

# ***Georgian Central Soil & Crop Improvement Association Spring Bulletin, 2021***

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## ***Shady Glen Farms, The Jones Family, North Simcoe SCIA***

*Pictured in 2019, Front Row – Carina, Grace, Clara Middle Row – Michael, Yvonne, Steve, Myrna, Kevin, David  
Back Row – Gavin, Carolyn, Andrew, Luke, Landry*

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# Member Spotlight

In this Spring issue of the Georgian bulletin, the spotlight turns to North Simcoe SCIA, particularly Shady Glen Farms. This is a family run partnership (dairy and crops), owned and operated by Steve and Yvonne Jones (Sleegers), and Kevin and Carolyn Jones (West). The Jones family farm has been in Tay Township, near the hamlet of Vasey (near Midland) since 1876. I had the great pleasure to speak to Steve recently about their farm operation.

## Family

Steve, Kevin, and their wives attended the University of Guelph. Steve and his wife Yvonne graduated with the class of OAC 99 with B. Comm Ag Bus. Yvonne is from a dairy farm near Belmont on the outskirts of London, and has a career with National Bank in agriculture lending. They have four children: Michael 18, Andrew 16, Luke 13, and Carina 10. Kevin graduated OAC 04 Bsc. Agr. Ag Economics. Kevin met Carolyn through 4-H before they attended the University of Guelph. Her family had a dairy herd near Cookstown, now cash crop, and she is a Registered Dietician with the local family health team. Kevin and Carolyn also have 4 children: Landry 11, Grace 9, Clara 7, and Gavin 4.

David Jones, Steve and Kevin's father, passed away in 2019, and they are still missing him and his contribution to the farm. Their mother Myrna (nee Simpson) provides support for the farm and takes pride in the gardens and landscaping at the home farm. She is the Music Director of Unity United Church in Vasey, and the Chair of the Stewart L Page (Ag Rep) Scholarship committee for agriculture education entrants from North Simcoe. For many years, this scholarship has supported North Simcoe high school graduates going into agriculture programs.

Uncle Wayne and Aunt Elaine Simpson custom raised some yearling heifers for Steve and Kevin after they purchased their cows and quota in 2010. Wayne also enjoys hauling silage for them at harvest time.

## Farm History

Steve and Kevin are the 5<sup>th</sup> generation to be farming their land. Past generations, as was common in those years, had mixed farm operations. There was always a dairy component, but it wasn't until their Dad and Mom started farming in the early 70's that it became primarily a dairy operation, Daimyr Farms. David initially milked Holsteins, but since Myrna's parents had Jersey cows, Jerseys were introduced into the herd. Over time, David and Myrna gravitated to a registered Jersey herd with a small tie stall dairy, 20 kilos of quota, and only enough land for forages. Steve does not hide his enthusiasm for the Jersey breed. When Steve was asked why they milked Jerseys, he enthusiastically replied, "because they are awesome!" As the market now is demanding more butter fat than the protein component, Steve believes that there may be a resurgence of Jersey cows in Canada.

The farm name, Shady Glen Farms, was their grandfather's shorthorn herd name. In 2000, when Steve came home to farm, they started to expand. From a cash flow and profit standpoint they needed more activity to make it viable, so they looked for rental land and bought quota to increase in size. They also made changes to the barn to accommodate more



*Jones home farm*



*Dairy facility at Kevin's*



*Steve's property*

cows and built larger stalls for increased cow comfort. In 2004, Kevin graduated and returned to the farm. At that point, the farm was not large enough to support them both, so Steve accepted a position at FCC from 2004 to 2009, and farmed in the evenings, weekends, and holidays. The position at FCC allowed Steve to learn more about the financial side of the business. He also really enjoyed talking with other farmers and seeing their operations.

When Steve and his wife were married, they bought a farm one concession over from the Jones home farm. The grain bins, farm shop, and equipment storage shed are on that property. The farm is involved with a local solar co-op, so their shed has panels mounted on the roof. Kevin and Carolyn bought a farm behind Steve and Yvonne's, and in 2010 they built a sand-bedded 170 free stall barn with a double-8 basic parlour that they moved from a farm in Brantford. They have also built some bunker silos and bins for feed. In 2018 they made the decision to purchase two Lely robots.

Designating the roles family members take in the farm operation can sometimes be a challenge. It seems that the strategy at Shady Glen Farms came naturally. Kevin always had more of an interest in the cows, whereas Steve would rather be in the shop or the field. Therefore, Steve's focus is the machinery and crop production, and Kevin concentrates on dairy production. Steve appreciates Kevin's focus on the cows and acknowledges that "He does a really good job with them." They have their separate roles, but they come together on decision making and help each other when needed.

## Farm Operation

Steve and Kevin have 110 milking registered Jersey cows, along with replacement calves and heifers. They crop 800 acres (owned and rented), and provide custom services for neighboring farms (plant, spray, combine, draghose manure). The guiding management philosophy for Steve and Kevin is science and economic based. They tend to question and debate everything, which can be tedious, but it has proven to be successful. All their decisions are well researched, and running the numbers is a must. Communication is one of their keys to success. They achieve this in part with a shared cloud based calendar that even includes their kid's activities, a face to face chat every morning before they start chores, and texts during the day. Since the two brothers do almost all the farm work themselves, other than hiring a few drivers during the cropping season, they have made some management decisions to reduce the workload. Prior to switching to robotic milkers, they added an automatic calf feeder to reduce the workload of calf feeding. The robotic milkers have also reduced the labour requirements, but additionally it has offered flexibility during the cropping season, and more freedom to be more involved with the kid's activities. The two robots have also provided them with an abundance of hourly information. Overall health, and reproductive health have improved with the advancement to robots, and they recently achieved Lactanet's Top Management Score in Simcoe County for 2020.

For the first few years, Steve and Kevin employed custom operators. Over time they purchased pieces of equipment, but Steve added, "If you are going to make an investment in a



*David pouring cement*



# Member Spotlight cont.

piece of equipment, you want to run it as much as you can to make it pencil out.” Now Steve and Kevin provide custom services to their neighbours. Most of their equipment is previously owned as their farm size limits what they can justify/afford. They use GPS, auto-steer, and yield monitoring. Steve maintains and makes small modifications to the equipment. He has insulated his shop so that in the winter he can optimize the space and work on machinery. He finds himself cruising twitter and zooming in on the shop walls to see how other farmers store their tools and organize their areas. Steve has done some innovative initiatives on his planter. Over the last two years, he has married a flex coil air cart with a soybean planter. They use the planter unit to put the seed in the ground, but the seeds are metered through the air cart, giving plenty of capacity. With this unit they can more efficiently get the seeds between the corn rows, resulting in better establishment.

The crops grown at Shady Glen Farms include corn, RR soys, wheat, oats, BMR corn silage, alfalfa, grass hay and haylage. They have also grown black beans and IP soys. The rotation is typically corn, soybeans and wheat, or corn soybeans and oats. They have also planted corn, soybeans, oats and then wheat to try and get the wheat in earlier. Their children also grow pumpkins, squash, and sweet corn to learn about business and be introduced to hard work. Last year was an excellent growing season, and they had great sales with an uptick in customers. “Pumpkins are heavy,” Steve mused, “If you don’t like picking stones, you won’t like picking pumpkins!”

Their goal is to no-till all crops, but they will use tillage to level tile runs, and a high-speed disk to incorporate manure, or prepare for alfalfa seeding. They have largely sandy and silty loam soils that lend themselves to no-till. When they first started, they did it as a labour savings initiative as they could leave the stones where they are, but it has really worked for them. Steve appreciates the soil health benefits, and ponders, “Why do tillage when you don’t have to?” He is happy with the yields, and it is a simpler process! Steve listened to a presentation at the recent Ontario Agriculture Conference about bio-strip tillage and thinks that would be worth a try in their operation. Bio-strip tillage is a practice where you plant annual cover crops in a band that will die out. That is where you are going to put your corn row the next year, and you grow more of a perennial cover crop in between where your tires are going to be. They do use cover crops in their operation, with red clover being there go-to in wheat. If that does not succeed, they add some oats. They have tried radishes and clovers with some success. They usually try red clover first, and then use other varieties to fill in. Steve tried interseeding into standing corn at the 6-8 leaf stage, with poor establishment. He would like to have something growing after corn, but with the short growing season, they have not nailed that down. Steve laughed and commented that “Snow is a cover crop!” Manure does get used, but only close to the dairy barn. Steve added, “You would have a hard time convincing us that trucking manure six to seven miles makes sense.” To reduce compaction they utilize radial tires, and timely application – “Don’t be on the field when you don’t need to be,” stressed Steve. Their draghose manure system also reduces compaction. It is an expedient system to apply manure in tight springs when it is important to get the manure on the ground before planting corn “without making too much of a mess”.

## Community Involvement

Kevin is a past chair of Jersey Ontario. He and Carolyn are long time dairy 4-H leaders, and he is also chair of the local

400 Jersey club. Steve is chair of the local Simcoe Dairy Committee. He was on the Central Ontario Agriculture Committee planning committee, and he is a Soil and Crop Director. Both Steve and Kevin have been hockey coaches for their kids. Steve expressed concern about the availability of volunteers for rural organizations. He commented that “The number of farmers is decreasing, so there are fewer of us to volunteer. These groups need people to step up, organize and run things.”

## The Future

Clearly farming should be in the genes of the Jones kids, but will the farming bug take hold in this next generation? It is too soon to definitively answer that question. Their parents are letting that interest develop naturally, without pushing. “You always want the next generation to continue,” explained Steve. Steve and Kevin enjoy what they do and believe that it is a nice life to lead. Since there is a lot of history on the farm, Steve admits that it would be great for their line of farmers to continue. If the children do decide to farm, developing a succession plan will be in their future. Steve reflected that their Dad and Mom were willing to delegate responsibilities, and that their Dad would never hold them back from following an idea. From a budgetary standpoint he might express some caution, but generally he let them run with their suggestions, and learn from any mistakes. Steve believes that that freedom to try alternative options led them to their success today. His suggested keys to a positive succession process include good communication; a willingness on both sides to change and adapt; and recognition that there is a need for it.

## Challenges

Steve thinks that one of the biggest challenges with farming today is trying to figure out how you can afford to invest in something that does not necessarily cash flow, like the next farm. It is a challenge to expand operations when assets do not pay for themselves in a logical way. Steve feels that it is important to continue to expand. He added, “If you are not going ahead, you are going backwards.” One of the many challenges to expansion is that your friends and neighbours are renting that land as well. Steve went further, “We want to be a good neighbour and not step on toes, but how can you be a nice guy and expand at the same time?” The process requires patience and planning to be ready to pay enough for it when it becomes available. It must pencil out too! “If you are just renting land for the sake of renting more land, than it does not make sense to rent it,” states Steve. Expansion is especially important as they look ahead to have the land mass that will allow the next generation to expand. He adds, “I would rather be looking for those opportunities today and being ready to capitalize on them so that we are ready for the next generation.” Another worry is the future of the dairy industry as it is always at risk of trade deals. Steve agrees that it is an excellent system, and it works well for producers and consumer, but the industry is at the will of government. However, he is quick to add that this dilemma does not cause him to lose sleep at night.

*We would like to thank North Simcoe County SCIA for suggesting that we interview the Jones Family. It was a delight to speak to Steve. They have a very busy operation, so I thank him for taking the time to share their farm story. By prioritizing family, in tandem with strong management and communication strategies, these brothers and their families run a very efficient and successful farm. We wish them continued success in the years ahead!*

**Lorie Smith**