

# ***DBJ*** Business Brief

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## **Labor of Love** *The Fioranelli family*



(From left) Gary, George, Eric and Wayne Fioranelli

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Photography by Matthew Wood

Farming is hard work, and profitability is often influenced by factors beyond the control of the farmer. Some farmers stick with it just to make a living, but others truly have a love for farming.

"I've done it all my life," says George Fioranelli, 58, who farms near Cleveland with two brothers and his son. "I love farming. It gets hairy at times because of the headaches, the weather and the expense. If you don't like farming, you would hate it, but I love it. I wouldn't do anything else."

He started farming with his father, Ned Fioranelli, who passed away in 2007. George began farming on his own in 1973 growing soybeans and cotton. In 1976, his brother Gary came in and, in 1986, their brother Wayne joined them. George's son, Eric, started working with them in 2004.

They stopped growing cotton after a drought in 1975, 1976 and 1977. After not being able to pick more than a bale of cotton all three years combined, they made the decision to stop growing cotton. Since then, they have been growing soybeans, rice and wheat.

There are some distinct advantages to being part of a family farm. Fioranelli says if you have to leave for some reason, you know there is someone there who cares about what is going on and can get things taken care of.

"We all work together to make it all as one instead of leaving it with a manager," Fioranelli says. "It is more personal input."

In addition to the crops, the Fioranellis "grow a lot of families." In addition to their own, they provide full-time employment to eight or nine people and up to 15 at harvest time.

"It is hard to find good people," Fioranelli says. "You try to keep the ones you can depend on year around if you can afford to do it so you won't have to be hunting all the time to get someone to come to work."

The Fioranellis forward contract a lot of their crop, and work hard to control expenses.

"I think having brothers and a son around that kind of look after your interests helps you keep your costs in line," Fioranelli says.

Farming has changed drastically over the years.

"Equipment has gone from little bitty stuff to large tractors," Fioranelli says. "Equipment and chemicals have changed so much over the years. But it takes more land and production to make it these days."

They were spared the flooding this year that plagued thousands of farmers in the Delta and have a beautiful crop. Commodity prices are good, although they have backed off somewhat from earlier record prices.

Right now herbicide resistance to pigweed and knapweed is a concern. There is hope that new chemicals or different varieties of soybeans might be developed to help deal with the problem. Different crop rotations might help, too, but if that doesn't work, farmers might have to go back to manual labor to chop out the weeds.

"We haven't done that yet, but we may see a day when we have to," he says. "I chopped a lot of cotton as a youth. I didn't like it. I prefer to use the chemicals."

The Fioranellis make sure to work closely with experts like their seed and chemical sales representatives.

"I trust their judgment," Fioranelli says. "I depend on them. I also ask other farmers what they do. All the farmers out here converse with each other about what is going on. People do something different, and see what works the best. We are changing our operation every year a little bit."

One thing that has changed is that farmers in the past have planted in rows. Then using herbicide resistant seed allowed farmers to plant flat, which saved two or three trips across the field, but now farmers are going back to the old way of planting in rows.

"Everyone is bedding up some because of drainage," Fioranelli says. "Crops can't take the water like they used to. Today we use much wider equipment and auto guides (GPS) to keep it straight. We run computers on our combines. It maps the field, tells where yields are high and low, and gives you an idea what you need to do concerning drainage, fertilization, or application of chemicals. We give the map to the seed rep, and he goes around and gives recommendations to make it better."

During his time farming, Fioranelli has seen soybean yields improve, and even better increases in rice yields. However, like other rice farmers, they were hurt by a steep drop in rice exports in 2006 after about 30 percent of the rice fields in the U.S. were contaminated by a rice strain bred to be resistant to Bayer's Liberty-brand herbicide. The European Union banned imports of long-grained rice from the U.S. until 2010.

Recently, Bayer CropScience agreed to pay up to \$750 million to settle lawsuits brought by rice farmers. Fioranelli says he believes most Mississippi rice farmers were part of that class action lawsuit settlement, and he believes the rice market still hasn't completely come back. "I don't know if we have ever really recovered from it," Fioranelli says.

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