

FARM

► continued from A1

spot on the map and moving to wherever destiny led them. Instead, he explained, it was a classic case of being in the right place at the right time.

In the early-to-mid 70s, land prices in Wabasha County and neighboring areas had increased, interest rates skyrocketed and the window to expand the Elgin farm grew progressively narrower.

“Dad had always been fond of the northern Minnesota area,” Brent said of Milton’s preferred spot for relocation. “He used to come up here when he was 19 years old and hunt with a family friend.”

He added that Carol, originally Carol Ness, was from International Falls, and a move back north seemed like a natural adjustment for the family – they just had to find the right farm to call home.

“It was kind of funny how it happened,” Brent said. “Dad was looking at bluegrass farms in Roseau and he stopped at the Birchdale craft center on our way back to International Falls to stay with grandma (Angel Ness). He started talking to someone in the store who told dad he’d sell him his farm.”

Milton visited the property a few times and the rest is history.

A NEW BEGINNING

Moving from one end of the state to another took some adjustment by Brent, Ross and Kent who were 11, 10 and 8 years old, respectively. But Brent and Ross agreed the brothers quick-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The Benikes pose for a photo in the early 1990s. From the left, Milton, Carol, Brent, Ross and Kent, have all played a part into the success of the family farm. The extended family, not pictured in the photo, includes Brent’s wife, Kim and Kent’s wife, Melanie, and 11-year-old son, Brenden, who are supportive of the hard work a farm requires.

ly embraced the change.

“Of course we missed our friends, but we were young enough that we adapted pretty quickly,” Brent said. “We loved the Birchdale area right away.”

The adolescents were in their farm-working prime. Since as young as age 5, the boys had already learned to mow lawn, drive tractor and rise with the sun for typical farm-related chores. The stage was set for a successful future in agriculture.

“I can’t imagine (farming) not being part of my life,” said Brent, who manages Northern Excellence Seed in Williams, Minn. He admitted that although keeping up crops on top of a full-time job requires a lot of work, coming to the farm feels like a vacation. Ross, who works at the

local Boise Inc. paper mill, agreed.

“I love being out here,” he said. “This area is beautiful. The work takes up a lot of time, but it’s worth it.”

However, Ross, who owns property nearly adjacent to his parent’s original homestead, confessed, “When I do take vacation, it’s nice.”

CHANGES IN THE TRADE

While touring the Benike farm – both by tractor and by a plane that Ross pilots – may make farming look easy, the brothers reveal that learning which crops will compliment northern Minnesota’s diverse weather is a lot of work.

“There’s our teacher right there,” Brent said pointing to Milton, who



STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

Ross Benike shows off the farm’s rye grass — this year’s most profitable crop.

was noticeably humbled by his eldest son’s gesture. “And we picked up some stuff at college.”

Brent, Ross and Kent each attended the University of Minnesota – Crookston to further their studies in agriculture.

“We’ve learned to gravitate towards crops that can handle the weather up here,” Brent said. “They don’t call it Rainy River for nothing.”

The boys agreed that adjusting to early frosts and rainy summers has proven to be one of the bigger challenges of farming in Borderland.

“We’re always learning,” Ross said. “One thing we know for sure is never to put all your eggs in one basket. It’s important to be diverse.”

Brent added that new methods, technology and genetics are constantly being produced to enhance the agricultural business.

“If you don’t think about progression, you’ll never advance,” Milton said.

PLAYING THEIR PART

Brent and Ross said while a bulk of the seeding and harvesting is shared between themselves and Kent, the foundation of the farm and its required work ethic was built by Milton and Carol.

“Dad is the chief gardener and lawn caretaker,” Brent said. “He oversees all operations.”

Milton explained that health problems have kept him from driving tractor.

“I miss that,” he said. And Carol, the brothers explained, was the domestic engineer of the Benike farm.

“Mom kept the house going and ran all the errands,” Brent said. “Whenever we needed something, she got it.”

Ross added that she ran a “meals on wheels

service” and delivered countless meals to the men in her family who spent hours out in the field.

“A lot of people ask us how we all get along so well,” Brent said. “I guess we just got any disagreements out of our system when we were younger.”

At the end of the day, Brent said the farm may be a corporation on paper, but in reality it is a family farm and something each member is proud of.

“When I was 9 or 10, I may have wanted to be a baseball player, but I always knew farming would be part of my life,” Brent said. “We all fully enjoy this area, the people, and the neighborhood. We have a strong faith in God to alleviate the stress of not having a good year. But really, it is hard to have a bad year in this area. The soil is ideal – it’s northwestern Minnesota’s best kept secret.”

TRAM

► continued from A1

ing to be impacted by people he meets,” she said. “I want him to see what other people in the world are like, what they live with, to exposed to different things, there’s so much out there. I think he will be impacted by the situation.”

Vork said she’s been training for about six weeks, but she said ideally she should have been training from eight to 10 weeks.

She noted that the first day the group travels 81.4 miles, with a stop at Cam Hardwig’s farm along Highway 65. The second day brings 61 miles, the third day 58 miles, the fourth day 68 miles, and last day 26 miles with the ride from Two Harbors to Duluth. That last leg is the easiest, she said, as it is downhill, except for the last mile uphill to the University of Minnesota Duluth campus.

Bicyclsts must raise at least \$300 to participate and Vork said she was a little nervous about meeting that goal. But when she came home from work Wednesday, she had a check for \$200 in the mail.

“I’m not nervous anymore,” she said. “Living in Littlefork, people hear about what you’re doing and we got a lot of support. It makes me feel good to know people will be thinking about me all week and know I’m on the Tram.”

Vork said she will attempt to post on her Facebook page a photo each day and invited people to follow she and Tyler on their adventure.

“This will be an amazing experience,” she said. “The first time I wondered what I had gotten into, but when it was done it was bittersweet:

I was sad it was over, but glad it was over. The people you meet along the way and the people who have MS are so grateful. I think everybody should try to experience it at one point in their life. It’s really kinda cool.”

FLYING SQUIRRELS

Schlieff, 76, is his daughter’s inspiration, she said.

Kennedy, 46, said she is looking forward to spending time with her dad.

“When was the last time I camped out in the same tent with my dad?” she asked. “I don’t know if it ever happened.”

The pair spent time when she was young in a camper and at the cabin on Rainy Lake, she said. “I have someone picking me up some silicone earplugs,” she said laughing about sharing close sleeping quarters with her father.

Schlieff said the time he and his daughter spend on the Tram will be special.

“I am very proud of her,” he said. “She’s been riding bike a lot.”

He laughed when asked about tenting together. “Yes, it’s probably been a long, long time ago.”

Schlieff, Kennedy said, encouraged her to train prior to his recent trip to Montana, telling her she needed to do some hills.

“You know what hills he’s talking about,” she said with a groan referring to the famous Sha Sha hills on Highway 11 East. She said she was in sixth or seventh grade the last time she rode her bike to the lake over the hills.

Kennedy said she’s been diabetic for 36 years and likes to exercise and keep active, but said the Tram will be challenging. She’ll keep her diabetic supplies and quick sugar sources with her

at all times.

Residing in the starting point for the ride has prompted questions about whether she and Schlieff will ride home after the Tram. “I said no, if I make it there it will be a miracle,” she said.

Despite a decade or more of Trams, he’s not sure of the exact number, Schlieff is low key about his participation. He said he and his brother, Harry, have spent an active week together for many years. The Tram came about for one of those weeks and has continued for 10 or 11 years.

“It’s just a wonderful event,” he said. “Very well organized and for such a good cause.”

Schlieff said he and his brother will be joined by grandchildren as well as his daughter.

“It’s a good family event and it’s fun to see the families together, enjoying themselves and raising money for this good cause,” he said.

Schlieff and Kennedy said each community offers entertainment and fun events for their Tram guests.

Schlieff said he has vivid memories of those special offerings. For example, he said he recalls riding in southern Minnesota on an earlier Tram to hear a “chug, chug, chug. Here is an old-time ice cream maker and they gave everybody ice cream cones. It was just great.”

An Iron Range community stop over on another Tram offered participants traditional pasties.

“Things like that just make it special,” he said.

BOISE

► continued from A1

Carol Stegmeir or Tammy Riley at Minnesota Workforce Center at 283-9427.

Several local meetings about the job terminations were conducted by a Path Forward Committee, made up of members of the International Falls City Council and Koochiching County Board.

Commissioner Rob Ecklund, a member of the committee and a worker at the mill, said he applauded the department’s decision to grant TAA status to the Boise job curtailment.

“It will give many of my coworkers that are losing their jobs more confidence for their futures,” he said Thursday. “Hopefully through training, they will be able to stay in our community and apply their new skills.”

Falls Mayor Bob Anderson, a member of the committee and the former mill public affairs manager, also said he was pleased with the designation.

“Certainly our Congressman Nolan and Sens. Klobuchar and Franken have been on top of this situation and been able to help us secure that designation and assistance for those workers,” said Anderson. “And this is wonderful for them.”

At a meeting with local officials last week, Franken learned about the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development application for

federal Trade Adjustment Assistance to help displaced workers and sent a letter the same day supporting the request to the Department of Labor.

“International Falls is a great community with hard-working people and it’s good to hear that folks who are losing their jobs are going to get some help finding new ones,” said Franken in a statement. “This assistance will provide significant help to train workers for new careers. But I realize it’s just the first step, and I’m committed to helping in any way that I can.”

Franken said the Trade Adjustment Assistance program offers a variety of benefits and services to support workers in their search for reemployment. This includes trade readjustment allowances, training, assistance with healthcare premium costs, reemployment trade adjustment assistance, employment and case management services, and may also include job search and relocation allowances.

In his letter of support for the TAA status to Caroline Hertel of the U.S. Labor Department, Franken said: “Boise is the largest employer in Koochiching County. I’ve toured the plant so I know first hand that Boise has provided good, quality jobs for years. Boise produces supercalendared coated and loose-leaf paper. Their products are in direct competition with like and similar products produced in Canada and Brazil. At

least one Canadian mill producing similar products receives subsidies from the Canadian government. The trade effect on the paper industry in Minnesota has been dramatic and sustained within the last year and a half.”

Nolan met with local officials in June to discuss the impact of the job terminations. At that time, he pledged to help the community in any way he could.

“In so far as there can be good news in this situation, the news that Boise workers facing layoffs are now eligible for Trade Adjustment Assistance is good news,” he said in a statement to The Journal. “It means additional security for these workers and their families in uncertain times. But it also confirms what we already know — that these Boise workers are indeed victims of unfair trade by foreign competitors subsidized by their governments. As we move ahead to help the workers at Boise, we need to reform our trade laws to protect American jobs. That’s the larger issue.”

Franken added in his letter to Hertel that he is “confident that International Falls can recover and come out of this situation stronger than ever, and I will continue to work closely with the community to address the challenges these layoffs represent. Trade Adjustment Assistance, and the training and support services it provides, will be critical to that successful recovery.”

