

Opportunities abound for women in agriculture in North Dakota

Generational shifts, markets, interest in regenerative practices drive shift

By Michael Standaert
North Dakota News Cooperative

While a little over a century ago women obtained the right to vote in North Dakota, it took decades more to be treated as equals at traditionally male occupations like agriculture.

Today, around one-third of agriculture operations in the US are operated by women. Opportunities to lead agribusinesses and farming operations continue to grow, particularly as Baby Boomer farmers retire or pass away.

More than half of graduates of agricultural science programs are now women, a shift starting over a decade ago. At many programs now, more than 60% of graduates are female.

Jill Vigesaa, 65, raised on a farm

near Lakota, and recent winner of the first ever Legacy of the Land Award created by the North Dakota Farm Bureau Foundation, has seen those changes.

When growing up, it was traditionally her brothers who would drive the tractors.

That changed after they grew bored of the monotonous back-and-forth and paid her a bit out of their hourly wage if she would ride along to keep them company.

“Well, pretty soon it was like, ‘You can drive it, why are you just sitting here?’” she said.

That began her own farming journey, even if her father was a little embarrassed because of neighbors gawking.

“They would literally sit at the end of the field and watch me, and not watch any of the guys,” Vigesaa said of neighboring farmers. “They weren’t unkind, but it was like women aren’t supposed to be out here doing this kind of stuff.”

That’s changed dramatically, and interest and opportunity abound in North Dakota and across the Midwest.

The United Nations declared 2026 the International Year of the Woman Farmer as well as the Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, highlighting how integral women are to both agricultural operations and as land stewards.

For Trish Feiring, who ranches with her husband Donnie just north of Beach near the Montana border, it took years to buy land rather than lease it.

The partners now run a successful Angus ranch on nearly 2,000 acres, raising cattle, selling grass-fed-and-finished beef across the Western part of the state and operating a vacation rental on the property.

Feiring said there are many opportunities for young people to get into agriculture, particularly if they’re creative and flexible with what presents itself.

“I hate to say this, but you can’t just be a rancher,” Feiring said. “You have to be a business person, and you have to be willing to open your mind to different opportunities.”

While growing up on a farm where her own mother took a very active role, and seeing her own operation as a 50/50 partnership with her husband, she did say she felt women are becoming more well received in ranching.

“Independent women who want to start their own operations, there’s more of them all the time, so kudos to them,” Feiring said.

Ashley Bruner, manager of Dakota Angus near Drake, said one of the reasons she and her husband Travis started the company was to potentially provide a future career pathway to some of their four children, three of whom are girls.

“We know that for all four to come back to the farm is not realistic in today’s world,” said Bruner, who sees her oldest daughter has the most interest in potentially working in the operation long-term.

“She loves being outside, being with the animals, she likes learning alongside her dad,” Bruner said.

Active on the board of the North Dakota Angus Association, Bruner said she has seen more women taking on leading roles in operations during the past several years and is amazed at the work they do.

“There are some women who are the main breeders in their operation, it’s not their husband,” Bruner said. “I’m just in awe and think it is so great that they’re the ones who came back to the ranch to take over from the previous generation and continue building that legacy for their future.”

Many of the recent interns coming through the association internship program have been young women, she said.

“They’re not afraid to do the work that’s out there, they’re not afraid to learn, they want to be involved,” Bruner said. “Thirty, forty years ago, that wasn’t a woman’s job.”

Amber Smith, co-executive director for the nonprofit Women in Ranching, who ranches in Eastern Montana, helped form the organization as part of an effort to provide skill-building programs and resources to new women ranchers, who make up about 60% of those they serve.

The organization came out of having been in other meetings with women farmers and ranchers 19 to 70 years old who were forward-facing or leading agricultural operations, but were voicing limiting beliefs about their own value.

“What women continue to articulate is we want more hands-on skill building, we want more opportunities to learn from one another, we want more opportunities to gather, we want more women ranching to be much bigger,” Smith said.

The North Dakota News Cooperative is a non-profit news organization providing reliable and independent reporting on issues and events that impact the lives of North Dakotans. The organization increases the public’s access to quality journalism and advances news literacy across the state. For more information about NDNC or to make a charitable contribution, please visit newscoopnd.org.

Dakota Attitude

Norman Seidel
Interview: Aug. 25, 2014
County: McLean
City: Riverdale



Making Wooden Wheels & Rifles

Born in 1934, Norman went to school and worked on the family farm in Mercer County, near Dodge, until he was 19, then went into the service. He was in Korea with the 1st Marine Division. “I was attached to an artillery outfit, but I was in the tank battalion. We used the tank guns because they could shoot farther. We had firing missions every day.”

Norman has worked many jobs including as a beer driver/salesman and in California sawmills before taking a job with the U.S. Department of the Interior. “I worked for the Corps [of Engineers] and the sedimentation section. It’s maintenance of the rivers, all the way from Fort Peck to Gavins Point. The last job I had before I retired was [Garrison Power Plant] shift operator. That’s the top job in the operation section.”

In 1961, Norman married Mary Jane Kraft. The couple, who has four daughters, moved to Riverdale in 1965. At the time of the interview, Mary Jane was residing at a nursing home care facility. She died four months following my visit with Norman. Norman keeps himself busy making wooden wagon wheels and guns. “We prepared our wheels on the farm, and you can’t find wheels like that anymore, so I just started making some from scratch. I have a metal lathe, a wood lathe, a couple of band saws, table saws—two of them. Drill press. Everything. I figure probably 100 hours a wheel. I take my time. The spokes are all made with draw knives. I’m a gunsmith, too. I build rifles from scratch.” He points out two muzzle-loading rifles. “I had some drawings from Missouri that were original from the man that made these rifles back in 1820. His name was Hawken. That’s what I patterned these guns after.” Norman, not surprisingly, is a life member of the National Rifle Association.

“If we wouldn’t have the National Rifle Association, we probably would be talking German all of us. I believe that every young man or woman should join the military. Have some military experience. It will make an entirely new person out of them. Patriotism is important. If we don’t have any patriotic people, we wouldn’t have the country. That’s about all I can say.”

Darryl Ellingson
Interview: June 3, 2011
County: LaMoure
City: Berlin



Growing Up In A Service Station

Darryl operates Ellingson’s Service, a full-service filling station and garage, founded by his father, Glenn, in 1938. “When my folks got married, they lived in the back part of the service station. I lived there until I was two and a half years old,” Darryl says. “There was a kitchen, living room, everything.”

“I would be out here at the station all the time. I [as a toddler]

would be picking up cigarette butts off the floor and eatin’ them. It used to drive Mother nuts. She also remembered digging tobacco out of my mouth.”

“When I was young, it was pie every day. A pie might last two days, but that was always my favorite food,” Darryl declares. “A piece of pie.”

“There were people who were [at the station] all the time,” Darryl recalls. “We were open in the evenings, too. Every evening. So it was quite a gathering place, between here or the bar every evening. We were open ‘til 10:00 for many, many years.”

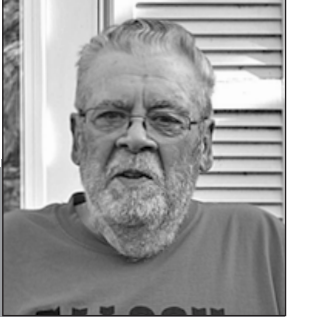
Those loyal patrons included Ellingson family friend and Berlin native, U.S. Senator Milton R. Young. “He used to come back for vacations, and then he always stopped in,” Darryl says. “He was a good friend of my grandfather’s. My dad worked for him when he was young.”

“[My father] had planned to retire when he was younger but just didn’t. He was down here every day until he just couldn’t make it anymore. He went downhill quick when he was in the nursing home. He wasn’t in there much over six months.”

Darryl says his wife was from northwest of Berlin about eight miles. “She is a farm girl. My advice is that you find yourself a farm girl. That was my experience. I found a good one.”

A customer just drove up as we were about to finish up the interview. There was no hesitation on Darryl’s part; attention was now given to his customer. “I think it is someone with a tire problem.” I knew Darryl had his priorities right.

Luke & Joyce (Barta) Lutovsky
Interview: Mar. 6, 2016
County: Walsh
City: Voss



He Married An Angel

Luke Lutovsky says when he married Joyce Barta, he “married an angel.” And he’s got a photo to prove it. “I had my first communion when I was seven years old. They always had two younger kids as angels. They took a group picture of all the communicants. And there was Joyce, an angel, standing in the same picture that I was in.” Luke was born in 1934 in Voss. The couple was married for 60 years and has five children, 17 grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

“I was gonna go into the Air Force,” Luke says, “but that didn’t turn out. My dad was in the elevator. His legs went bad on him, and Dad said, ‘Hey, can you help me out?’ So I been there over 60 years now.” Luke’s dad stayed manager until 1963; now Luke’s son is in the business.

“We got into [cleaning] yellow mustard. Damn hard work. We ran, hell, seven days a week per near 24 hours every day. [From temperatures] 100 above to 40 below, we were baggin’ mustard. Shippin’ it out all over the states. First year we had over 30,000 acres. We had to keep movin’ it. We were full all the time; what we cleaned out in one day we could take in again,” Luke laughs. “We had some ticked-off farmers—guys had mustard in their chicken coops and their bedrooms, waitin’ to haul it in. French’s Mustard was the big buyer.”

“The mustard bags were 100 pounds. That made men of us back then.” Today the bags are 50 pounds. At 81, Luke is still hefting the 50-pounders. “Oh, yeah. Guys ask me when I’m gonna leave the elevator, and I keep tellin’ them when they carry me out.” Joyce was in the room during the interview but in ill health. Her chosen words to her grandchildren were “behave, be good, and you gotta work. Keep the faith. Go to church and pray. Pray for me.” Luke’s angel died nine months later in December 2016.

(Editor’s Note: The following profiles of North Dakota residents were collected by author James Puppe between 2004-2018, covering 617 subjects and 113,000 miles. He has given permission for his book to be serialized in North Dakota Newspapers at no charge. To find out how you can read the entire collection of Dakota Attitude profiles go to

BELCOURT SCHOOL DISTRICT #7
1207 William Hardesty Street
Belcourt, ND 58316

TENTATIVE AGENDA

BSD #7 Special Board Meeting
Tuesday, May 12, 2026 - 12:30p.m.
Board Room

1. CALL to ORDER
2. ADOPTION of AGENDA
3. ADOPTION of CONSENT AGENDA
4. NEW BUSINESS:
 - A. Approve Tiny Turtles Preschool Program Title I Schoolwide Plan — Debbe Poitra
 - B. Approval of Retaining LSE Architects of Minneapolis, MN per Proposal submitted for the Architect Services for the Physical Education Gymnasium Project — Duane Poitra
5. ADJOURNMENT

100-297 High School Grant
REGULAR BOARD MEETING
Tuesday, May 12th, 2026 @ 11:30a.m.
Board Room, 1207 William Hardesty Street
Belcourt, ND 58316

TENTATIVE AGENDA

1. CALL to ORDER
2. ADOPTION of AGENDA
3. ADOPTION of CONSENT AGENDA
 - 3.A - Approval of Minutes (04-14-26)
 - 3.B - Superintendent/Athletic Director - Dr. Shane Martin
 - 3.C - Approval of Accounts Payable - Earl Demery
 - 3.D - TMHS Principal Board Report - Brad LaRocque
 - 3.E. - TMHS GT Class Room Without Walls \$84,770.80 — Brad LaRocque
 - 3.F. - Business Manager Reports - Duane Poitra
4. OLD BUSINESS:
 - 4.A - NONE
5. NEW BUSINESS:
 - 5.A - NONE
6. ADJOURNMENT

BELCOURT SCHOOL DISTRICT #7
1207 William Hardesty Street, Belcourt, ND 58316

AGENDA
Board of Education
Belcourt School District #7
Tuesday, May 12th, 2026 @ 12 NOON
Board Room

1. CALL TO ORDER
2. OPENING PRAYER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
3. OPEN MEETING COMMENTS (BCBA)
4. ADOPTION OF AGENDA
5. ADOPTION OF CONSENT AGENDA
 - A. TMCS Superintendent/Athletic Director — Dr. Shane Martin
 - B. Approval of Minutes 03/20/26 & 03/21/26 (Board Retreat)
 - C. Approval of Minutes 04/14/26 @ Noon
 - D. Approval of Minutes 04/22/26 @ Noon
 - E. Approval of Minutes 04/23/26 @ Noon
 - F. Approval of the Operation of the Tiny Turtles Preschool Program — Debbe Poitra
 - G. Concussion Training — Summer Crissler/Dr. Shane Martin
 - H. Ojibwa Indian School Board Report — Angeliqne Bennett
 - I. Business Manager Report — Duane Poitra
 - J. TMHS Principal Board Report — Brad LaRocque
 - K. TMCMS Principal Board Report — Gaillor Peltier
 - L. Approval of Tuition Agreements — Duane Poitra
 - M. TMHS GT Classroom Without Walls \$84,770.80 — Brad LaRocque
 - N. Approval to increase the General Fund budget IT Dept by \$718,000 — Travis LaRocque
 - O. Federal Programs Final Monitoring Report (Information Only) — Dr. Shane Martin
 - P. Approval of Final Reading KAB2 BSD Parent & Family Engagement Policy - Levi Gourneau
 - Q. Approval of the Consolidated Application Representative (Levi Gourneau) for Title I, Title II, Title III, Title IV, and Transfer funds with BSD — Dr. Shane Martiin
 - R. NDDPI Corrective Actions Items Required to Ensure the District can meet Federal Program Requirements (Information Only) — Dr. Shane Martin/Levi Gourneau
6. BE LEGENDARY
 - A. Draft Community Engagement (Information Only) — Laurie Elliot
7. OLD BUSINESS
 - A. NONE
8. NEW BUSINESS
 - A. Approval of Accounts Payable — Earl Demery
 - B. TMCS Assistant Superintendent/HR Director Board Report — Levi Gourneau
 - C. 1. Recommendation for Approval to Hire: TMCS Alternative School Administrator — Levi Gourneau
 - 2. Recommendation for Approval to Hire: TMCHS Native American Studies Teacher — Levi Gourneau
 - 3. Recommendation for Approval to Hire: TMCHS Health Operations Teacher — Levi Gourneau
9. ADJOURNMENT