve farms with his father, Jim, and was also farming some land owned by Keven's grandparents. Steve offered to give that up so Keven could come back to Iowa and get started.

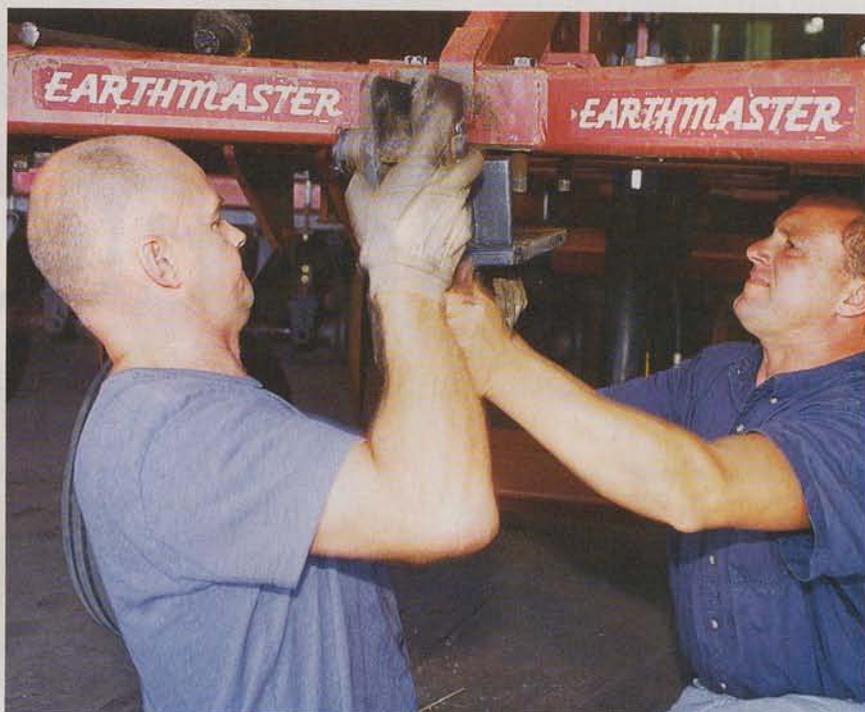
"I didn't have any machinery at all, and Steve and his dad needed help. I traded my labor for the use of their machinery, so it worked out pretty well," Keven says.

Although he was looking to make a change, Keven says he was a bit cautious. "I talked about it for a couple of years





**Keven knew farming basics and had studied ag mechanics after high school. But his first year of actual farming meant learning more about marketing, chemicals, and fertilizer.**



**Keven's cousin, Steve Shortenhouse (left), offered to give up some land he had been farming to give Keven a chance to make a fresh start on the farm. Keven trades his labor for the use of Steve and Steve's dad's equipment.**

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and started coming back in the spring and fall to help Steve and Jim. I took time off from the factory job to come down and make sure it was what I

### Easing into it

**W**orking your way into an existing operation is a good way to get started, says Keven Dearing. And it may be about the only way.

"The only way I could see someone starting from scratch - like I did - is working with somebody," he says. "I think there's a lot of opportunity out there, especially with farmers retiring.

"A lot of them still want to live on their farm. And if they've got a grain drying system established, they may want to work with somebody. You should definitely try to work something out with someone who's established if you're trying to start from nothing," he says. ■

wanted to do and that it would work out between us," Keven says.

Keven's parents, who got out of farming in the 1980s, also encouraged him to take his time and be cautious about his decision. "People I worked with at the factory thought I was crazy to start farming when I had a good job and benefits. But I had pretty much everything figured out how I could cash flow it ahead of time," he says.

When he finally decided to make the plunge in 2001, Keven sold his house in Minnesota and used the equity he'd built up to plant his first crop. He also bought a farmstead near Buffalo Center for a place to live.

### Getting experience

Keven's first year in 2001 proved to be a challenge. They had a wet spring and were late getting the crops in the ground. "It was probably the worst year to start farming in a long time, and I didn't have a good year. I made it through, and the last two years have been really good to me," he says.

The first couple of years, Keven managed his own acres but was able to use all of Steve and Jim's machinery. He didn't have to pay for fuel, grain storage, or grain drying. In return, he

worked side by side with Steve and Jim on their operation.

"They farm enough acres where I did put in a lot of sweat equity," Keven says. "They helped me out a lot with this arrangement. If it wasn't for Steve, Jim and my grandfather, I wouldn't be farming. There would be no way I could get started."

Although they each make their own management decisions for their crops, they do everything else together. "We all work together when it's time to

### New Web site

**T**his story is one in a series on beginning farmers who have the goal to make a full-time living for their family from production agriculture.

For information on other "Up By Their Bootstraps" farmers and additional resources for young and beginning farmers, visit [www.agriculture.com/bootstrap](http://www.agriculture.com/bootstrap). The Web site is sponsored by *Successful Farming* magazine and The Farm Credit System Foundation, Inc. ■

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plant, spray, and harvest. We farm together every day," Keven says. "It's worked really well. We get along great and all have the same work ethic."

### Learning to manage

Doing the work was the easy part of the process, Keven says. Management was a bit tougher. "I realized the first year how much there is to actually know and learn," he says. "Marketing was the biggest thing. I learned a lot from Steve and Jim about marketing and about making chemical and fertilizer decisions."

He also works with Dan Yegge, who runs a financial consulting company called Ag Performance in Buffalo Center. "They take care of all my bookwork," he says, "and they help me out with marketing, too. Marketing is the biggest problem everybody faces. In the summer of 2002, I should have pulled the pin on some grain but got too greedy. I learned from that."

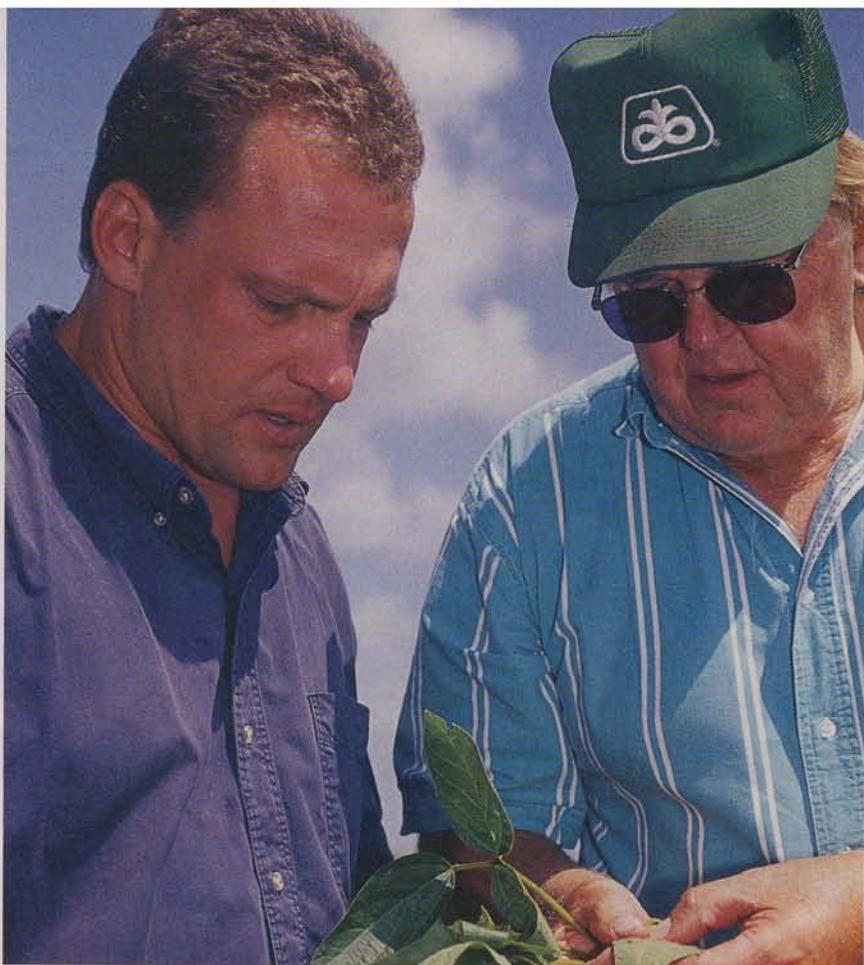
Keven rents some of his land on shares from his grandparents and says his grandfather has been a big help, too. "He never bought any machinery unless he absolutely knew he could afford it. He never overspent. I learned that from him and also from my cousins. The brand-new stuff doesn't make you any more money than the used equipment."

Last spring, Keven bought his first piece of equipment – a used 12-row Kinze planter. He also partnered with Steve and Jim to buy a used sprayer and combine.

### Looking for a land base

Now he's focused on adding more acres, either through buying or renting. He's been able to farm his grandparents' land on shares, and he says that this has been a huge help while just getting established.

He started renting 430 acres of his grandparents' land on a crop-share basis, and has been fortunate to add acres each year. His grandparents bought more land that he farmed his second year. Last year he was able to rent additional acres from a neighbor, and he bought 17 acres next to where he lives.



**Keven (left) and his uncle, Jim Shortenhouse, check a field for soybean aphids. Last year was the first year aphids were a problem in their area.**



**Keven's extended family shucks sweet corn. They are (from left) cousins Jim and Steve Shortenhouse, grandmother Dorothy Dearing, Keven, and grandfather Willard Dearing. Keven is engaged and planning a July wedding.**

"The biggest limiting factor now is the price of land," he says. "In Iowa, I think it's near a record high right now. It's really gone up the last year."

Keven says he's been fortunate that he didn't have to take on any debt the first two years. He had to borrow money for the planter last spring and

to buy the 17 acres last summer, but otherwise his balance sheet is in pretty good shape.

The one thing he would do differently is start sooner. "I wish I would have left the factory and gotten started sooner now that I've been doing it for three years," he says. **SF**