

Jim Fraley PodCAST Transcript

Kara Snyder:

Hello and welcome to the Podcast. A. Podcast, produced by the College of Applied Science and technology at Illinois, State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant Dean of Marketing communications and constituent relations for the college. Each episode we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today we have a chance to talk to Jim Fraley. Jim is an alum of the Department of Agriculture. He currently farms his family's century farms, where they raise hay, corn, soybeans, and cattle, and he is the former livestock program director for the Illinois farm bureau. Welcome and thank you for being here.

Jim Fraley:

Oh, thank you, too. It's been a pleasure working with you and all the other Isu staff during this process. Enjoy it very much.

Kara Snyder:

Well, this is going to be fun. So we are going to start at the beginning. And I am really curious what came first for you, finding agriculture or finding Isu. How did you find your passion and know that this was the place you wanted to pursue it?

Jim Fraley:

Well, I grew up as a 6th generation of a family farm in Naperville, Dupage County. It was homesteaded, and so farming has been in my blood for many, many years, and that's how I grew up was being very close to agriculture after high school I farmed with my family and knew that that's where I wanted to be. I wanted to follow agriculture in some capacity, whether that's farming or being involved in an agricultural business, or in this case both. So I've always farmed. And when I was going to college and I was a transfer student coming in after Joliet Junior College with a degree in agriculture, I thought, oh, where's my next step, you know, and I went to Illinois State and met up with Dr. Paul Walker, the animal science instructor here, and he took so much time with me that day,

visiting the facilities, talking about agriculture, and you know he just gave me all the time in the world, and I knew at that moment I needed to come to ISU.

Kara Snyder:

I love stories like that, because, you know, you always hear the people make the place, and all these years later you can still remember his name, and remember the time that he took with you, and I think that's so special.

Jim Fraley:

Yes, and we became fast friends after college, too, I mean, we remained in contact, and he had the same passion for John Deere equipment that I did. And with my job at farm bureau, I got to still maintain a lot of these contacts, so we'd run it into each other at fairs and at animal or livestock events, and and catch up. So you know, we've always become been very close and become good friends.

Kara Snyder:

Well, and that probably helped you, especially as a transfer student, really find your place and be able to get involved on campus. So can you tell us a little bit how you spent your free time while you were a student here?

Jim Fraley:

Sure. And that's just it. As I I could choose to be a student that just, you know, studied and did my homework, and really didn't do many extracurriculars. But the Ag. Community is close and we're friendly, and we're we're all encompassing. And we're inclusive. And those were all the things that I wanted in my college experience. So I joined the livestock judging team. And what an experience that was! I mean, each person that I was on that judging team with back in the day. I'm still in contact with today, and we go to the Harvey Woods golf outing together. And its really a good time, but that's what I did. That was the big thing for me. And of course there was a lot of social activities within the College of Agriculture, you know, dances, parties, and and things that we could get together even there was even a thing called the Little I, where we would be assigned an animal. Take care of it and get it ready for a little exhibition or show, and we'd show the animal and fit it, and and we'd, I guess, have a little competition to see

who is the best showman for the different species of animals. So that was a lot of fun, and I certainly learned a lot. A lot of hands-on experiences at ISU.

Kara Snyder:

What do you miss the most about your time on campus.

Jim Fraley:

Now, obviously, my friends, I mean, Facebook has come a long way to keep us close and keep us active in each other's lives. And that's really helped. And we run across old friends and contacts, and we start catching up. And that's what's the biggest thing that I think has really helped us is the social media aspect and maintaining contact with these folks that we were so close with in college. And when we see each other again. We pick up right where we left off the last time, although I will say, the older we get, the more we talk about our kids and not our college experiences. We're talking about our kids getting married and having children themselves and being grandparents, or, you know, unfortunately, talking about the last surgery we had, or our latest maladies. But you know, in the end it's all about fellowship and talking and catching up on old times.

Kara Snyder:

Yeah, the topics change, but the friendships stay the same and grow. I love to hear that that's awesome. So tell us about your initial job. Search your transition from being a student to your career at the farm bureau. What did that look like for you?

Jim Fraley:

That was an interesting experience, because Paul Walker, who I mentioned earlier, took me aside. I was a very good student. I think I graduated 3rd in my Ag. Class, and he took me aside and said, Jim, you need to go to grad school, and he was a University of Illinois graduate, and he said, you need to go to the U of I. So I applied to grad school, and in that time, from where Paul Walker mentored me and encouraged me on to grad school. had the application process going, and I was interviewing with the Illinois farm bureau, and Jack Fowler was the head of human resources at the time, and he told me during the interview I said, well, I've applied to grad school, and he stopped me right there. He said, "Jim, I'm going to consider this interview over You need to go to grad school if you got

the opportunity. Go on and further your education. When you're done in 2 years, talk to us again, and we'll see where it leads at that time.” So that's exactly what I did. I went to grad school, thanks to Paul Walker's mentorship, and finished up with a master's from the University of Illinois in swine nutrition and animal science, and interviewed with farm bureau again, and and got hired right out right before I even had graduated. So it worked out great for me. I went from a freshly minted master's student to an employee the next week at the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Kara Snyder:

You can't beat that. That's very lucky.

Jim Fraley:

Yeah, yeah, it really was. And what's interesting about the 2 universities is they each played a huge role in my life. Illinois State, I would characterize as the university where you became very close friends with your classmates, and you all did a lot of hands on work with animals. I was an animal science student at Illinois State. So we did a lot of work with animals, even did some little research studies and worked with the professors on that. But there was no place where you could milk cows one week, calve cows the next week, and then process pigs and sheep the next week. We did everything, and it was all expected we were expected to do the work, I mean, we all did it. And at the University of Illinois. It was more a plot of a book learning, situation, and you know you learned biochemistry and and statistics and things like that that are were all very helpful for me, but you know you the hands-on learning that came with an ISU education, I missed some of that.

Kara Snyder:

But it sounds like it really combined to make you a very well-rounded employee. Can you tell us what was the job title that you went into when you started at farm bureau.

Jim Fraley:

Well, I was an agribusiness training specialist, and at the time in the late eighties there were— agriculture was just coming out of a situation where you know interest rates were, believe it or not, 22% interest. So when you borrowed money, you were paying 22%

interest. Crazy to hear of that today, but it was a very difficult, difficult time for agriculture, so I came in as a retrained farmer, and because I had farmed after high school before I went to college, and so I was a retrained farmer, and that was very interesting for Illinois farm bureau to hire somebody that was a farmer, sought some education, and now was in a situation as an agribusiness training specialist, teaching other farmers about marketing, financials, and things that were very important for them to learn, especially during this time of financial crisis. So that's what I started doing. And then a livestock position opened up in our farm bureau, and I jumped in, was able to take that, and was the longest serving livestock director. The Illinois Farm Bureau's ever had so... very happy to have that position, was able to put my degrees to work, so to speak.

Kara Snyder:

Well, and that actually brings me to my next question, which is that it can be really rare to see someone stay at the same company for over 30 years. So tell us about how you were able to continue to grow and learn. How did you keep things fresh throughout that time?

Jim Fraley:

Well, I was lucky to have some good supervisors that really encouraged me to develop my position to a national level, even though I worked for the Illinois Farm Bureau, The Illinois Farm Bureau wanted to make sure that our members viewpoints were taken on to the National level, so I was very involved in organizations like the National Institute for Animal Agriculture, for example, US Animal Health Association, where we took policies that we had in Illinois Farm Bureau and sought to make them policies in other organizations that ultimately led to USDA policies. We're talking about issues like animal identification, that is a national effort. Now that is actually being realized. Now, where we have to identify animals for the purpose of tracking for animal disease purposes in the event of an outbreak, so we have a quick and fast response. Other things like elimination of diseases like pseudorabies and brucellosis. Those were all eliminated and eradicated in our State and nationally during my tenure at Illinois Farm Bureau, and we all had a hand in doing that. So those are some things that were really important, I think, as an Illinois farm bureau organization, and to see that our members were able to take advantage and

take have some real benefits by us being involved at a national level with our with our position, so encouragement with my supervisors to do these unbelievable things, and attend meetings and share my information, that was key.

Kara Snyder:

Yeah, I think that's really exciting and continuing to keep employees engaged is so important in promoting that loyalty and making sure that people are still excited to come to work right? So I'm glad to hear that that's exciting.

So how would you describe your leadership style? Looking back on your time at the farm bureau, but also your time at home on your farm. Currently, How would you describe your leadership style.

Jim Fraley:

I would consider myself a cooperator and one who really enjoyed teamwork. So you know, if I was given a task I was always reaching out and seeking advice from other people to see how would they do this, you know? It's just not my way or the highway, it's like, I'm really curious to see how you can help me get this job completed. So I was more the person that sought out cooperation and not just lead the charge and go ahead and do it. I was more the person that said, "let's work on this together and come up with a solution and go from there."

Kara Snyder:

I think you might be the first person to ever describe your relationship style as a cooperator, and I love that. That's a great word. Thank you for sharing.

Jim Fraley:

You bet!

Kara Snyder:

So tell us about the transition from your career at the Illinois Farm Bureau to full time farming. What did that look like for you, and what's it like for you on a day to day basis now?

Jim Fraley:

Well, it's interesting, because I retired, and I thought, Well, I'll probably have to do something in retirement to keep myself busy. And at the time Margie's, my wife's, brother was farming the family farms and he retired, and Margie and I thought, Well, let's just go ahead and step in and start farming. And we thought we could rent farms and just be cash renters and let somebody farm the ground for us, or we could say we could do it ourselves, and we'd always done a little bit of farming on our own, you know, put up hay and fed cattle that sort of things, but we just stepped right in. So I bought a planter, and I had a tractor already, and just started accumulating equipment and and just jumped in full, you know, full time, and of course my friends were all patting me on the back and say, we'll help you. We'll give you advice, this sort of thing, and I lean on them heavily, but today we're farming Margie's families' century farms, that means they've been in the family for over a hundred years, and so now we are farming it together, and with my kids and she-- we all pitch in and do something, especially at planting time when everything is kind of hectic. But you know, all my kids know how to feed cattle. They all know how to put up hay. They all know how to plant corn, and that's what I get the most satisfaction of, is passing that knowledge on to the next generation, and even my 12-year-old grandson and my 5-year-old grandson can drive tractors and know what each equipment's job is on the farm, and that's very rewarding.

Kara Snyder:

Well, I was gonna ask what your favorite part of your job was, but it sounds like that's the easy answer is being able to pass on that legacy and see them learn and grow. So on the flip side, I will ask you what is the most challenging part of your job.

Jim Fraley:

I really have grown to have an appreciation for farmers that farm all by themselves. Just themselves. So you know, as the kids grew up like putting up hay. You know it takes a small army to put up hay, but today I have an accumulator and a grapple, so I can do it all from the comfort of my air conditioned cab, and that's kind of funny. But you know I just have to learn to do things on my own, you know, hooking up a piece of equipment. Sometimes it takes 2 or 3 times jumping in and out of the tractor to get it hooked up just

right and finding creative ways to do things by yourself, and it takes a little longer, and I miss not having my kids there. They have all have jobs. But on the important jobs they're there with me. And that's what's really, really gratifying. And and it's something I really enjoy seeing them enjoy being with us.

Kara Snyder:

Well, Jim, we are about to the end, and we are going to finish with a speed round. So I'm going to ask that you go with your 1st instinct on these questions?

Jim Fraley:

Okay.

Kara Snyder:

Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Jim Fraley:

Oh, I'm a night owl. I tend to either read a book 'till probably a lot of times it might even be midnight, or I'm watching it. Binging a TV show, but definitely, a night owl.

Kara Snyder:

Is there anything you can recommend to us? The book or TV show anything we should add to our list.

Jim Fraley:

I've been reading these novels by—they're World War II novels—by Deutermann, and they are extremely fascinating. So they're historical novels about some of the World War II—key World War II battles—and it's just I've enjoyed them immensely, so I'd recommend those books. Of course I'm a Jack Reacher fan which also I can watch on TV now, which which I think that they're doing a great job in that in that series. I'm watching stick right now an Owen Wilson flick series, and that's about a golf themed show. So yeah, I've I've got a really wide variety of likes when it comes to movies and books.

Kara Snyder:

Oh, that's great something for everyone! All right, Coffee or tea.

Jim Fraley:

I never used to be a coffee drinker until farm bureau and farm bureau has got me, you know. You go to an evening meeting, and they all have coffee there. So I started drinking coffee then, and so now I drink coffee one cup every morning, and I take a little milk in it, and that's about it.

Kara Snyder:

Okay, fair enough, at least you know who to blame. Right?

Jim Fraley:

That's right, exactly.

Kara Snyder:

If you have a completely free Saturday, how are you spending it?

Jim Fraley:

Oh, probably I'm probably doing something piddling around in the shop on a project, or, you know, working on a tractor restoring an old tractor, or I'm doing something really probably not very productive, like watching the Cubs game or taking a nap on a Saturday afternoon. How's that sound?

Kara Snyder:

I think that's great. No obligations. I love it. What's the best trip you've ever taken?

Jim Fraley:

Oh, easily, I've been to Scotland 4 times. My family is—I'm about—according to 23 & Me, I'm about 60% Scottish. I learned how to play the bagpipes, and I'm very proud of my Scottish heritage, and we still keep in touch with my family, my cousins in Scotland, and when I go to visit them we can go to the home farm that my family emigrated from almost 200 years ago, and that farm is still a farm today it's still in existence. Some of the buildings are still there and we just love getting together as cousins and and talking about times. We've seen each other in the past. And of course, again, on Facebook, we keep in touch with each other all the time, and that's very, very encouraging. I love that. But to go

back to our home farm and walk where my ancestors did 200 years ago and know that you know I am one of them today is pretty interesting.

Kara Snyder:

Oh, that's amazing! That sounds like a great experience. What is the best advice you've ever received?

Jim Fraley:

Well, I think of it often. My dad used to say that the best crop a farmer could ever grow is their children, and I think of that all the time when I'm making hay or planting a straight row of corn. I'm thinking of my dad, and you know he was the one who taught me how to feed cattle, how to be proud of your heritage, and you know, taking pride in a good looking well cared for farm.

Kara Snyder:

That really just puts it all in perspective, doesn't it?

Jim Fraley:

Yeah, it really does.

Kara Snyder:

Well, I ask everyone who comes on the podcast... Avanti's gondola or Pub II cheese balls?

Jim Fraley:

Oh, is there anything bad at Pub II?.

Kara Snyder:

That's a fair question.

Jim Fraley:

No, I mean, we used to go to Pub II for lunches with my farm bureau buddies, you know. We would hit up Pub II, probably once every couple weeks, we'd say, "Hey, let's go to Pub II," you know, and of course cheese balls, and you know a bacon Cheeseburger was always on the menu, let me tell you. Oh, that's—You can't pass it up. That brings back so

many memories, and they've got a lot of ISU memorabilia in the pub, and we really love to go there. I just ate there last week. I have a confession for you, Karen.

Kara Snyder:

Yeah, I'm not sure if you're allowed to go there without ordering the cheese balls while you're there.

Jim Fraley:

Oh, sure, no doubt! No doubt.

Kara Snyder:

One last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say.

Jim Fraley:

Work hard in the classroom, but enjoy the experience. I mean, you're making memories that are going to last a lifetime. And you know it's going to stick with you and your friends, and you know you're going to be talking about things that you did back in college fun, things things that stick in your memory, and you're going to be making more friends through these memories and their children. And it's just going to last a lifetime. Your experiences here at ISU. So work hard in the classroom, but enjoy the time.

Kara Snyder:

Well, thanks for that advice, and thanks again for being here.

Jim Fraley:

You bet, Kara. Thank you so much.

Kara Snyder:

That was Jim Fraley, farmer and alum from the Department of Agriculture, join us next time on the Podcast for more stories from our cast, alumni.