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The Lundbergs From Dust Bowl to Rice Bowl

Vicky Uhland

“The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country.”

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Skimming across Northern California’s Sacramento Valley, Wendell Lundberg dips the wings of his single-engine Cessna on the approach to his family’s rice fields. Acre after acre is covered in water, broken up only by the earthen berms and dirt roads that divide the fields into a pattern so precise it looks as if the valley were platted by a mathematician. As a flock of egrets swoops across the verdant rice patties on the way to the nearby Feather



All photos courtesy of Lundberg Family Farms

River, Steinbeck’s parched, windswept plains seem almost impossible to imagine.

But for Wendell and his three brothers, the Dust Bowl is as much a part of their lives as the Rice Bowl. Like Steinbeck’s fictional Joads, the Lundbergs were one of thousands of Midwestern farming families who fled the Great Plains in the 1930s and traveled to the fertile valleys of California.

But unlike the hapless Joads, the Lundbergs knew exactly where they were going: Richvale, Calif., at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in the Sacramento Valley. Established by developers in 1909, the Richvale Land Colony was a Depression-era farmers’ utopia: schools, roads, irrigation, drainage and everything else necessary to support a town of 3,000 to 4,000 farmers and their families. If that weren’t enough, developers traveled to Nebraska and Kansas in the 1910s and offered farmers free round trips just to see their paradise. Lured by the promise, Wendell’s grandfather bought 40 acres in

the new community. But he never farmed it, choosing to stay on his ranch in Nebraska. It wasn’t until 1937 that his son Albert, along with his wife, Frances, and their sons Eldon, 9, Wendell, 7, Harlan, 4, and Homer, 2, left their dust-ravaged Nebraska farm in search of a new life on the Lundberg land in California.

Albert and Frances had grown corn and wheat on their Nebraska farm. But the soil in their new acreage wasn’t suitable for those crops. Frankly, it wasn’t suitable for much at all. Known as Stockton clay adobe, the soil is heavy and only about 3 to 4 feet deep. Below that is a hardpan layer that’s virtually impermeable. Nuts, fruits, vegetables—practically any crops with an extensive root system—wither and die when their roots hit the hardpan.

But the soil is perfect for one crop: rice. Water doesn’t penetrate the ground very well, so it collects on top, allowing farmers to grow rice without using any extra water

Patriarch plows way for eco-friendly farming

than what's supplied by the nearby Feather River. The flat land, hot climate and intense summer sun are also a rice farmer's dream. "We think this is the best rice-growing area in the world," Wendell says.

Learning to grow a brand-new crop is difficult for any farmer, but for Albert it was a particular challenge. At age 48, when many men are looking forward to a restful middle age, he had to reinvent his career. But his sons remember Albert as the type of man who could adapt to any challenge. And he had already reinvented himself once before, when he and Frances immigrated to Nebraska from Sweden.

"He had a firm grasp on the way things really were," says Homer. "He had good common sense, and he could see things that some smarter people just couldn't see or understand."

The Lundbergs weren't the only Midwestern farmers who had to learn how to farm all over again once they reached California. "People brought equipment that didn't work in the heavy soil. They didn't understand how to plant rice. But they adapted, and that's the toughness, the courage of the pioneer farmers in Richvale," says Dennis Lindberg, a farmer and Lundberg neighbor who was born in Richvale in 1924.

Even among these pioneers, Albert Lundberg was unique. "Many people came out of the same circumstances as he did, but for some reason he came to California with a real goal to leave the ground better than he found it," Homer says. "Everyone was just getting into chemical farming, but he dragged his feet. Instead, he learned good ecological farming before he even knew the definition of what that was."

Albert and his sons were pioneers in other ways as well. They were the first in the country to grow organic rice. They were the first in their valley to build their own mill and do their own processing. They were the first American farmers to develop and market their own brand of natural and organic rice products—everything from risotto to chips. And along the way, they became the face of the California rice industry through their involvement on a variety of industry boards and commissions.

"They are able to do some things other growers can't or won't do. They're always thinking out of the box, or out of the field,

so to speak," says Ted Trimble, general manager of the Western Canal Water District, which manages the water for the Richvale-area farmers.

Today, the Lundbergs are still bucking tradition. In a time when second- and third-generation farmers are leaving the land behind, the Lundbergs have managed to not only hold the farm together, but to continue growing and innovating the Lundberg Family Farms brand under the leadership of Eldon's, Wendell's, Harlan's and Homer's children.

"I don't think they've changed much over the years—they still have their feet on the ground and are still committed to going to any lengths necessary to get things done right," says Michael Potter, president of Clinton, Mich.-based Eden Foods and a longtime Lundberg customer.

"They're just a class act all the way around."

'Those crazy Lundbergs'

Despite the developer's grand plans, the town of Richvale isn't much larger now than it was when the Lundbergs tilled their first field and planted their first rice crop. The 200 or so residents of the 12-square-block town were almost all transplants of Swedish or Norwegian descent. Some of them, frustrated at not being able to grow traditional Midwestern crops, left town. The ones who stayed banded together, forming cooperatives to mill, store and sell their rice.

The Lundbergs joined those co-ops, but they plowed their own way when it came to farming techniques. In his quest to farm ecologically, Albert devised innovative ways to care for the soil that are still in use today. He left fields fallow to allow the soil to revitalize, and planted rotation



The Lundbergs in 1942 in Richvale, Calif. From left: Frances, Eldon, Wendell and Albert. Front row: Harlan and Homer



Harlan, Frances, Eldon, Homer and Albert in front of their 1948 Chrysler Imperial



Eldon and Ruth's wedding in Keene, Neb. From left: Albert, Frances, Ruth, Eldon, Wendell, Harlan and Homer

Sons took risks for organic success

crops such as vetch and oats, which are rich in natural fertilizer. And instead of burning the leftover rice stalks—known as rice straw—after harvest, he and his sons devised a way to plow the straw back into the field.

Burning rice straw depletes the soil, pollutes the air and destroys the habitat for the more than 200 migratory birds and waterfowl, including cranes, geese, egrets, herons, pheasants and swans, that live in the Sacramento Valley rice fields during the winter. But it's the traditional way of getting rid of thousands of pounds of refuse. All the Lundbergs' neighbors did it. "People called us 'those crazy Lundbergs' for trying to do something different," Harlan says.

But Albert persisted. He was convinced he could devise a machine that would press the rice straw into the dirt, allowing the organisms in the soil to break it down during the winter. He attached huge wheels with big metal cleats to the farm's tractor, with the idea of churning the rice straw into the ground. But the cleats kept bogging down in the mud. "It was an expensive experiment and it was almost a complete and total failure," Homer says with a laugh.

Eventually, Albert invented a cage roller made from rebar welded onto a big drum. Pulled by a tractor, it was able to tamp the rice straw into the mud without clogging the tractor wheels. Even though it was an effective way to put leftover rice straw to good use, most other farmers ignored it until 15 years ago, when the state of California began a program phasing out rice-straw burning. Now, burning is limited to no more than 25 percent of a farm's total acreage. All of a sudden, the Lundbergs' rice-straw disposal system didn't look so crazy after all. Neighbors began asking for advice on how to roll their straw back into the fields. "Now, most growers are where the Lundbergs were 15 years ago," says Tim Johnson, president and chief executive of the California Rice Commission.

"The Lundbergs have a good vision on how to manage grower issues. They always do a very good job of approaching hard problems from a creative standpoint."

Going organic

For more than 30 years, Albert and his sons planted rice, bought more farmland and developed their ecological farming techniques. "There was a lot of trial and error,"



Top: Wendell, Eldon, Homer and Harlan in 1958. Bottom: Harlan, Homer, Eldon and Wendell stand in a field of organic short-grain rice in 1983.

Homer says. "There was a time when you could have written a story just based on the bone pile of what didn't work."

One experiment that did work was growing organic rice. In the late 1960s, the Lundbergs began hearing about how other farmers around the country were growing organic crops. They were intrigued, and asked representatives from the local natural foods distributor, Chico San, to explain just what organic was. Armed with that information, they decided to try growing organic rice, even though no one in America had suc-

cessfully done it.

Rice is difficult to grow organically because the lush fields are virtual petri dishes for weeds. There are two types of weeds that thrive in rice fields: grasses and broadleaf. The Lundbergs devised a system, known as precision planting, to control those weeds organically.

When the rice is planted in the spring, the fields are flooded for three weeks, which kills the grass but lets the rice seeds gestate. For the next 35 days, the fields are allowed to dry, which kills the broadleaf weeds but

Generations work to sustain harvest of caring

doesn't harm the rice seeds. Finally, 3 to 4 inches of water is applied to allow the young rice plants to grow. The flood-drought cycle also kills the major pests and diseases that torment California rice: rice water weevils, tadpole or horseshoe shrimp, and fungus.

The Lundbergs didn't know all this in 1969, when they decided to devote 80 acres of their farm to organic rice. They just knew organic farming was an extension of Albert's credo. "He always used to tell us, 'Boys, when you leave that ground, I want you to leave it better than you found it,'" Wendell says.

Growing organic rice entailed more than just figuring out how to farm without pesticides. At the time when the Lundbergs began their organic experiment, area growers sent their rice to the big mills in Sacramento, where it was mixed together, processed and sold as nameless California rice.

"We thought we had the best balance of rice, the best balance of food grown on healthy soil, but it was just being marketed as generic rice," Homer says. "We thought there was a market for people who cared about the quality of their food."

So the Lundbergs decided to mill and sell their own rice. This was unheard of at the time, and is still rare. According to the California Rice Commission, there are more than 2,500 rice growers in the state, 95 percent of whom farm in the Sacramento Valley, but only about 40 produce and market their own branded rice. Still, for the Lundberg sons, it was a necessary progression. "It was a big risk for us, but you have to find ways to add value to your product," Harlan says.

Such thinking was partially a result of the college education all four brothers received. Harlan studied agriculture at California Polytechnic State University and Eldon majored in civil engineering at California State University-Chico before leaving school to join the Army. Homer graduated with a degree in agricultural education, and Wendell majored in industrial arts. "My dad was always pointing out areas where we were able to do things better than he could because we had better training," Homer says. Farming may have been Albert's bailiwick, but processing, manufacturing and marketing were Eldon's, Harlan's, Wendell's and Homer's.

But before the junior Lundbergs could put their plans into practice, they had to have

a mill. They helped Albert build one out of scrap lumber around the farm. "He'd encourage us to chew gum because we could stick it between the boards. That mill was built out of old wood and chewing gum," Homer jokes, "and it was a race to get it done before the crop was ready."

The next year, the Lundbergs founded a company—Wehah Farm, an acronym of Wendell, Eldon, Harlan, Albert and Homer—and began marketing short-grain, organic brown rice. "A lot of the farmers around there thought they were crazy for spending so much time developing a market for their rice when they could just be shipping it in plain brown burlap bags like everyone else," says Terry Fowler, founder of San Rafael, Calif.-based Fowler Brothers Distributors of Natural Foods.

"It takes a lot of effort and sacrifice to create your own marketing and packaging and distribution. You have to be very dedicated and hardworking," says Carl Hoff, president of the Butte County Rice Growers Association, which most Richvale farmers belong to. "There's a potential to lose everything."

Still, the Lundbergs persisted, developing their iconic label with the picture of the four brothers and slowly figuring out the marketing end. In the pioneer days of organics, that was problematic. The family got into a bind in the early '70s when its sole distributor over-predicted its market and wasn't able to buy all the rice it had contracted for. "We just had to go out and find other markets," Homer says. "One thing about food production is it's on a really narrow margin. I like to joke that some people will project all their sales off one good year in a row."

From the beginning, the Lundbergs turned out a good organic product, remembers Michael Potter of Eden Foods. "In the early years when organics were not usually [U.S. Department of Agriculture] No. 1 quality, the Lundbergs were producing consistent, clean rice. Where they were at in the 1970s in terms of their sophistication, their technical abilities—they were definitely head and shoulders above your usual Midwest organic farmers.

"They were the first living proof that organics could be grown large-scale, commercially."

Generation II

Albert died in a car crash in 1970, and his sons were left to carry on his legacy. For many family farms, this second-generation handover can be difficult, as siblings try to carve their pieces of land from the family homestead. But in the Lundbergs' newly expanded business, there was room for every brother to excel and thrive.

While all the brothers agree that first and foremost they're farmers, each of Albert's boys brings a unique mindset to the production side of the business.

Eldon is the typical oldest child, holding the family together and providing leadership. Always nattily dressed, complete with cravat, he radiates a quiet, old-school charm. "Eldon is the president, the chairman of the board, the head of the table. He's the diplomat, the guy who makes sure everyone gets to say what they want to say. He keeps the peace in the room," says Tim O'Donnell, who started as a sales rep with the Lundbergs 20 years ago and is now vice president of sales and marketing.

"Eldon's our little social butterfly. He's the one who visits customers the most," says Karen Skupowski, Lundberg's customer service manager. O'Donnell likes to tell the story of how Eldon will take out the family Cessna (every brother but Harlan has a pilot's license) to visit local stores with his "Flying Farmers Group."

"We call the plane the 'crop prop,'" O'Donnell says. "If you go to a store and go to the rice section and you see a bunch of Lundberg recipe pamphlets shoved between the boxes, you'll know that Eldon was there." Not all of Eldon's fly-bys are marketing-related, however. "He likes to visit home-less places and bring them rice," O'Donnell says.

Wendell is equally charming, but his business interests lie more with the financial and farming side of the business. He's the brother most involved in the day-to-day growing processes. "He's very passionate about and always championing things for the farming side and the drying and storage part of the business," O'Donnell says. Wendell is the only brother who doesn't live in or around Richvale, choosing the sophistication and style of the nearby university town Chico.

Harlan is the least gregarious of the

brothers. “He’s the salt-of-the-earth type,” O’Donnell says. Blunt and opinionated, Harlan has led a fascinating life that includes a stint in the Peace Corps in Brazil and missionary service in Kenya, England and Italy, where he and his wife were dorm parents in children’s homes. Among all of the brothers, Harlan is most at home in the laboratory. He even created a proprietary strain of rice, *Wehani*, which is a brown rice developed from an Indian basmati-type of rice seed. He lives in a modest house steps away from the farm offices.

Homer is the talker. “He’s a guy that tells a lot of stories that are incredibly funny, just at the drop of the hat. I’m always thinking, ‘Where did he come up with that one?’” O’Donnell says. Friendly and affable, Homer is the brother most involved with the sales and marketing aspects of the company. “I think he’s the perfect spokesman for Lundberg Family Farms,” O’Donnell says.

Lunch at the cafe

Throughout the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s, Lundberg Family Farms continued to grow. Not only did the brothers buy more land, but they also built an infrastructure to mill, store and manufacture an increasing number of rice products. Progress was slow, however. Lundberg’s mill manager, Steve Clement, remembers that when he started with the company 30 years ago, the offices were in a 200-square-foot side room of the Richvale Café. “There were four desks that pretty much took up the whole room,” he says. “Everything was basically done by the seat of our pants.”

Even in the mid-’80s, when O’Donnell was hired as the company’s first salesperson, he remembers that “six to eight of us—the four brothers, the general manager and a couple others—would meet at our table at the Richvale Café and eat lunch together, and that was the start of the board meeting.

“It was quite informal and very refreshing,” he adds. “But it was very strange walking into the café and knowing I was going to have lunch with the board of directors.”

That informal, consensus-style of decision-making was necessary in a company run by, in essence, four CEOs. “The brothers would have disagreements, but they would consciously bow to the brother who was most passionate about whatever they were discussing. They avoided conflicts for the good of the long-term company,” O’Donnell says.

“They pretty much agreed on one

thing—you never had one brother telling you one thing and then another telling you something else,” adds Skupowski, the customer service manager.

Over the years, the Lundbergs added rice cakes, rice chips, rice syrup and flour, rice milk, packaged rice entrees, risotto and rice cereal and pasta to their product offerings. They moved their offices out of the café to a couple small buildings, and built a new mill, rice drier and manufacturing facilities nearby.

Across the road, they constructed an elaborate rice-storage system consisting of multi-story, airtight concrete and metal towers that can hold nearly 100 million pounds of rice. They designed a proprietary cooling system that pumps air into the containers and keeps temperatures low during the hot Sacramento Valley summers. This inventive airflow system kills pests organically, without chemical fumigants. If pests do appear, the oxygen can be flushed from the bins and replaced with carbon dioxide, essentially suffocating any creepy crawlies before they infest the rice.

Third gen

As Eldon, Wendell, Harlan and Homer approached retirement age, they began to hand control of the company to their children. Although many of the 11 third-generation Lundbergs opted for careers outside the company business, several are now full-time employees of the family firm. Others use their expertise to help out occasionally, like Harlan’s son Mark, a doctor who is on the board of directors and who designed first-aid kits for the manufacturing operation.

Wendell’s daughter Jessica, who is the company’s nursery manager and took over as chairwoman of the board in 2005, sums up the third-generation philosophy: “It’s really a wonderful gift—it’s a tremendous opportunity to be able to step into a family business.”

Jessica studied pre-med in college with the idea of becoming a doctor but, she says, “I was always looking at the [farm]. It’s a legacy that I felt a responsibility to keep going.” Adds her cousin Bryce, Harlan’s son and the company’s vice president of agriculture: “I think there’s a need to continually add to the family holding of land.”

Longtime Lundberg employees, who watched the third generation play in the fields and pelt each other with rice at family fish fries, understand why so many of Albert’s

grandchildren are drawn back to the farm once they reach adulthood. “It’s in their blood,” Skupowski says.

The second generation also made it easy for their children to take over the business. Just as Albert relied on his sons’ knowledge and training to make the transition into milling and marketing, Homer, Harlan, Wendell and Eldon rely on their kids’ expertise to take the business into the 21st century. “They know all about computers and things we have no idea how to use,” Eldon says. Adds Homer: “That’s what progress is. A person has to have a bit of humility, to be able to say, ‘I’m just a gear in the machinery, and it has to go onto the next gear.’”

The first shifting of gears began in 1998, when Eldon’s son Grant took over as CEO. With a bachelor’s degree in agricultural business, a master’s degree in agricultural economics, an interest in finance and accounting, and a vocabulary that includes phrases like “vertically integrated,” Grant was a natural choice among the third generation to run the business operations. If there was any jockeying for position among his cousins, the family’s not telling, but there certainly doesn’t appear to be any resentment that their childhood playmate is now their boss. Part of that can be attributed to Grant’s management style, which, like that of his father and uncles, leans heavily on consensus building.

The company still has its weekly lunch meetings at the Richvale Café, although they’re much larger than the informal, everybody-included lunches of the ’70s and ’80s. Still, the roundtable discussions, where 30 or so board members, department managers and guests report about what’s going on in their divisions, help keep the 170-employee company close to its mom-and-pop roots. So does the family-run board of directors, which now consists of Wendell, Homer, Grant, Jessica, Bryce and Mark Lundberg, along with Eldon’s son-in-law Kevin Parrish and Homer’s son-in-law Tim Schultz.

“To see family and their spouses have equal influence and expertise, and having 3-year-olds crawling around the floor during the meetings, I’ve never seen anything like it,” says Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. “This is a family with a core code of ethics, raised in a respectful, loving environment. It gives them liberation so that everyone can get their ideas into the hopper. The uniqueness of this family is that they can farm with vision.”

Lundbergs sow seeds for future generations

Whether the management system results in profits, or the profits allow the system to exist, Lundberg Family Farms averages 8 percent growth per year, and during the last two years has grown 30 percent. “I’ve always wondered what would happen if our business declined 6 percent and sales started to go south. We’ve never really had to fight for the money. We’ve had 20 good years,” O’Donnell says.

Capitalizing on those decades of popularity, Grant says the company’s goal is a “qualitative, not quantitative, approach. We don’t have a quantitative number [of revenue] that we’re trying to hit in five years.” Rather, Lundberg Family Farms will strive to be No. 1 in each of the categories in which it currently has products. To Grant, that translates into a consumer recognition of the values Lundberg is trying to achieve: environmentally, socially responsible food products.

“I really appreciate that they’re offering things like chips and other staples and haven’t gone for the flashy, Madison Avenue-type products,” says Mark Squire, president of Good Earth Natural Foods store in Fairfax, Calif. Squire has stocked Lundberg products for 35 years. “We sort of felt like we were all participating in this big experiment when they first went organic. For us, they are really *the* organic grower in California.”

Planting for the future

The third generation of Lundbergs is committed to continuing Albert’s vision, albeit on a much larger scale. The family farm is now about 5,000 acres, and the Lundbergs contract with growers owning an additional 9,000 acres. About 70 percent of the acreage is organic; the rest is “eco-farmed.”

Because it’s so labor-intensive to grow organic rice, Lundberg developed the eco-farm method to reduce costs and provide products at lower price points. Eco-farming is basically conventional rice farming without the high environmental impact. While conventional rice producers douse their fields in a wide variety of insecticides, pesticides and herbicides, the Lundbergs rely on one type of insecticide and eight herbicides that are carefully selected for minimal environmental damage. “We don’t use broad-spectrum, pre-emergence herbicides like some rice growers do,” Bryce says. Eco-farming also uses conventional fertilizers and fewer cover crops than organic farming.

Bryce and his team continue to develop

new, better ways to farm organically, including planting fava beans—one of the few useful plants that grow in the farm’s heavy clay soil—as a cover crop. Jessica Lundberg devotes 90 acres to her nursery, where she experiments with different seeds and rice strains. Lundberg currently grows 14 varieties of rice, including Wendell’s Wehani strain, but adding a new one is a major undertaking, necessitating its own storage bins, manufacturing area and packaging. “You’ve got to find a variety that’s compelling enough to say that’s our new variety—one that’s got the right flavor, appearance and price to produce,” Bryce says.

Other third-generation innovations include a farm-wide global positioning system and a solar-generation project. The GPS unit stores the parameters of each rice field and sends navigational information to farming equipment, allowing precision weed tilling and seed planting in rows only 6 inches apart. The solar system consists of an acre of solar panels that powers Lundberg’s drier facility. Eventually, the plan is to run all of the farm’s operations with solar power.

Members of the third generation are also preparing for their kids to eventually take over the business. They’ve devised an internship program for the fourth-generation teenagers that lasts two to three summers and allows them to work in all aspects of the farm business. The idea is to not only introduce the youngest Lundbergs to the family legacy, but also to “try to capture their interest on a number of levels so they can see what their talents are and where those talents fit in the company, or just in their lives in general,” Grant says. Already, the oldest fourth-generation child,



Peter Mulberry, Harlan, Suzie (Grant’s wife), Grant, Eldon, Tim O’Donnell, Ingrid Lundberg, Doug Speakman and Wendell



Harlan and Grant during harvest



Jessica addresses a tent-full of spectators at a company gathering.

Bryce’s 18-year-old son Anders, has participated in the internship. “We want to give them something useful for their life that they can take with them, whether they decide to work in the family business or not,” Grant says. ■

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