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What it's all about: An ear of field corn ready to harvest in a field near Blairsburg.

MY FIRST HARVEST

I had no idea what a huge operation harvest is until my cousin invited me to ride in his combine.

by CARRIE ABELING | photography by BRIAN AND CARRIE ABELING

I was born and raised in Iowa, but I didn't experience harvest until last year at the age of 14. My cousin Randy Greufe had invited our family to a harvest party at his farm in Blairsburg.

As soon as we arrived, Randy waved us over for a combine ride. The cab only has one seat, but my dad and I squeezed in with Randy, and we headed for the cornfield.

Inside, it was obvious how high-tech farming has become. Several touch screens, including an iPad, provided live stats of both the yield and the moisture content. Randy watched the moisture content closely; the moisture level determines how much drying the corn will need.

Randy's data also tracks what seed type he planted and how much fertilizer he used. He'll review the information more closely later to determine what changes he'll make to his seed and fertilizer next year — both to maximize yields and to ensure that the land will be fertile for generations.

Randy also showed off another high-tech feature, letting go of the steering wheel to show that he can (and often does) eat meals with both hands while harvesting. Like most late-model combines and tractors, his have GPS-guided auto steering. Basically, you only need to take the wheel around corners.

As I looked across the field, I saw the line where the crop switched to soybeans. Randy said he alternates beans and corn annually so the nitrogen in the soil stays balanced.

Once the combine bin was full of corn, we hopped into a tractor towing a grain cart. It pulled alongside the combine, and an auger transferred the corn into the cart. We took our load to the barnyard, where another auger transferred the grain into a bin. As we pulled back toward the field, Randy pointed to guys from the co-op who were checking the corn's moisture content. When they finished, Randy looked very

happy: the moisture content was perfect, so he wouldn't have to burn a lot of expensive propane to dry the corn.

Then it was time to haul the crop to the co-op. My dad and I crammed into the front seat of Randy's 1964 Peterbilt semi that made a huge rumble as it fired up. We took a trailer of corn barely a mile to the tallest landmark in "downtown" Blairsburg, the grain elevator, and lined up with other tractors and semis waiting to unload.

Randy said they'd weigh his truck before and after it emptied to determine the weight of the grain. He knew almost to the pound what the truck weighed. When he said he'd be able to tell exactly what I weighed when we were done, he wasn't kidding.


After we finished at the co-op, it was back to the fields, where the harvest team had continued without us. At any given time, there were at least four people involved — friends and neighbors as well as family. Once one family's fields were harvested, they helped their friends and neighbors. No one is done until everyone is done. That's the Iowa way.

It's all pretty amazing, something every Iowan should experience. If you don't have a family member who farms like I do, you can still get a taste of harvest from a couple of videos my brother, Wil, and my father, Brian, made while we were there. Enjoy the ride!

MORE HARVEST

For a time-lapse harvest video by Wil Abeling:
vimeo.com/109407456

For a one-minute combine ride-along video by
Brian Abeling: vimeo.com/142822945

A photograph taken from the passenger side of a combine harvester's cab. The operator, a man wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a dark cap, is seen from the chest up, looking towards the front of the machine. His right hand is on the steering wheel, and his left hand is on a control panel. The harvester is moving through a field of golden-brown corn. The machine's green and blue components, including the auger and grain chutes, are visible. The background shows a vast field of corn under a clear sky. The photo is presented as a page from a magazine or book, with a dark, textured border.

Randy Greufe shows Carrie Abeling how he monitors the yield and its moisture content in real time from the combine cab while he's harvesting corn.

Chris Sparks and his daughter Jillian from Alden head out to the field to ride on the combine during the Greufes' annual harvest party.



Randy's combine often runs late into the night during harvest, taking advantage of favorable weather, ground, and crop conditions. Sunsets are often particularly colorful during harvest as dust stirred up by thousands of combines, augers, and grain trucks tints the fall air amber. **1**

Brian Abeling is Director of Technology for West Des Moines Community Schools. He's an avid photographer and loves to cover all things Iowa, including night and time-lapse photography. He grew up in Monticello.

Carrie Abeling attends Valley High School in West Des Moines. She loves art, music, and photography and has exhibited at the Iowa State Fair and other venues. She's illustrating a book about an Iowan Holocaust survivor.

