

## Alan VanNahmen – Farm Buddy

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Who knows more about combines than anybody in the country? Some agribusiness companies would tell you that the answer to that question is Alan VanNahmen from rural Kansas. He is now working with farmers and others to develop even better combines and other harvesting systems for the future.

Alan VanNahmen comes from the rural community of Spearville in southwest Kansas. Spearville has a population of 817 people. Now, that's rural.

Alan grew up in a farming family with three brothers and four sisters. That meant everybody had to pitch in on the farm. "As a kid, I drove lots of combines," Alan said. They tried different types of equipment. It also meant that, when something broke, they fixed it rather than paying a repairman.

Some people would call that adversity. "Adversity created opportunity," Alan said. It gave him first-hand knowledge of how combines work.

Alan went to high school in Spearville. For foreign language, he happened to take a French class. He went on to Dodge City Community College and then to K-State, where he first majored in agricultural engineering and then graduated in Mechanical Engineering Technology in 1977.

He had planned to go back to the farm but John Deere was recruiting engineers. Alan and his dad thought it would be good for him to get some business experience before returning to the farm, so he took a position with Deere and Company. He worked in field service across the U.S.

Remember that French class he had in high school? In 1982, John Deere launched a business initiative in Europe. Because of Alan's knowledge of the French language, he was sent to France. This launched a remarkable international experience. After President Nixon opened up commercial relations with the People's Republic of China, Alan led the effort to introduce combines into the Orient.

Eventually Alan came back to the states where he managed a territory in the U.S. He worked in a John Deere research center where pioneering work was being done on the first robotic welders, automatic guidance systems, and more. Then he took a position with Claas, the German-owned combine company, and settled with his wife and family in Columbus, Indiana.

During his corporate career, he observed farmers who struggled to present their innovative farm equipment ideas to companies for potential manufacturing. He thought to himself, "Those farmers need a friend to guide them through this process."

In 1991, Alan founded a company he called Farm Buddy to assist farmers with product design and development. Alan now serves as a consultant to various farmers and agribusinesses. His specialty is crop harvesting systems. He has had clients as far away as Germany, France, Australia, China, and New Zealand. Today he has offices in Indiana and Kansas and travels perhaps two-thirds of the year.

Alan was working on a process to bale forage for the cellulosic ethanol plant in southwest Kansas when his brother Fred told him about another farm family which needed help with harvest. He met Kyle Kopper of Kopper Family Farms and Kyle's

father-in-law, Randy Burns. They had corn and sorghum (milo) to harvest in the large fields of southwest Kansas.

“They bought a new \$70,000 milo head, and on the first day (of harvest), the slip clutch went out,” Alan said. In frustration, they recognized they needed a new and more reliable sorghum harvesting system.

“You can do a lot of thinking while driving combines in long rows,” Alan said. He thought about ways to redesign the standard corn harvesting attachment to make it adaptable for harvesting sorghum. He and the others designed a prototype and put it to the test in 2015. It worked so well that they got a provisional patent and continued to develop the concept.

Who knows more about combines than anybody in the country? According to some agribusiness companies, that person is Alan VanNahmen. We salute Alan and others involved in this project for making a difference by seeking improvement in harvesting systems. Alan is truly an outstanding expert in his field.

And there’s more. We’ll learn about their new harvesting system and a real life-and-death situation next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.