

# Golden Growers Annual Meeting

March 19, 2026

West Fargo, North Dakota

Thank you, Nick and Scott, for inviting me to speak to Golden Growers at your last annual meeting. I am honored by your invitation and hope I am worthy of that honor. In my life, like many of you, I am between two poems. Dylan Thomas in his poem “Do not go gentle into that good night” wrote:

*Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight  
And learn too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

In my 50-year career in North Dakota, I have worked with start up cooperatives who have caught and sang the sun in flight. Golden Growers is one of those. And as my career ends and you sell your ownership, we too grieve, and in some ways rage, as Thomas said, against the dying of the light. The light we embraced was the belief we could work together to make our individual farms more profitable. You did that, I helped, and I hope that light never goes out.

The second poem is a form of self-counseling all of us, regardless of our station in life, need to apply. It comes from the poem Desiderata by Max Erhmann:

*Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.  
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.  
Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.*

Scott sent me minutes from the steering committee in 1993 that I took as secretary to the steering committee. The minutes were signed by Pat Benedict. The list of the steering committee members present and absent at the September 20, 1993 meeting created a massive flood of memories for me. I bet they will for you. Those present included: Pat Benedict, Daryl Chisholm, Jack Dalrymple, Gerald Green, Jim Hanson, Lyle Hovland, Carl Larson, Bill Patrie, Armand Tiegs, Sonia Vculek, Clair Vigesaa. Steering Committee members absent included: Wallie Hardie, Russ Mauch, and Mike Warner.

I remember a startling moment for me was when Armand Tiegs asked me “are you any damn good?” It startled me because it was the second time I had been asked that question.

The first was by a Cando banker Wayne Forge in the late 1970s and I was providing technical assistance to the Durum Triangle Industrial Park Corporation who wanted to help Leonard Gasparre build a pasta plant. The ground breaking of the Noodles by Leonardo pasta plant at Cando was

attended in 1980 by Industrial Commission members Allen Olsen, the attorney general, Myron Just, the Agriculture Commissioner, and Art Link, the governor. 46 years later that plant is still there. And the ProGold plant is still in Wahpeton. I am still in touch with Myron Just who remembers that project, but we have lost Allen Olsen and Art Link and Armand Tiegs. I hope I have answered the question “are you any damn good” and I am here as a witness to the Golden Growers who have answered that question about yourselves.

Congratulations.

A key reason for the success of farmers creating value added enterprises that increase farmer income is their faithful execution of well thought out ideas. Both the Bank of North Dakota and the North Dakota mill and elevator are over 100 years old. The founders of these useful ideas were recalled from office, but the institutions survived and thrived.

Political parties, religious organizations, and even associations of farmers are often organized by who they are against. It is the low hanging fruit of organizational development. The Evolutionary psychologist Robert Kurzban studied why humans first began cooperating beyond family/clan groups. It was in defense against wild animals, hunting big game, and warring neighboring tribes.

To the Nonpartisan League, there certainly were enemies like bankers, industrialist, and grain millers. But the farmers who thought through the Mill and the Bank went beyond being angry farmers with pitchforks to skillful enterprise planners and politicians.

Before we had artificial intelligence, we had carefully collected human intelligence. One of my favorites is Aristotle who wrote in Nicomachean ethics,

*“anybody can become angry-that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way-that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.”*

What Don Senechal as a feasibility study consultant did for corn producers, was to channel that anger about low corn prices on a per bushel bases to an enterprise that created added income. He did that for bison growers, for potato producers, and for durum growers. He did that for Beef producers as well.

Under the direction of Northern Ag Development Corporation, an intellectual property 501 © 4 Corporation owned by farmers, North Dakota State University completed a feasibility study for a farmer owned nitrogen fertilizer plant. Scott Stofferahn and four other farmers or association managers commissioned the study that showed a farmer owned nitrogen fertilizer plant in North Dakota could be profitable.

Unfortunately, three different organizations pursued that opportunity without farmers as partners and none of the three have achieved the construction of the plant size recommended in the study.

Not everyone can execute on those well thought out feasibility studies and business plans. Not everyone can execute the internal politics of farm association or the understand the appropriate technology for milling corn into high fructose corn syrup. Pat Benedict could.

In 1972 Pat was on the cover of time magazine for adopting the computer for use on the farm. I was in graduate school in Indiana taking my research on punch cards, to the computer center and getting the results of those tabulations on tractor feed paper.

In the case of Golden Growers, many members have attributed your survival and success to the intelligence and strength of character of your leaders. I think that is absolutely true-but one thing more-the boldness and willingness of intelligent followers.

When I became a cooperative developer in 1990, I was facing multiple farmer-led failures by leaders who may have been charismatic and influential but not focused on building viable commercial scale enterprises. I faced the new idea of the day which could have been Jerusalem Artichokes, Ostrich, angora goats, alfalfa pelleting machines, on farm ethanol plants, or flax shive-based clam shell containers for McDonalds.

I also faced the ego needs of people who wanted to become first adapters of new technology and get their names on the letter head of a new company. We all know them, these people who will try anything without understanding the long-range trends in the industry.

I am reminded of an axiom that Don Senechal taught, if you are a new company enter the market with an existing product. Only existing companies can experiment with new products. And the lessons I learned from Lee Estenson at the St. Paul Bank of Cooperatives have been foundational in understanding how to finance enterprises. The borrowers need to have character-real honest people who have a history of paying back their loans, the business plan needs to understand the market for the product and the competitors and the technology to produce the product.

This business plan must demonstrate with real numbers why and how this proposed new plant will be production cost per unit competitive with existing producers.

For those of you who don't know, Lee Estenson was just out of graduate school at NDSU, and working for the St. Paul bank, when he led the financing of the farmers who acquired American Crystal Sugar.

David Cobia who taught at NDSU gave me a crash course in the American Crystal Cooperative model where farmers invested in the cooperative prior to patronage-sometimes referred to as a "new generation" cooperative, or sometimes as a "closed Cooperative" only open to a select number of investors capable of supplying the needed commodity, and not exceeding it.

This new model required a discipline not everyone is capable of exercising. Bison producers continued to accept memberships and bison that exceeded their ability to market and went into bankruptcy.

I worked for Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund, now known as Shared Capital in Minneapolis. Early in this revolving loan fund's history they made a \$10,000 loan to a couple of organic dairy farmers in Wisconsin to buy a cooperatively own milk truck.

Today, Organic Valley Cooperative has achieved \$1.2 billion in sales, but they still only allow new members as their market expands to accommodate more milk supply.

In my view, new generation cooperatives break clean of political and organizational ideology. There is no need to create enemies or anger or hold a single political ideology. The profitable operation of the enterprise is the single goal. If the enterprise does not create a net margin capable of employing normally competent management and employees, it is not feasible. If it requires grants to have positive net earnings, it is not feasible.

I don't know if the folks who come after us in agriculture will ever know about cooperative fever, or the Non-Partisan League, or ever know about the Commission on the Future of Agriculture and their vision that:

*North Dakota has become the trusted provider of the highest quality food in the world with:*

- *Prosperous Family Farms*
- *Thriving Rural Communities*
- *World Class Stewardship of Natural Resources*

And while it may be true that the world will little note nor long remember what was said at the Golden Growers Annual meeting, the corn growers in three states will never forget what you did at Wahpeton. And so, it is up to us, those who still remember, to pass these skills and opportunities to the generations of farmers who will come after us.

As I vacillate between two poems, I am asking you to rage against the dying of the good ideas we have fought for and so faithfully executed and I am asking you to kindly accept the counsel of the years and to gracefully surrender the things of youth. I don't know how to reconcile those two ideas. I think it is something all of us will need to wrestle with.

When Scott asked me to come to this meeting, I remembered that I had made 20 previous trips from Mandan to Fargo on this project. This is my 21<sup>st</sup>. What a thrill to be remembered after 33 years. What a thrill to remember all of you, the important people who built this organization.

As the world careens into blaming and hating and killing each other, and what it means to be a farmer in the Great Plains becomes defined by government programs, size of equipment, world markets, tariffs, and cash flow, I will remember this period of time in my life that was for me Camelot. A time when violence was not strength and compassion was not weakness.

I will remember Golden Growers as an example of courage and leadership and the power of human cooperation to make human lives better. Congratulations on your amazing success. Thank you again for inviting me.

