



# REMEMBERING THEIR ROOTS

MCKINNEY TWINS GROW FARMING LEGACY

Agriculture is a calling and a passion for twins Ted and Tom McKinney.

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Farming, you could say, is in their blood.



They grew up on a family farm in rural Tipton County that their maternal grandfather, Frank Kirkpatrick, purchased in the early 1950s from the Kemp family (namesakes of Kempton, Indiana). Their father also came from a farming family in neighboring Clinton County, where his father's relatives laid down roots seven generations ago.

Tom continues the tradition today, guiding efforts at both farms. Ted is director of the Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA).

Their parents emphasized hard work on the farm, in the classroom and in the community.

"Growing up, school and school activities came first. FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America) and 4-H were very big," Ted comments. "Even in the most intense cropping season, there was never a word about missing those kinds of things (farming responsibilities).

"I think that helped a great deal in who we are and where we are now in terms of not being afraid to dive in advancing a youth organization, leading a club, or leading a movement in the community or at the state level."

Step inside the McKinney farm in Tipton as I did for an unforgettable afternoon this spring. As Ted and Tom proudly share their family's heritage, it's clear that they are creating a legacy of their own.

### Planting the seeds

As we arrive at the family farm, we're greeted by Tom and his dog, Shadow. The home where the twins grew up, built with native white oak from the farm, is warm and welcoming. The farm spans a few thousand acres.

We sit down at the dining room table and the brothers offer refreshments. Ted hands me a Purdue glass full of ice-cold water. Like Tom, he's wearing a Purdue pullover.



Indeed, one can't tell the McKinney story without a chapter (or two) about Purdue University.

Ted and Tom are third-generation graduates of the College of Agriculture along with siblings Mike and Becky. Mike spent 30-plus years at John Deere before retiring. Becky works at Kellogg Company.

"We pretty much have the ag food chain covered," Ted says with a laugh.

Ted and Tom majored in agricultural economics. Tom minored in animal science (the McKinneys also raised swine at their Tipton County farm until two years ago) and Ted minored in agronomy, which concentrates on crops.

"The big change came when after our freshman year at Purdue, I ran for state FFA office, was elected and took a year out of school," Ted reflects. "I laid out a year and it was transformative. I drove 25,000 miles as did the other officers speaking around the state. When I came back, I decided I was going to dive deep on activities."

As he entered his senior year in 1980, two factors influenced his post-graduation plans: the challenging economy and, "knowing that – I'm going to be careful with this word – I didn't want to be isolated on the farm. I wanted to go out and make things happen."

And so he did.

Following graduation in 1981, he began a successful career in agribusiness with a job at animal health company Elanco. Stints at Eli Lilly and Company and Dow AgroSciences followed. He returned to Elanco to head global corporate affairs before Gov. Mike Pence appointed him director of the ISDA in January.

Ted's goals include expanding food processing and water quality as well as furthering the Indiana Grown initiative, which promotes locally-produced agricultural products.

Before the twins were born, their father and grandfather moved an old church (top left photo) onto the property. To the right is their father's workshop, where they honed their skills. Starting at age 15, Ted McKinney spent a lot of time driving this Super M tractor while holding a small sprayer to kill isolated weeds. Standing tall: Silos illustrate three generations of grain handling equipment on the farm.



## McKinney Moments

- Tom and Ted may be twins, but they have different birthdays. They were born 28 hours apart (Tom's the oldest).
- Ted rallied fans as mascot Purdue Pete in college.
- It's not twin telepathy, but Ted says, "It's the type of thing that if we're in a meeting or – we had some occasional classes at Purdue together – we could look at each other and completely know what the other was thinking. That today still comes naturally."



"We want to take ag up not one, but two or three levels," he asserts. "Indiana is, I believe, really set to do great things."

Meanwhile, Tom has devoted his life to farming and public service.

"It's very simple," he says. "I always wanted to farm."

Farming remains a family affair. Tom leads efforts with his wife, Karen. Parents Mark and Judy, now in their 80s, are still active. In addition, Tom runs a precision planting franchise and houses space for a seed dealership with global company DuPont Pioneer.

For more than three decades, he helped instill a strong work ethic in area youth by operating a seed corn detasseling business.

Since graduating, Tom and Ted have given back to their alma mater in several volunteer roles. Among them: Tom is a past president of the Purdue Council for Agricultural Research, Extension and Teaching. In addition, Ted is a current (and Tom former) member of the Purdue College of Agriculture Dean's Advisory Council.

### Sinking their teeth in

The McKinney kids learned about the value of hard work at a young age.

"There were always chores," Ted remembers. "Inside the house and outside the house. Inside the barn and outside the barn. Inside the shop and outside the shop, and then there was the seasonal work."

During the summers, the twins "walked soybean fields" to remove weeds from soybeans.

"This was before they had the Roundup product," Ted explains. "It was a chance for extra income. We were always paid minimum wage, but over time you can save quite a bit."

And there was the brutal, but rewarding, corn detasseling.

Ted laughs when describing a story about a particularly tough day

on the job.

"I remember waking up at two or three in the morning, standing in bed and reaching up to pull a tassel (in my sleep)."

Ted and Tom started managing their own crews at age 16. Detasseling season lasted approximately three weeks. Teens (the average age was 14) worked eight-hour days. Within three years, 300 were joining them in the fields.

As we walk along the farm, Ted stops by an automated seed detasseling unit.

"They had these in one form or another when we were detasseling in the 1970s, but they have clearly improved on them over the years."

When the twins started in the detasseling business, "it was just one kid per row and they had to pull every cornstalk. For 13- to 15-year-olds, you're reaching up. They (the industry) started automating it."

Tom declares, "That was a neat business. It was 35 years of boot camp; that includes my first year (working for Pioneer) as a 12-year-old. First of all, you clearly learn work ethic and responsibility. You work your tail off! It was really fun teaching kids how to work."

But sometimes, motivating the team wasn't easy.

"You've got junior high-age kids at 5:30 in the morning with wet corn," Tom relates. "You can imagine."

Ted chimes in, "There was a hump in getting used to wet corn. Sometimes it would cut or you had tassel with some fungi. To get them through the first three days was dramatic."

"It was more than a money-making business. It was almost a social experiment, a social cause, where you were teaching kids to grow up. It was about transforming people's lives."

Tom seconds that.

"The main story I get back is, 'I got my first job because either the interviewer knew what detasseling was and had an instant respect for it or the interviewer didn't know what it was and when they heard the story (they were impressed).'"

Tom tripled the size of the detasseling operation following the birth of his daughter Christie, a special needs child. Karen stayed home full-time to care for her, which Tom says reinforced the decision he had made to return to the farm.

"There's no doubt, I always wanted to farm. That's first and foremost, but second, there was some divine intervention there," Tom stresses. "When Christie was given to us, it kind of all came full circle."

### Weathering the storm

Looking back at their childhood, it wasn't all work on the farm.

"Home run used to be if you hit (the ball) over the old board fence where we sorted hogs by the yellow barn," Tom says, pointing beyond a stretch of grass that once designated a baseball diamond for the McKinney children and their friends.

Countless hours were spent playing baseball and enjoying various activities in that big yellow barn, which was a former workshop. They built forts out of haymows. They channeled their inner Tarzan by swinging from a rope on an old pulley. They played ping pong and pool.

"Oh my gosh, we had a ball," Ted beams.

Equally memorable was the devastating straight-line winds that destroyed their cherished barn and killed several swine. The twins were 14 years old at the time.

"It was transitional," Ted observes. "We'd never seen destruction like that."

But ultimately, they consider the event a blessing.

"Our mom remembers seeing tin from the barn roof rolling across the field. She couldn't reach my dad or the hired man, which got us into the two-way radio business," Ted shares. "Because she couldn't reach them, we decided that safety was something we were really going to double down on. That brought untold efficiencies."



Tom McKinney nostalgically recalls the location of the old yellow barn (top), which now is the site of a modern shop. The advent of automated seed detasseling equipment (bottom left) helped take some of the grunt work out of a most challenging task. Once construction on silicon-based solar panels is complete, the McKinney farm will be roughly net even on energy consumption and energy return.



Adds Tom, “It didn’t take long to figure out that, ‘Hey, this isn’t all bad,’ because we could put up a modern shop. I don’t think we ever would have torn that yellow barn down. It would have been very difficult to do.”

### Cultivating community

Through the years, Ted and Tom have embraced opportunities to make a difference.

Tom is president of the Indiana 4-H Foundation, which raises funds for scholarships and works closely with Purdue to expand opportunities for young people.

“The fastest growing 4-H clubs in the state are in center Marion County and the Lake County area,” he comments. “These are inner city youth that would normally be on the street at 5, 6, 7, 8 p.m. and instead, on Friday evenings, they’re at a 4-H club meeting (and) learning about robotics, learning about health and learning about food.”

Other passions include working with the local extension and Tipton County Foundation boards (he’s a past president and current member of the latter). In addition, he was instrumental in establishing the C.W. Mount Community Center in the mid-1990s.

“That was hundreds of hours, but we built a tremendous facility for the benefit of Tipton County citizens,” he recalls with a smile.

“I suppose what drove me (in community outreach) was the chance to give back because we had those opportunities. The focus is still around bringing up the next generation whether they’re special needs kids or whether they’re 4-H and FFA.”

Ted has served on the Indiana 4-H Foundation board as well, along with the Indiana State Fair Commission and many others.

One of his proudest accomplishments is helping bring both the National FFA Center and the organization’s convention to

Indianapolis. He viewed the opportunity as an invaluable recruitment tool.

“I knew what Indiana the state and Indianapolis the city offered and what it could do for these kids,” he asserts. “I remember going to Kansas City (where the annual convention had taken place for nearly 80 years) and thinking, ‘You’re planting new memories.’ The kids when they graduate are going to say, ‘What a great experience.’”

When asked about the importance of family and heritage, Ted pauses for a moment.

“We’ve borrowed off the equity of parents and grandparents who also were very involved. You feel both an obligation – others did it before you, it’s your turn – but also the importance of keeping your good name. ... That sort of provides those white lines on the road that guide you.”

**RESOURCES:** Ted McKinney, Indiana State Department of Agriculture, at [www.in.gov/isda](http://www.in.gov/isda) | Tom McKinney, McKinney family farm