

Crossing Family Lines

How one family made the farmland transfer that needs to happen a thousand times over

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In the early 1990s, PFI member Martha Shivers Skillman started looking around for a more sustainable farmer to work the land she had inherited with her sisters. She was told not to get her hopes up. Farmers who might have been interested “were wiped out in the ‘80s,” people told her.

That was the wrong thing to tell Martha, who, like her sisters, is of determined and resourceful stock.

Jump-start to early 2009, when an excited PFI member, Jim Petersen, called the PFI office. Jim had just purchased 160 acres from Martha and her sisters to help his young adult sons start farming. How did the two families do it, come together to make the land transfer that needs to happen a thousand times over if we are to have a future of diverse farms and vibrant communities?

Martha Skillman and her sisters, Charlotte Shivers and Marietta Carr, grew up on the family’s large farm but all left after finishing high school in the 1940s, Martha to Chicago as an occupational therapist, then into horticulture with “Garden in the City.” Charlotte was teacher, then realtor, then Unitarian Universalist minister around the country. Marietta became a medical administrator in Albuquerque and now lives in Seattle.

For all three, the pull of farm and family was strong.

“I was always coming back to Iowa, mainly to visit Mother, particularly when all those trains ran back and forth from Chicago,” Martha says. Their father, John, died in 1962, and their mother died in 1990. Then the sisters had the great fortune to inherit 520 acres of good Iowa land, to agree that they wanted to keep it, and to form a partnership, “Shivers Fair Acres.”

“I took over as our sisters’ first managing partner,” Martha said. “Then in the early 1990s, I moved back to Iowa into the little house here that was originally used to house the ‘hired man.’” Charlotte and her husband, Bob Baker, moved back to the farm in 1996; they now live in the original farm house, and Charlotte is the current managing partner.

There is a large web of Shivers all over South Central Iowa, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, first and second cousins. These three sisters are descended from Celly (Marcellus) and Molly Mills Shivers, who bought the farm in 1903, complete with a big red barn labeled “Fair Acres 1882.” The girls’ father was youngest of their eight children and got the home place.

There’s an annual Shivers Picnic to help the family stay connected, and it was at this picnic sometime in the farm crisis of the

1980s that Charlotte visited with her cousin-in-law Folmer Petersen. This year Folmer didn’t answer the traditional “fine,” when asked how he was. He revealed that they were in serious financial trouble and about to lose the home farm that his son Jim so wanted to farm. Charlotte listened and suggested that they should try for a loan from her mother, Vera. Marietta advised their cousin, Norma, Folmer’s wife, the same way. And Vera Shivers got to express her passion for the family farm by loaning the necessary dollars to Folmer’s son, Jim Petersen.

“The Sellers are committed to the land ethic which came down to them from their ancestors ... and was given to them by their father, John Shivers, in these words: ‘The land isn’t ours. It’s ours to use and pass on, better than when we got it.’ Sellers know that Buyers share these ancestors and believe they share this ethic as well; that is why they have chosen them as buyers.”

-- from the sale contract of 160 acres of land from Shivers Fair Acres to Jim Petersen



Conversation flows between Jim Petersen, Charlotte Shivers, and Martha Skillman as they relax on the farm porch on a beautiful summer day.

“We got to know Jim and his wife Julie that way. They never missed the opportunity to thank us, and Jim paid the loan back just as agreed,” Martha says. “Then I discovered that Jim was trying different farming methods that we hadn’t been able to get our farm operators to do.”

The Petersen’s and Shivers started to talk: the Shivers heard more about Petersen’s farming approach, and that the two older boys, Justin and Jacob, were interested in organic agriculture. The sisters agreed that they would like to rent 160 acres to the Petersen’s to be farmed organically. Managing partner Charlotte sought advice and then worked out with the Petersen’s a lease whereby landlord and tenant shared the risks and yet had a cash rent arrangement. They learned about organic together. Perhaps the hardest part,



At PFI Field Days, Martha (center, at a DeCook field day) learned about more sustainable farming practices. “They made me feel like I was part of a community. That contact through PFI gave me the courage to talk to others who have similar ideas.”

Martha said, was, “Another set of cousins, good conventional farmers, had been farming that land, and we had to take it from them. That was a painful process. But they hadn’t done what we asked for, and we were serious about trying more eco-friendly farming.”

The Petersen’s began renting the land in 2004. Early each December Jim would report how the money had been spent and what money came in. His father, Folmer, a long-time soil and water district commissioner in Marion County, continued to help out. “He was particularly helpful in helping trace and augment tile lines,” Martha said. “The Petersen’s educated us about our land in a way that no one else had since our father’s death.” And it worked financially for all concerned.

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Martha Skillman

Jim Petersen had been eager to buy land to help the boys get started. He eventually got up the nerve to ask the Shivers if they would consider a sale. Marietta, Martha, and Charlotte explored with their children how they would feel about parting with a portion of the farm. “Each of those children responded: ‘I love the farm, but we won’t be coming back,’” reported Martha. “Our kids were open to Jim’s request because they liked the kind of farming he was doing, and like their parents they wanted a way for the farm to continue as sustainable.”

Charlotte told Jim: Make us an offer on the 160 acres you rent. About two years later he did. “PFI’s Next Generation meetings taught me to get out and do something about getting more land. Don’t wait,” Jim says. It was actually easy to agree on a price; Jim’s banker named a number that he thought Jim could handle without

Lessons from the Shivers-Petersen’s

Be patient and persevere: It took the Shivers over 10 years to find the right renter to work toward their stewardship goals. They then rented to the Petersen’s for five years and saw good care of the land before selling them 160 acres.

Build the relationship: According to Martha, “Jim and Julie never missed an opportunity to thank us” for the loan the Shivers family gave them. Jim built trust by paying the rent on time and discussing their farming ideas with the Shivers.

Keep goals in mind: The Shivers needed income from the land, but they were willing to forego top dollar for two of their other goals: land stewardship and helping a new generation get started.

Don’t be afraid to get third-party help. “With a group of heirs, differences appear even if their goals are the same. We used a social worker for 14 years to help us negotiate our differences. It’s to our credit that we got professional help,” Martha reports.

Don’t be an “absentee” landlord: The Shivers sisters stay involved with their tenants and their land, which is easier to do because they chose to return home. “We never allowed ourselves to become the traditional removed and absent landlords with this land,” they report.

having to mortgage his home. And as Marietta said, “We don’t want that to happen.” After a diligent search, the sisters found that no one in Iowa granted conservation easements to protect farm land and give owners a tax break. So, the 160 acres went for below market value, but there were many restrictions placed in the contract in an attempt to assure good stewardship through the years.

“The most assurance comes from the fact that we trust the Petersen’s to farm in a way that puts care of land first,” Charlotte said.

This summer, Jim, Martha, and Charlotte took some time to sit on Charlotte’s front porch swing, which overlooks the Shivers’ farmland and the new Petersen land off to the southeast. One sister smiled as she told Jim, “We three can argue about how much to spend for dinner, but we were in complete agreement about this sale.” Later Martha added, “We can joke now but early on our differences weren’t funny; we found a social worker attuned to family business issues and got help.”

Together four children of Marietta, Martha, and Charlotte will inherit the remaining 360 acres of the farm. And the Petersen’s, winners of “The Way We Live” award at the State Fair this year, move forward on their new 160 acres, adding the land into their five-year crop rotation, 200 head of cattle, and 600 head of ewes. Jim works at 3M. Justin, who gravitates toward the field crops, lives at home, farms full-time, and has followed in his grandfather’s footsteps by becoming a commissioner of the soil and water conservation district. Jacob, an Iowa State student, is more interested in the livestock. Jim reports with a smile than the other Petersen children, Joshua and Jenny, may want to farm someday too.