
# Oral History of Illinois Agriculture

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**Abstract:**

Nate Janssen was born on May 27, 1974 in Syracuse, New York. He is a 33-year-old Dairy Operations Manager for the Golden Oaks Farm located in Wauconda, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. Nate explained that he moved to Illinois in 1989 when his father accepted a job at Golden Oaks Farm. The rest of the Janssen family lives in Iowa and has always been involved with agriculture. While living in New York, Nate was interested in farming. He showed cows through 4-H. Nate attended Cornell University, and studied Animal Science. He has been in all types of agricultural business, including selling feed on both the east and west coasts. This experience proved to the owners of the Golden Oaks Farm that Nate could be a profitable employee, so they hired him to expand the dairy operation. Golden Oaks Farm, owned by the Crown family of Chicago, was started in 1948 and is 1500 acres. There is a dairy operation, a recycling operation, and crops are grown to feed the cows. Nate commends the Crown family for keeping the farm and points to the pressures they must feel to sell the farm due to rising land costs and the location in proximity to the city. The dairy operation was built in 2002, and has a double twelve herringbone milking parlor. 99% of the herd is black and white and red and white Holstein. The milking herd is milked 3 times a day and kept inside so they can be fed. Nate explained that the milk had previously been sold into a Co-op. Recently, the farm was offered a better deal by Grande Cheese. Now all the milk produced on Golden Oaks Farm is turned into cheese. There is also a genetics program that identifies the top cows and captures their genetics. After the capture, the embryo is sold or placed in a surrogate mother. Either males or females may be kept or sold depending on the herd situation. This program allows the employees to show and sell cows.

**Keywords:** Syracuse, NY; Dairy Operations Manager; Golden Oaks Farm; Wauconda, IL; Chicago, IL; Iowa; Farming; 4-H; Cornell University; Animal Science; Agricultural Business; Dairy; Recycling; Rising Land Costs; Double Twelve Herringbone Milking Parlor; Holstein; Co-op; Cheese; Genetics; Embryo Capture; Surrogate

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# Interview with Nathaniel Janssen

## # ISM_20_JanssenNat

Interview # 1: May 8, 2008
Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Okay. Today is May 8, 2008. It's a little after ten-thirty. About somewhere between there and eleven. I'm sitting here with Nate Janssen at Golden Oaks Farm outside of Wauconda, Illinois. How are you doing today, Nate?

Janssen: Great, great. Thanks for coming today.

Maniscalco: Oh, it's great to be here. Why don't we start out with talking about where were you born.

Janssen: Okay. I was actually born in upstate New York near Syracuse. I was born May 27, 1974, so thirty-three going on thirty-four.

Maniscalco: Great. Now do you have your immediate family around here?

Janssen: Yes. A lot of my immediate family is around here. Actually my father is one of the other managers on the farm here at Golden Oaks. My mother works with the daycare program at the local school. And I have one brother who is married with two kids that is a veterinarian that lives in southeast Wisconsin about an hour from here. And then I have a sister who is younger that runs a floral department in a Jewel grocery store about half an hour south of here.

Maniscalco: Great. Now you said you grew up in New York. So how did your family get to this area?

Janssen: Well, actually the move to Illinois came about when my father was hired originally as the manager here, which was in the fall of 1989.

Maniscalco: Okay. So basically the entire family picked up in 1989 and moved over here to Illinois and everybody grew up here since then.

Janssen: That's correct.

Maniscalco: Great. What about your grandparents? Where are they?

Janssen: Both my mother and father's parents are in Iowa. My mom's parents are both still alive. My dad's parents, my grandfather did just pass away not so long ago, but my grandmother on his side is doing well and nearing ninety years old. So they've lived a really good life out there, and it's pretty enjoyable when I can get out there and see them.

Maniscalco: Now has your family primarily been involved in agriculture?

Janssen: For the most part. My dad has always kinda acted as a manager for some farms. And there was a short stint where we did own our own farm. So growing up in upstate New York and then with the move out here our family has always been around dairy cattle and farming.

Maniscalco: What about any other relatives around here? Do you have any beyond the immediate family?

Janssen: Most of my aunts and uncles and cousins live in Iowa. So most of the family does live in Iowa. So it was nice when we moved from New York to Illinois that we geographically became much closer to them. So we are able to get out there and visit them much more often.

Maniscalco: Yeah. Now are they all involved with agriculture? Pretty much the entire family?

Janssen: Some of them are and some of them aren't. We're probably the main part of the family that really focuses on agriculture as our lifestyle and our livelihood.

Maniscalco: So that's gone back now through your grandparents as well?

Janssen: Yeah. Well, my dad became interested in the farm because his parents had a farm, and they had more than just dairy. They had a few cows. They had a few pigs. They had a few beef cows. And later on in his life my grandfather became a feed salesman for Moorman's Feeds. But when my dad graduated from college he wanted to stay involved in agriculture. So he actually started as a field representative for the Holstein Association but shortly after that decided that he wanted to get back into the production side of it.

Maniscalco: Very interesting. Now tell us about your childhood in New York. You said you grew up in New York. What sorts of things did you do? What a kid were you?

Janssen: Well, to be quite honest with you, most of my interests were involving or involved the farm, working on the farm, showing cows, being involved in 4-H projects, and my other main interest was sports just like every other boy probably. So most of the time I was either playing sports or working with the cows. And when I moved out here to Illinois I was a sophomore in high school. So I continued having interest in the farm. But while I was growing up in New York State it was always a dream of mine to attend Cornell University. So I did end up going back to upstate New York for my college degree. And when I was done with college I actually started my professional career in New York as well.

Maniscalco: That's cool. So now you said something about being involved in 4-H. What sorts of things did you do in 4-H?

Janssen: Well, a lot of it involved showing cows at local county fairs. Got very interested in judging or appraising cattle. So we went around a lot of those contests every summer. There's also what's called a dairy quiz bowl which basically gets kids involved in learning about the dairy industry basically through a quiz contest kinda that pits you against another team from either another local area or another state or something like that.

Maniscalco: That's cool. Now what about the sports? What sports did you play?

Janssen: I was mostly involved with tennis and basketball. Basketball I started playing when I was a little kid and was always the favorite sport of mine. Odd for a farm boy to pick up tennis, but I did when I was in seventh grade. And I played tennis all throughout high school. And I actually ended up being much better at tennis than I was at basketball.

Maniscalco: Really? Did you go to any tournaments?

Janssen: Well, while I was in high school I actually played on the varsity team and was the top conference player as a senior. So I did go to the state tournament. Didn't fare so well down there. But it was a nice experience to get down there.

Maniscalco: That's cool. That's really cool. Now what about your friends during those times? You lived on a farm. Now was the farm out in the country?

Janssen: It was. It was not too far away from town. But for the most part the different farms that we lived on were out in the country. So most of the friends I grew up with really were other kids that were involved in 4-H and doing the dairy projects that I discussed before. And that kind of changed a little bit when I came out here because this is not a heavy dairy area or a heavy ag

area anymore. Used to be, but it's not really anymore, we're pretty close to Chicago. So that changed a little bit. When I went back to college in New York I actually kind of reunited with some of those childhood friends and became closer friends in college. And most of my friends from that experience were involved in ag in one way or another. So really that's where a lot of my best friendships came from.

Maniscalco: So growing up on a farm in New York and then spending some of your childhood on a farm in Illinois, what are some of the big differences, I guess, between being on a farm in Illinois and New York?

Janssen: Well, I don't know, you know, that there's a lot of difference between specifically being on the farm. Now I will say my experiences like I talked about in New York were a little more out in the country. We're pretty close to the city here. So that's where the big difference lies. Out in the country there's several farms out there. You can go down the road and borrow something from your neighbor if you need to. Really don't have that kind of situation here. So I guess with a farm being involved in this area, you know, it might have a few drawbacks because the dairy services are harder to get to, there's a lot more traffic. But there's also quite a few positives in fact to being close to a suburban area. I think we can educate the public a lot more. There's a lot more public to educate. With our genetics business we're pretty close to O'Hare International Airport, so when international visitors come in they have a chance to stop here, particularly on their way up to Wisconsin if they're visiting some folks up there. You know, so the big difference is really in the specific locale of the farm. There might be some differences within the industries. Upstate New York is a pretty populated dairy area. They're one of the top states for milk production. Illinois is not really. We're in the middle, about the twentieth, twenty-first ranked state for milk production. So a lot more crops grown for grain out here than crops to feed dairy cows, so there's some of your difference between the two states.

Maniscalco: Now you just mentioned something I want to ask you about, and that's international visitors. Do you have a lot of international visitors that come into the farm here?

Janssen: We do, we do, and that's based primarily around our genetics business. One of the things we focus on at the farm is expanding on our purebred genetics in the Holstein industry both with black-and-whites and red-and-whites. And we have several markets overseas, whether it be selling—well, right now it's really selling embryos overseas. And we've sold embryos to pretty much every country in Europe, we've sold embryos to Japan, South America, Argentina, or other places in South America like Argentina and Brazil and places like that. So particularly around World Dairy Expo time, which is in October, which is in Madison, Wisconsin just two hours away up Route 12, we attract a lot of visitors at that point. And they'll come to the farm and they will inquire about our genetics. And if something fits their needs that we have available then we're able to work with them.

And it's kind of interesting right now that the US economy—some people are fearing the recession and the value of our dollar is pretty weak. We can talk about this in a little more detail. But actually the dollar being weak has turned out to be—I don't know if lucrative is the right term, but it's put agriculture in a little bit of a better situation because our product has more value to people that are buying it. So there's a lot more interest for embryos right now. There's a lot more interest for milk and the byproducts of milk going overseas. So as a producer in the United States we can't just look domestically. We got to supply what we need

domestically, but we have to look globally too. And I think we're kinda set up to be one of the major suppliers in the whole world.

Maniscalco: Wow. That's very interesting, and I would like to come back to that even more. But let's kinda talk a little bit about your farming career. You mentioned you went to Cornell University. What did you go to the university for?

Janssen: I went for animal science. And when I first started I had some ambitions of being a veterinarian and I took biology the first semester and decided that maybe wasn't for me. So I kinda switched out of that and focused more on taking classes and trying to find a career in the industry. At the time I really wasn't particularly interested in production agriculture, but I wanted to be involved in the dairy industry. So when I graduated from college I took a job with Cargill, their animal nutrition division, and I basically— a two-tiered job. One part involved selling the feed to farmers and the other part involved with that feed balancing rations for them. So we were set up as a value-added situation where you're not, you know, just buying our feed, you're buying our service. And so that's what I did for about a year and a half in upstate New York. And then I actually moved all the way out to western Washington north of Seattle, actually closer to Vancouver than Seattle, and did the same thing for about a year in western Washington State. And while I was in the last three to four months of doing it out there I kind of told myself that I wanted to try to get back into the production side of it to actually be on a farm and work on a farm on a day-to-day basis and kinda cut down on the travel and that sort of thing. But my experiences with being on so many different farms along the way I thought could help me, you know, in trying to put myself in a position to get back onto the production side of it.

So what happened toward the end of my stay in Washington is that the folks at Golden Oaks here, the owners, decided that they wanted to try to make the farm a little more efficient. And the way to do that was kind of to grow into the land base that they had. So when I was initially hired, the first big project that I had was to kind of oversee the initial growth of the farm and eventually get it to the stage where it is today, and essentially since that time just grown into the position I'm in today. If we were to put a title on it I guess I'm called the dairy operations manager here at the farm. And more or less kind of see the day-to-day activity on the dairy here itself.

Maniscalco: Very interesting. Now you brought us up to the time when you're here at the farm. You mentioned the folks at the farm. I'm wondering, can you tell us a little bit about the history of this farm.

Janssen: Absolutely, absolutely. Golden Oaks Farm here was established in 1948, and it's owned by the Crown family. They're a family that have many entities. They work out of the city of Chicago. When it first started here there was about fifty cows and 300 acres. And it's grown to the size it is today where we have about 700 adult cows and 550 young stock and about 1,500 acres that we actually crop. And then we rent out some other acres as well. And they've always been interested in agriculture. Always been interested in the purebred genetics. It's a little bit of a different situation because none of the family members live on the farm here. And we meet with them about once every month and we meet with them out here two or three times a year. So it's interesting that it's a situation that works well that they've trusted us and our employees to run the facility and the farm the way they'd want it to be run. And I really commend them for keeping agriculture in this area. Because they could very easily sell this land for a lot of

money, or turn it into a housing development or a golf course or whatever. So I'm really proud of the fact that they're very interested in keeping agriculture here in Lake County.

Maniscalco: Why do you think they're keeping agriculture here?

Janssen: Because they have a love for it, even though they're not here on a day-to-day basis. They're very interested in it. You can carry on a conversation with them just like we're having right now and they'll know exactly what's going on on the farm even though they're not here. So they're very interested in having the land base and the farm here, and also working with the genetics that we talked about as well.

Maniscalco: Speaking about the farm, can you give us the layout? You gave us the acreage and stuff like that. But can you kind of describe it?

Janssen: Sure. Well, I'd say we're a relatively modern facility at this point. The farm as it is right now we expanded and built in 2002. And we're actually right at the six-year anniversary of when we started milking in this facility. We have two barns for the adult milking cows, and right now we're milking about 625 cows. And these facilities also hold the cows that are about ready to give birth, have their babies. And we have a milking parlor that's called a double twelve parlor, which means there can be twelve cows on each side. We can milk twenty-four cows at one time. So that's here on this main site.

The office we're sitting in is attached to the milking parlor. Since we got quite a bit bigger we kind of wanted to expand our office facilities as well. And then we utilize some of the old farm for heifer raising, for keeping equipment and that sort of thing. And then we have two spots that are off site of the main spot here, but they're only a couple miles away, that we keep some other animals as well. And then also involved on the farm here is a separate enterprise that we can get into, I'd like to talk a little more detail in at some point, is the Midwest Organics Recycling. We started a composting business about four years ago. And that has expanded pretty rapidly. And it's a really interesting business. And it's a situation where it allows us to do a lot of things. We can take some of our manure out there to be composted and then landscapers can send—we can recycle their waste. They bring their waste in, turn it into compost, and that compost is either getting resold back to the landscapers or we're utilizing it as fertilizer here on the farm. So it's another interesting business that we've started here in the last few years that we're pretty happy with.

Maniscalco: That's very interesting, and we'll come back to it. Now you mentioned crops and that you do harvest some crops around here. What sorts of things are you growing?

Janssen: Well, we predominantly grow crops for the needs of the cows. So we grow about 800 acres of corn every year, and that corn will get utilized as either corn silage or high-moisture shell corn through the cows. If we do have some extra we do have some grain bins and a little capacity to store some whole corn grain to sell at market. We also grow alfalfa on the farm. About typically between four and five hundred acres of alfalfa. We grow a little bit of wheat and then we sell the wheat and use what's left of the plant for our straw needs. And this year we're actually growing soybeans for the first time since I've been here anyway, and this is not a great area of the state to grow soybeans, but in trying to find a way to be a little more efficient with our feeding strategy, soybeans are very expensive out there right now, and so we thought that we would try growing some and processing them ourselves to see if that would be a little bit more efficient and a little cheaper than buying soybean on the market.

Maniscalco: Now are you rotating those crops?

Janssen: We do rotate those crops on a fairly regular basis, yes.

Maniscalco: What about fertilizers and things like that? Are you using fertilizers?

Janssen: Most of our fertilizer needs are taken care of with our own manure. Besides the composting operation, obviously our cows generate manure. We have a storage facility where we store that manure and then either two or three times a year we hire specialists to come in and they will knive it into the ground to fertilize our fields. And we kind of coordinate that with a crop production service here in Richmond that calculates what the fertilizer needs are for the specific fields. And we coordinate that with the people we hire to spread the manure. And just to step back a little bit, because I'm talking about some people we hire, we actually also hire people to plant and harvest our crops. Because we really wanted to focus on working with the cows and working with the dairy, and we have not invested in all the equipment that it would take to plant and harvest all the crops that we utilize every year. So we do hire, we do contract out the crops to be done as well.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. That's good to know. So do you know if the people that you've contracted to, have they had problems with insects, and do they deal with those sorts of things?

Janssen: That's our responsibility for the crops. Again crop production service kind of monitors that for us and if they feel there's a need to prohibit the insects on the fields then they'll work with us on that.

Maniscalco: And what sorts of things will you do to take care of that?

Janssen: They will use some sort of approved insecticide to spray on the fields.

Maniscalco: Now this is an incredibly wet year.

Janssen: It has been so far.

Maniscalco: How about drainage and things on the farm?

Janssen: Well, to be quite honest with you we kind of play to the mercy of the weather gods, you might say. We don't do any irrigation when it's dry. For the most part we have had to do a little bit of tiling and draining in certain situations this spring. For the most part we kind of go with the weather pattern. So we have not been able to plant much corn yet, like you probably heard throughout the state. The whole state is kind of behind on that right now. But hopefully things will turn around. We have had pretty fortunate crop growing situation at least in this part of the state in the last couple years, so we have had the ability to grow some good crops and good quantities of crops. So we do have some left over from last year and within our whole game plan we always try to make extra so that if a real wet year or a real dry year comes about we'll be okay.

Maniscalco: Let's move on to what you said is your focus here on the farm, which is the cows. Can you tell us about the different breeds that you have here on the farm?

Janssen: Sure. Most all of our cows, I would say 99 percent of them, are Holsteins. Now we do have both black-and-white and red-and-white Holsteins. And I would say about probably 85 percent of the Holsteins are black-and-white. We have a couple Brown Swiss cows.

Maniscalco: Now why just a couple Brown Swiss?

Janssen: Well, to be quite honest with you, the Brown Swiss are kind of a favorite of a couple of the employees and so the employees have a few cattle here, and that's why the Brown Swiss are here.

Maniscalco: So I guess basically you focus pretty much on Holsteins. Can you tell us why you're focusing so much on Holsteins over any other?

Janssen: Well, we feel to us they have the most value. They're the highest producing breed. And the way we're set up here we think we can utilize their genetics and their potential to produce milk better than the other breeds.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned that there's three different spots on the farm. And you mentioned one other spot on the farm here that has other livestock. Are there other types of animal? Or they're cattle?

Janssen: There's no other livestock besides dairy animals here. We do have some of the young stock at two other facilities close to the farm here.

Maniscalco: So now what about housing? Are the cattle out in pasture sometimes? Are they in barns all the time?

Janssen: It depends a little bit on the age of the animal and the time of year. The cows that are in production, the cows that are getting milked, are inside. Because we have to be able to feed them and bring them up to get milked three times a day. We obviously try to make them as comfortable as possible inside the barn. And if we go out and about you'll see that they lay on mattresses and there's standing on top of the mattresses and that sort of thing. When they're preparing for their next calving we do get them out on pasture so that they can have a little more exercise and maintain themselves and get ready for that. We have the young stock in several different facilities. And the young baby calves are in a home of their own. But as they get older and start getting grouped up they'll get moved to a pen of differing amounts of animals depending on what age they are. But a lot of the young stock have the opportunity to go outside at some point in their lives as they grow up.

Maniscalco: Now you've mentioned a couple of times—what about the genetics program that you're running here?

Janssen: Well, like I said, one of the owners' interests at the farm is to kind of maintain the genetics here. So what we do there is we try to identify some of the top cows in the herd, and we work with them through what's called a flushing program or superovulation to try to capture their genetics. And then once embryos are made from the superovulation we are flexible or have the opportunity to do different things with them. We can sell the embryos, which I talked about already, or we can put the embryos in basically a surrogate mother or a recipient mother, and they'll have the calf for us. And then they'll either make a female or a male. The females have a lot of value, will either have a lot of value to us or they may have a lot of value to somebody else, so we might sell a live female in a consignment sale. The bulls might have some value to us in that we can market them to artificial insemination stud that will then be able to market their genetics from there. And we're always keeping tabs on the industry as far as other animals out there from other farms that we might be interested in bringing into our program and working with. So we subscribe to a lot of different magazines. We advertise all the time our genetics. We advertise our genetics on a website and in several different monthly magazines. And then there's some word of mouth involved with it as well. And it's kind of the

neat thing on the farm that we do and through that we get involved with some sales and we get involved with showing some animals. And those are some of the nice things for some of the employees to kind of get away from the day-to-day routine of things a little bit to have the opportunity to work with that as well.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned you go out and you seek out the different cattle that have something that's special I guess you would say. What are some of the criteria that you're looking for?

Janssen: Well, when we're looking for something that we want to work with, it's really the potential of that animal. And the potential of that animal is measured through their ancestry and how their ancestors have performed, whether it be the dam, the mother, or the sire, the male. We evaluate the particular animal on the production aspect of it themselves. Are they a good producer of milk or protein or fat? And do they have the potential to go along with that? And then some of the animals already have females or males on the ground that have maybe performed well already. So we'd go back to the donor of those animals and maybe look at them. And then there's a type or a phenotypic appearance aspect to it. The cow has got to look good. She's got to have the traits that will allow her to thrive in a production environment. So she's got to have a nice sound udder. She's got to have nice sound feet and legs for mobility. And so those are some of the things we look at when we go out and look to buy one.

Maniscalco: Now who's doing the genetics stuff of taking the eggs or the sperm and things like that?

Janssen: There's a veterinarian specialist. For us it's Sunshine Genetics that does the work for us. They're located up in Wisconsin. But they specialize in embryo transfer. And so they will come down here and do those procedures for us.

Maniscalco: Now in terms of markets and milk and everything else, how has the milk market been for the farm so far?

Janssen: Well, the milk market can be pretty cyclical. In '06 it wasn't too good. '07 it was much better. And in '08 it has been relatively good so far. The thing to realize is that the whole dairy environment has changed. With ethanol coming on board, with the growing needs for feed around the world, a lot of the input costs have gone up as well along with a more favorable milk price. So the way that we manage has actually shifted a little bit because we're working with higher revenue but higher costs as well. But our milk market has been pretty good. We actually sell our market to Grande Cheese, which is actually a privately owned processor in Wisconsin. And their specialty is making higher-end Italian cheese that they will sell to higher-end restaurants, particularly pizzerias. So our milk actually goes to a plant. That for the most part gets converted into cheese for pizza. It's kind of interesting in their last newsletter the six top-rated pizzerias in southeast Wisconsin use Grande Cheese. So we're happy to be affiliated with them and selling our milk to them. So that's been a good market for us from the milk side.

Maniscalco: So all of your milk goes to making cheese then?

Janssen: Most all of it. They may sell our milk to somebody else for fluid consumption. But all of our milk goes to one of their plants. And then like I said most of the milk at their plant will go into cheese production.

Maniscalco: Now has it always been that way for this farm?

Janssen: It has not always been that way actually. We just made that switch. It was just a little over a year ago that we made that switch. And before we were with a cooperative. And obviously a

cooperative has its benefits. But when it comes down to it we are a business and basically what it came down to was that Grande Cheese at the time was offering us more for our milk. So there's obviously a lot to be said for relationships with vendors and who you supply your milk to. But at the same time we have to do what's best for us and best for our owners. So we made that decision at that point.

Maniscalco: Let's talk about one other thing. How are you keeping these cows healthy? That's got to be a huge task.

Janssen: Well, keeping the cows healthy is really the most important job we do here on the farm besides actually milking them probably. And there's several things that go into that. Cow comfort starts in their environment. So like I talked about having a comfortable place for them to lay is vital. Keeping their environment clean, keeping the air moving, keeping them out of inclement weather. They're a cold-blooded animal, so they like the winter a lot better than they like the summer as long as you keep the fierce wind off them. So in the summer you'll see fans running out here. You'll see sprinklers running out here to help keep them cool.

Another vital part of it is the feed. We have a nutritionist that works for us and he takes our feeds and he takes the analysis of our feeds and matches them with purchased feeds that we buy. So we know exactly how much a cow is eating in total, but how much protein she's getting, how much vitamin E she's getting, how much selenium she's getting, and just everything that'll help keep the cows healthy. And then how we handle and work with the cows is really the other cog to that.

We have a couple herdsmen who basically specialize in working with the cows all day. So every morning we're looking for any illnesses that a cow might come up with. And if one does pop up we know how to appropriately treat it. And if it's one that we don't think we can appropriately treat on our own then we obviously call a veterinarian to come down and help us.

Milking routine is very vital. We have a specific routine, the way the cows are handled and milked in the parlor, because we obviously want to try to sell the highest-quality product we can to the consumer. So it's very important that the procedures in the parlor are followed appropriately. Then all that together goes into keeping the cows healthy. And if we keep the cows healthy they're going to produce milk for us and they're going to live for a long time and they'll continue to be an efficient entity on the farm.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned a specific routine to milking. Can you explain what that routine is?

Janssen: Sure. I mentioned before that we have a double twelve parlor and we typically have two people in the parlor. And what we do is we work in groups of six cows. So one milker will physically strip on the udder to check the milk to make sure that the milk looks the way it's supposed to. And then they put a disinfectant on the udder. And when they do that with six cows they'll come back to the first cow. We use a washcloth to wipe off that disinfectant, get everything off the udder so it's nice and clean. And we only use one towel per cow. And then they put the unit on. And the cow gets milked. And then we go to the next cow, towel off the disinfectant, put the unit on. And then that happens for six cows. And then they can start on the next group of six cows. But with two people in there, typically working on one side, they're kind of at the same time working on their own groups of six cows.

But we've had several specialists come in and take a look at that procedure, and they think that's the best for us as far as not only keeping the cows healthy but actually getting them

to milk out in an efficient way, the fastest way possible, so that we can keep things moving in there. Because we do have 625 cows to milk three times a day, so we want to keep things moving.

Maniscalco: That's a lot of cows. How do you get through all those cows?

Janssen: Well, with that routine each milking takes roughly six to six and a half hours. So that allows us the time to set up at the beginning and appropriately clean everything at the end between milkings. But pretty much there's something going on in the parlor twenty-four hours a day.

Maniscalco: Wow. So what times do the milkings start?

Janssen: Well, our first milking typically starts right around four in the morning. And our second milking is typically around noontime. So they're getting pretty close to firing up the second milking. And then at eight o'clock tonight we'll have our third milking.

Maniscalco: Now you've mentioned earlier about the Midwest Recycling. Can you tell us a little bit more about the Midwest Recycling project?

Janssen: Sure, sure. Well, again, it was something the owners thought was a way that they could utilize the land and put together a recycling operation here. And to step back, it's one of the things that's become very important in agriculture today. You hear the word sustainability. Basically means that we need to efficiently use all the resources we have the most efficient way to put an end product in front of the consumer, whether it be milk or cereal from wheat or whatever. Recycling is a big part of that, and we try to do as much recycling as we can on the farm.

And so we kind of did a little research. Can we take some of our manure and make it into compost and recycle it? And at the same time doing some research in the community we kind of found out that there was a large group of landscapers out there, and those landscapers didn't have an efficient way to get rid of the lawn clippings, the branches, that sort of thing. They didn't really have a place to go with them. So (excuse me for a second. Let me turn that phone down.) Okay. So when we first started, the biggest thing was letting the landscapers come in with their waste and mix a little manure with it, make the compost, and then use that compost on the fields.

And over time that market has grown tremendously to the point where last year they took in 50,000 yards of landscape waste in one year. And it's going to be more than that this year. And they've gotten to the point this year where they're able to move pretty much all the compost that they make. So it's really evolved over the last four years. I'd love to take you guys out to take a look at it. It really does involve quite a bit, but it's a relatively efficient operation. There's three people that work out there, and more or less it involves bringing the waste in. The waste goes through a screener—or not a screener, but goes through kind of a chopper. Chop the product up. Put the compost out in windrows and let it heat up to the appropriate temperatures and kill off the bacteria that it needs to and let the bacteria grow that it needs to. And once a pile is ready they take the pile and it goes through a screener and then the end product is ready to go.

So it's really a pretty fascinating niche for us here at the farm. And I think it's an industry where a lot of other dairy farmers or a lot of other farmers, if they do the research and look into it and they do it in the right way, I think it's an industry within agriculture that can grow quite a bit.

Maniscalco: That sounds really interesting. I'm sure we'd like to go see that later. Now you've mentioned a few times through talking about all the different things here—and I've been seeing people coming in and out—and that's hired hands on the farm. How many people do you have that work here?

Janssen: Well, we have fourteen full-time people that work here on the farm. Typically between fourteen and fifteen. And then there's three people that work with the composting operation. Six of those people are milkers because we have three shifts of two milkers. And we have a full-time feeder. We have one guy that works predominantly outside. Since we don't do a lot of our crops, we don't have a big crew for that. And then we have people that specifically work with the cows. And my dad and myself and an office manager. And that kind of rounds it out. I mentioned to you before we sat down here that one of the things we do—and you can see it behind us here—is that we work with a program that was established by the family to work with interns here at the farm. So every summer we have at least one intern that comes to the farm here. They live here. We pay them kind of a modest wage. And they get to experience being here on the farm. And hopefully they're learning something from us. And most of the time we're learning something from them too. And then at the end of a successful internship we pay them a scholarship in the amount of 3,500 dollars to go towards their tuition for the next year. So everybody that's behind us here has gone through that program.

And it started out as kind of a Midwestern. Most of the first students came from Illinois, Iowa State, Minnesota. And in fact one of the first interns we had here is one of our herdsmen on the farm, Ethan Heinzmann. Since then it's expanded a little bit. We've had students from Ohio State. We've had a student from Cornell. Three days from now a student from Penn State University is going to start. It'll be our first experience working with them. So it's a really nice program that we're really proud of. And we get a lot of applicants each year and it gets tougher and tougher each year to select a student to come work here.

And then one of the things we've started a little bit over the last few years is also having international trainees come to work on the farm. And we currently have a young man from Germany, Christian Schlottke, who just started working here a couple weeks ago. And he'll be with us through the fall. And he's working with a program where through his school he's wanted to get out there and have a large animal experience. He's from a dairy farm at home. They have cows and pigs and they also do some vocational teaching from their farm as well. And he kind of wanted to come over to the United States and see how it's done here and in doing so maybe try to decide whether he wants to go back home and go into the dairy part of it or focus more on the pigs. So we're one part of several different internships that he'll take. But we love working with those guys because it's nice to get some culture, nice to learn how they do things in a different part of the world. It's a pretty neat experience.

Maniscalco: I've kind of made a little observation that you have a pretty diverse workforce. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Janssen: Yes. We do have a lot of Hispanics on the farm. Actually all six of our milkers are Hispanic and our night person is Hispanic. And they do a really nice job for us. They don't have a lot of dairy experience when they come here, but they're quick learners and they're hard workers. And they do a really nice job for us. And we do have an opportunity where we have some people around. A couple of those employees are bilingual so that we can do training sessions and we can work with all the Hispanic employees. That's one thing. I know a little bit. I need

to get a lot better yet. But we're proud to have them here, and if you look at the board behind us, that's some of the accomplishments of the farm as far as production per cow and that sort of thing. Actually graphs are labeled in Spanish so that they can observe them and know how the farm is performing and not just think that they're doing a job and getting paid. So that they can see how everything is going. And they actually receive a bonus based on the quality of our milk. So that's posted up there too. So that keeps them involved with what's going on.

Some of the other people that work here, some of them went to college for agriculture. Some of them were maybe guys that maybe didn't necessarily go to college but have been around ag all their life and have been able to learn pretty quickly the necessary steps to work here on the farm. So we do have a nice diverse group, and I think that's good for the farm. People can learn other cultures and that sort of thing. And so we're pretty happy that it works out that way.

Maniscalco: That's really interesting. That's great. For you, what are some of the pleasures of farming? What's making you get up every day and come out here and do this?

Janssen: Well, for me, and I think it's this way for most of the employees, I think it really comes down to three things. And actually those three things are kind of incorporated into our mission statement that actually hangs on the wall in a couple spots here. One of them is that we want to efficiently produce high-quality milk for the consumer. That's obviously the big goal on the farm. And if you weren't interested in doing that then it would be hard to have a place here. The second thing is our involvement in genetics, trying to be at least a player in that area, keeping involved in it, being able to market animals, show animals, sell animals, that sort of thing. And the other thing that I think that this farm really—I don't know if I'd say it has an advantage over other farms, but certainly our location enables us to do a lot of is communicate with the public. More and more these days I feel dairy farmers, they need to educate the public on exactly what they're doing, exactly how the milk that is produced is getting to the glass that they're drinking at home every night for dinner. So some of the school tours that we do here, we've had a bunch of them here in the last week, actually a couple of 'em today, I think is pretty neat, just to get people to understand what happens here and to be involved with something that's relatively large in their community. That being in a suburban community they're not thinking about farms being here. So it's nice to have the opportunity to educate those people.

Maniscalco: Now you have a lot of people that are working here and there's a big community around here. What about family life and the families of the workers? And do the families get to come to the farm much?

Janssen: They come to the farm occasionally. Obviously we want our employees to have a life outside of the farm. So we try to structure ourselves in a way that allows them to have time to spend with their families. A couple things that we do here for the families, one of them is every year in June—it's actually coming up in about a month—the family downtown, the people that are involved with the ownership of the farm, they put on a picnic here at the farm for employees and families of employees of all their different entities. And obviously we're one of those. So that's a situation where all the employees invite their family and friends to come to the farm and have a fun day at the farm. And we also may not necessarily have all the family members here, but at Thanksgiving time we have a dinner with all the employees that's catered. At

Christmastime we have a dinner with all the employees that's catered. Just so that we can keep them involved with what's going on on the farm.

Maniscalco: That's really cool. Now to keep family involved, your father also works here and you're working here. How is it working with your father on the farm?

Janssen: Well, it's an interesting relationship in that we're not a father-son owner-operator, we're a father-son management team for another owner. But since we've grown up around it together forever, he taught me everything really that I know growing up, so it actually works out pretty well. We have a little bit of a different focus on the farm. I guess he's a little more broad, oversees the crops and hiring the people to do that and hiring the people to fertilize the fields, you know, kind of a lot of general stuff on the farm. And I focus more specifically on the day-to-day with the employees and what's going on here. Obviously there's some intertwining of our jobs and there's a lot of time that we have to discuss what's going on. And we tag-team the whole genetics part of it a little bit. We work it out so he goes to some sales and I go to other sales. And so that way we're able to work it out pretty well. So there's always going to be disagreements on the way things can be done, but we have a pretty good way of working through those. But like I said, we got to realize that we're making a decision for somebody else and not ourselves. So we just have to make sure that we're cognizant of that and making the decision in that way.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. Now how about your neighbors and the town around here? We are in a suburban area, and I wouldn't say it's a real common thing to have such a large farm in a suburban area like this. How are your neighbors around here?

Janssen: We have a pretty good relationship with our neighbors I think. And what helps a lot of that is having the tours here, having the public come in. So we do have a nice relationship with the schools. The other thing is that since we are relatively large, even though we're not in a dairy area per se, we still need suppliers, we still need vendors. So when it comes to things like excavation or buying materials or buying fence or anything, some small things that we might need around here, we have to rely on the community for those items. So we've actually kind of grown into the community a little bit in that some of our really close neighbors are people that work around the farm all the time. And, you know, those relationships are important to have. We actually have a pretty good relationship with the sheriff's department because we are a relatively big farm. We're in a suburban area. Not going to see everything that happens. So they help us monitor what's going on here. We have a couple construction guys that help us out all the time when we need some things fixed, and they're the type of guys that if we need extra hands during crop season for something they'll jump right in and do it as well.

So establishing a relationship with the neighbors is pretty important. And one of the other things that kind of helps that is for example on a couple days of the year that the people are out spreading manure, we're obviously—by knifing the manure into the ground we take away a lot of the odor, but when they're mixing the manure before, and the wind catches it the wrong way, it's going to smell like a farm, and it might get out a little bit. But, you know, we've had local people like from the health board and the chamber of commerce and all that stuff come out here, see how we do it, know that we're doing it in the appropriate way, so that if somebody does call and kind of wonder what's going on they actually help us out to answer some of those questions.

So building those relationships has really allowed us to really stay here where we're at.

Maniscalco: Now you've seen a lot of change, I imagine, in agriculture, and especially in dairy farming. Can you talk a little bit about some of the more prevalent changes that come to your mind now?

Janssen: Well, certainly within the industry automation and technology has improved the efficiency of what we do. Obviously it starts out with the milk. And you don't see too many people that milk by hand anymore. And there's different stages of technology that go along with milking. But there's always new technology along the way as far as housing cows, ventilating barns, new equipment, new ways of working in the fields. Like working with GPS and all that sort of thing.

And so adopting that technology is important as long as it fits into your operation and is economically feasible I guess. So that's always one of the challenges as a manager, and what we're doing here, is there are technologies out there that we can bring in that are going to improve our efficiencies on the farm. And I'll give you an example of something that we have done in the last couple years. I mentioned that our cows lay on sand. That's only been within the last year. Before that they were on a mattress in sawdust. And we weren't completely satisfied with the comfort of our cows. Sawdust was costing a lot of money. And we knew that sand was probably the best way for our cows to stay comfortable. Sand, however, is very hard to move. It's not completely easy to get. And it can wear out equipment pretty fast. So we came up with a system where we actually—our manure goes into a facility and then the sand gets separated away from the manure and we reuse that sand in the barn. So the sand is completely washed away from the manure and we reuse that sand in the barn. We reclaim about 85 percent of our sand, which obviously drastically reduces the cost of buying sand and bedding the cows. But it's also improved efficiencies on the farm. It's improved milk production. It's improved udder health. It's improved reproductive performance. It's improved the mobility of the cows. Some of those are very measurable and you can put a dollar value to them. Some of them are not as measurable and you have to put an indirect value to them. But we think it's a system. We're crunching some of those numbers right now because we're right at a year. Originally we thought it was a system that was going to kind of have a 2.2-year payback. It's looking right now that it could end up being less than that.

So that's just an example of the technologies out there. Does it work for us? Is it going to make us a more efficient place to milk cows?

Maniscalco: What do you do when you see a new technology that's coming out? Technology is always changing at a very fast pace. How do you sit down and evaluate something like that and say is this going to work for us or not?

Janssen: Well, a lot of it involves seeing it work at other farms. And that might be where we have a little bit of disadvantage, because we're not going to be able to hop in the truck and drive half-hour from here and see a lot of these technologies. So we do have to get out a little bit to look at them. You obviously have to have some trust in the people that are selling you the technology. And it might be a situation where you've bought something else from them before and you have trusted them. So you can trust their technology. But the economic feasibility of it is really the most important part, because again we're not buying it for ourselves, we're buying it for the owners of the farm. So we need to present to them, and we go through this. Every time it's a big item we go through a presentation. We have multiple quotes. And we say hey, we really

think this is something that's going to work here at Golden Oaks. But it's going to cost such-and-such. We think we'll have the return in such-and-such time. What do you think?

And that's kind of the process we go through. And some of the technologies get approved and some of them don't. And we go forward from there.

Maniscalco: Now to kind of wrap this up and everything, what do you see the future of farming is going to be?

Janssen: I think farming has a tremendous future yet. Like I talked about in the first part of the interview, I think the United States has positioned itself to be a real dominant player on the world market supplying milk and milk products, supplying grains to feed the world. It was interesting, I did a little piece for the NBC Nightly News a few months ago, and that was about exporting dairy products and how that's become pretty prevalent for us. Can we stop for just one second? Hey, Susie, how are you? Good. Good to see you. Well, we're just finishing up. So we might be going out and about to walk around a little bit. So we've talked about the genetics stuff and that sort of thing.

Gary Janssen: Susie actually represents American Breeders Service, which is an AI organization, artificial insemination organization, that buys and tests and distributes bull semen.

Janssen: Distributes genetics, that's the way to say it. Especially when you have the kids out there. You say distributes genetics.

Susie: Picking up a bull next week. He's all ready to go.

Janssen: Right. He's all ready to go. So all right. So you guys will be out and about a little bit. Okay. You got the paper with the ones to look at and whatever other ones. Okay. All right. Great. All right. Thanks. Thanks for that.

Maniscalco: Is that your father?

Janssen: That was my father, yeah, and like he said, Susie is actually here to—she's interested in buying bulls, so buying our genetics. So let's step back. What were we talking about? Oh, exporting. Okay. So the idea around that piece was going back to the weak dollar. And exporting in ag is benefiting from that. And it was kind of interesting to learn while I was preparing for that piece a little bit that countries like China, Russia, India that are becoming more economically stable have a little more money to spend, are pretty interested in some of the byproducts we make, particularly like from whey and protein bars, baby formula, you know, that sort of thing. As they have a little more disposable income they're buying a lot more of that stuff. And that's where a lot of our exporting is going to. So to get back to where do I see ag going, it's going to continue to evolve. I think the US is going to be a huge player because I think we're set up in a way that we can efficiently support the world's food needs.

Maniscalco: Very interesting. That's good. I have one more question for you. The last question that we usually finish up with. This is going to be an oral history interview that'll be kept for hopefully eternity. And one day down the road one of your great-great-grandkids might run across this and say hey there's Grandpa Nate's interview that he did a long long long time ago. Is there something you'd want to put in this interview for them?

Janssen: Well, I hope my great-grandkids at that time are still involved in agriculture. And I hope agriculture still has a place at that point and still has a place here in the Midwest somewhere

for them. And that would be the biggest thing, is that I hope at some point that they'll be involved in it as well.

Maniscalco: Great. Well, thank you very much, Nate. Great time interviewing you.

Janssen: Thank you very much.