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Next Generation

Assuring a bright future for rendering

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Next Generation

Assuring a bright future for rendering

By Tina Caparella

Oppportunity. Empowerment. Transparency. Flexibility. Teamwork. These prospects are what some millennial rendering employees look for when choosing a company or dedicating their career to the industry. Although many say this generation (those aged 24 to 39, according to Pew Research Center) is difficult to manage, lazy, and feel entitled, when talking to a handful of this group who now work in the rendering industry, these definitions are far from the truth. This gives assurance that the rendering industry will be in good hands well into the future—a future that is now.

Most kids do not aspire to work in the rendering industry, even those who grow up on farms or in agriculture families, but that is mainly because most do not know about it. How then do new hires uncover plentiful rendering opportunities? What does the next generation of workers, who eventually will become or already are company leaders, look for when choosing a job or company? *Render* asked these and other questions to a handful of millennials who are recognized as up and coming stars by long-time rendering leaders. Below are their insights into the rendering industry and the companies in need of the next generation of renderers.

The Darling Five

While earning a bachelor's degree in agriculture from Missouri State University, Tim Law embarked on his career in 2005 at a private Missouri feed mill before venturing into the human food industry at Tyson Foods. After a time, he then changed direction into animal and pet food, first with Purina Animal Nutrition, then Mars Petcare. It was during this time a colleague, Tom Dobbs of Darling Ingredients, enlightened Law on the growing opportunities at the global rendering company. After meeting with the Darling team, and taking a look around at the “gray haired” employees,

Law was convinced there was room for advancement so he took the leap just over three years ago. Dobbs retired seven months later, putting Law in the position of overseeing Darling's quality assurance programs, which has afforded him the opportunity to present at industry events the last few years, educating others on the important role animal proteins play in pet food nutrition.

Sarah Whitley was a high school agriculture teacher in Texas and Wisconsin before deciding she wanted to put her agriculture degree to work in industry. So, five years ago, she applied and was hired for an opening at Sonac in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, a Darling Ingredients brand. “The company took a chance on me,” Whitley acknowledged. Three months later, Steve Thomas at Darling's Cold Spring, Kentucky, location noticed Whitley's talent and quickly added her to his sales team, where she now focuses on proteins for the pet food market. She credits Thomas' mentoring and the guidance of many other long-term rendering talents for her success with the company.

“There is so much tribal knowledge in this industry,” Whitley commented. “Time with a mentor is critically important.”

Michael Mann, who grew up on a family farm in Pendleton County, Kentucky, and went to school with the grandchildren of the founders of former rendering company Griffin Industries, knew of the rendering industry, but not

much else. After earning his animal science degree at Morehead State University in 2009, he went back to work on the family farm. Mann quickly realized farming was a hard way to make a living so he worked in the University of Kentucky agriculture department for a few years before Thomas, once again, spotted skills in Mann and recruited him to join the team at Darling. That was



Darling Ingredients' next generation include (from left) Michael Mann, Sarah Whitley, Tim Law, Seth King, and Alison Moore.

eight years ago, and today, Mann also markets the company's proteins, mostly to the poultry industry.

Seth King is the new kid on the block at Darling, having only been with the company for just under a year. He too grew up on a family farm in Illinois, but instead of the typical agriculture or animal science degree, he opted for one in English, graduating from Western Illinois University in 2004. King then switched gears and landed at a Japanese-owned grain-based commodities trading company in Chicago, Illinois. "I was the only non-Japanese trader in the room," he recalled. After a few years, his trading focus switched to ethanol until a mutual friend introduced him to Bill Reagor at Darling's specialty division. King also saw the potential of working for the growing rendering company as employee retirements loomed so he jumped on board. King currently hedges for organic fertilizers, bakery product exports, and, most recently, feather meal.



Amy Wolf, Valley Proteins, appreciates the close-knit community of the rendering industry.

Alison Moore has an insider advantage on the rendering industry—both her grandfather and father worked for Griffin Industries through their entire careers. Her grandfather, Elwood Orr, was one of the company's first drivers back in the 1940s before eventually becoming corporate fleet manager. He worked for the company for nearly 50 years. Her father, Mike Godman, began his career at Griffin in the 1980s, also in fleet, where he currently serves as corporate fleet manager.

"Lucky for me, most dinner conversations were about rendering," Moore jokingly remembers. Living on a fifth-generation family farm, she also realized farming was not profitable so she pursued an agriculture business degree and interned in Griffin's management trainee program one summer with the goal of eventually working for the company. Darling then bought Griffin Industries in late 2010 and everything came to a screeching halt. Moore shifted gears and went to work for the United States Department of Agriculture as a soil conservationist, though she stayed in touch with Brian Griffin, who remained at Darling during the transition. She was finally welcomed into the rendering family seven years ago, starting as a business analyst on the raw material side of Darling, including used cooking oil.

"My goal was to soak up as much as possible," remarked Moore, who is now a product manager and analyst in sales.

While each individual landed in the rendering industry via different pathways, all have a passion for agriculture and rendering's sustainable contribution to feeding the world,



Amanda Unga, The Lauridsen Group, never imagined she would work for the renderer that collected dead pigs from her family farm.

especially since they all have young children, including several infants. All agree that communication, support, and interpersonal relationships (especially in today's high-tech world) are key to success as both an employee and as a company, with that mentality needing to come from top management. They especially appreciate Darling's diverse portfolio, its innovation, its transparency to employees and the public, and its high code of conduct: all priorities of the millennial generation.

"Darling is diverse so I feel secure in my job, a job I can feel proud of," Whitley commented.

"The cool thing is, Darling is an innovative company, open to our ideas," King added. Not long ago, the company developed a Millennial Innovative Team to welcome new ideas from its next generation of employees.

As for continuing to attract new talent, Whitley suggested the industry partner with high school and college programs, such as FFA and college career fairs, to explain the real job opportunities available, from food safety and engineering, to trade positions like welding, machine operators, and truck drivers.

Fresh Out of School, Rendering Comes Knocking

Amy Wolff has only been out of college a few short years, but already is embracing all that rendering has to offer. While looking for a job related to her animal agriculture degree from Oklahoma State University, the rural South Dakota native whose family was involved in agriculture and 4-H was intrigued by Valley Proteins and its history so she welcomed an opportunity of an offered sales position. Since joining the company in April 2019, she has appreciated learning, building relationships, and the close-knit community of the rendering industry, which she initially perceived as "dark," "stinky," and "kind of boring." Now when she explains the industry to friends, it is with passion so they understand the value and importance of rendering and the products it produces.

"There are opportunities to get the average consumer to understand the importance of rendering and its connection to agriculture," Wolff stated. She also feels communication within a rendering company is vital to ensure the smooth

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production of safe, nutritional products. “The bottom line is, we want to ensure our customers are happy.” She also recommended industry participation at college fairs and, in particular, technical schools to inform students about the myriad of opportunities in rendering, especially in production. She strongly believes in mentoring, something she has benefited from with the guidance of Connie Smith at Valley Proteins. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” Wolff commented, adding that she is grateful to Valley for taking an interest in her and helping her grow so she can help the company flourish.

Rendering and Food Safety Go Hand in Hand

Amanda Ungs was raised on a small hog farm and showed hogs in 4-H and FFA. Despite being involved with livestock, though, she had no clue what rendering was. “As a kid, I thought the guy coming to pick up the dead pigs from our farm was the garbage man,” Ungs shared. Growing up, she enjoyed production animal agriculture so chose a degree that would help her move into that industry. While attending Iowa State University, however, where she obtained her bachelor’s in animal science, she found a passion for food safety.

“Rendering is a good balance to both, still closely tied to animal agriculture with opportunities to make progress in the safety of animal food,” explained Ungs, who went on to get a master’s in food science from Penn State and a PhD in food science with a focus on food safety from Iowa State University. She began working in the rendering industry after graduation in 2015, first at Darling Ingredients as a quality and product safety manager, before moving to a food safety-focused role at The Lauridsen Group in December 2019.

“I could never have guessed I would start working for that renderer [who collected the dead pigs from her farm] after school,” Ungs said. “Now, I understand and respect the vital role that renderers play in the sustainability of our food industry and protection of our environment.” As the supplier quality manager for Lauridsen, she is in a position to gain a better understanding of the relationship that ingredient manufacturers have with the food supply chain,

interacting with suppliers to both rendering and human food manufacturers. “I have loved what I get to do from day one in this industry and expect to be active in quality/safety in the manufacture of food for my career.”

Ungs believes kids would be impressed by the number of everyday items made from rendered materials, and generation Z (born from 1995 to 2012) listens to discussions about a greener world, sustainability, and recycling. “We need to continue promoting the rendering industry in a way that speaks to the younger generations, and take every opportunity given us to speak to a college class, FFA group, or industry meeting to promote the great things rendering does for us. Teaching the importance of what we do, so they care enough to understand how, and why we do it.”

Hands-on Workers Imperative for Success

Michael Luethje is a hands-on guy who was taught many years ago to “do what nobody else wants to do, do it, and do it well.” After working in construction following high school, he jumped into meat processing in 2006 at the JBS Swift plant in Marshalltown, Iowa, shackling hogs and working on the fabrication floor. He was approached by the training and hiring manager and promoted to production trainer, a position that required him to learn every job in the plant. Over the years, Luethje took on other roles until 2009 when he became interested in maintenance and transferred to a mechanic position. This introduced him to rendering and he was eventually promoted to maintenance supervisor. In 2013, he joined Seaboard Foods in Guymon, Oklahoma, as a maintenance supervisor, and was promoted to maintenance superintendent in late 2014. He moved to North Carolina several years later to be close to family and joined Smithfield Foods in Clinton as their animal foods superintendent overseeing rendering plant operations. Luethje has since rejoined Seaboard as director of industrial engineering and facility maintenance responsible for its rendering operation.

He was attracted to rendering because of its necessity. “I think it is absolutely amazing how you can take something that has been deemed waste and turn it into wholesome, protein-rich, and highly digestible feed ingredients that help feed animals around the nation and the world,” Luethje commented. His initial perception of rendering was misguided, thinking rendering plants did not care what went into the batch—a catch-all, per say. He now knows from experience that renderers have a responsibility and desire to produce safe, wholesome products that feed pets and livestock.

Luethje believes the industry needs to get more involved with the next generation who prefer to work with their hands instead of obtaining an advanced education. “There is a saying, ‘what if we invest in an employee and they decide to leave us,’ and the voice of reckoning replies back ‘what if we don’t invest in an employee and they decide to stay?’ We have to find ways to entice this new group of workers,” noted Luethje, who sees himself continuing to help Seaboard Foods and the rendering industry be as successful as both can be in the future.

Gauging by just these few individuals, it sounds like the industry has a good group of next-generation leaders to handle that task.

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Michael Luethje, Seaboard Foods, is a hands-on guy who was attracted to rendering because of its necessity.