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Farmers are aging. Their kids don't want to be in the family business.

Story by Patrick Thomas 2026-2-15

MARSHALL, Ill.—Don Guinnip is running out of time.

The fifth-generation farmer still wakes early each morning to tend to roughly 1,000 acres of corn and soybeans and 40 cattle. But four decades of grueling work, a bout with prostate cancer and surgery to replace both of his hips with titanium implants have taken their toll.

The 74-year-old estimates he can maintain the current workload for a couple more years.

Under the gaze of generations of Guinnips in black-and-white photos, he gathers his four siblings to chart the future of their family's farm—and contemplates a day when a Guinnip no longer cares for the land that runs along Guinnip Road.

The natural choice to take over, his son and daughter, left for college and now work in corporate fields. His siblings made the same decision years earlier.

"It's disappointing to me," Guinnip says, holding back tears. "That's the way the dice were rolled, and you have to accept what life gives you."

The number of farmers in America has been shrinking for years, but rising costs and weak commodity prices are pushing more families out at a faster rate. In 2025, 315 farms filed for bankruptcy, up 46% from 2024, U.S. court data shows.

Those left are aging; there are more farmers 75 and older than under the age of 35, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They are facing tough choices and tougher prospects.

"Family agriculture is in crisis, and American farmers and ranchers are fighting for their livelihoods," says National Farmers Union President Rob Larew.

Many farmers already rely on government bailouts to stay afloat. In 2024, Congress approved \$10 billion in bailout funds and \$21 billion in natural disaster relief for growers and ranchers. The Trump administration's trade policies exacerbated the situation, pushing more families and communities to the brink. In December, the White House pledged \$12 billion in aid to farmers. Even with that money, corn growers are expected to be in the red again in 2026, industry estimates show.

Thousands across the U.S. are closing the book on farms that have been in their families for generations, either by selling to a larger entity or declaring bankruptcy. It has transformed food

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production and local communities. Critics of farm consolidation say it's also led to less crop diversity, presenting risks for the broader food system.

The disappearance of small farms has carried steep consequences for rural America, upending the transfer of wealth—long attached to the land—between generations. And the tough economics are making the search for successors more challenging. Children of farmers today have more opportunities to work beyond agriculture than they did decades ago, and families are typically smaller, shrinking the pool of possible candidates.

Seated around the living room, Guinnip and his siblings dig into packets filled with appraisals and farm history as they discuss plans for land potentially worth millions of dollars.

While Guinnip has sole oversight of the acres and animals, his parents left the family farm in trusts that split ownership between him, David, Susan, Sallie and Dan. Every year, Guinnip pays his siblings rent based on the farm's performance.

The profits aren't much these days, but it could be worse.

One thing that helps: Guinnip is frugal. He still lives in the more than century-old house his grandfather built. His truck, which recently lost power steering, is from the 1990s. Instead of buying new equipment and hiring help, he uses an aging tractor and combine.

"Why would I buy new equipment if I have no one to pass it along to?" he says.

On Guinnip Road

With calls of "sook calf," Guinnip starts the day the same way his father and grandfather did before him. He treks the gravel path behind the farmhouse to a small pasture tucked between rows of corn and soybeans. One by one, cattle fall behind him single file to consume a breakfast of ground corn and hay.

Guinnip handles just about every task around the farm. He hauls buckets of feed into the back of his ATV and unloads them in a pen crowded with cattle that outweigh him many times over. With the hip replacements, he's limber enough to climb into the large machinery needed to harvest crops, spray pesticides, plant seeds and move hay bales that weigh roughly 1,000 pounds each.

Reminders of his lineage dot the land, starting with the sign in front of the farm pointing to the start: 1837.

Family patriarch Joseph Guinnip joined the throngs of people who headed west to take hold of America's Manifest Destiny, leaving Steuben County, N.Y., in the 1830s. He eventually settled 40 acres of land in southeastern Illinois, where he built a log cabin, the family's first farmhouse.

The land has passed through every generation since, including those who fought in the Civil War and survived a buzz-saw accident. Guinnip's father, Robert, and mother, Rose, eventually took their turn at the helm.

With Guinnip being the eldest child, there wasn't much question who would take over the farm. "Dad just really groomed him to take over," says Dan, a former cruise-line accounting chief who lives in California. "It was pretty obvious."

Guinnip graduated from Southern Illinois University in 1973 with a teaching degree. He briefly worked as an agriculture teacher before returning to the farm.

Before Robert Guinnip died in the 1990s, he and his wife put the farm into two trusts—the Robert Guinnip Trust and the Rose Guinnip Trust—that would be shared equally between their five children when they died. His vision, Don Guinnip says, was that whoever stayed on the farm would buy out the others.

The land was worth about \$1,000 to \$2,000 an acre back then. It's 10 times that now, making it impossible for Guinnip to buy out all his siblings.

The farmer isn't one to complain, his daughter says, and he's never asked for help. "It's just the way it is," he'll say when asked about the structure.

When their mother died in 2024, Guinnip and his siblings agreed to keep the trust as is and figure out the rest later.

Heir not apparent

Guinnip's son, Andy, was raised to be the farm's sixth-generation operator.

"It was always assumed since I was the boy," Andy says. "I don't think we ever had conversations about it."

He learned the ropes early and spent his childhood cleaning grain bins, baling hay and feeding the livestock. But farm work was a bore. Andy was more drawn to the animals than to the crops.

He can't recall when he told his dad he wasn't interested in a career in agriculture, but it was likely around high school.

After graduating from college, he spent a year helping out on the farm while his father recovered from surgery for prostate cancer. Once Don Guinnip was able to return to work, Andy headed west for a pharmaceutical job in St. Louis.

His sister, Molly Wedding, a lawyer for an insurer, lives in Indianapolis with her husband and three children. She had no interest in living her life out in a small town. She says her father also never tried to convince her to take over the farm.

As she's grown older, she's developed a greater interest in the farm's business operations.

"Could I run it? Yes. Do I see myself doing the labor myself? No."

She's encouraged her father to have more serious conversations about succession planning.

The five shareholders

Don Guinnip convenes his siblings at the farm in mid-October. It's peak harvest season, but the only time all five of them could get together. It's the first time they've met since the blur of weeks around their mother's death.

"We've had three good years on the farm," Guinnip tells his siblings, sounding like a chairman talking to his board. "Can't say that about this year. Prices are bad, and the crops are bad. So your income this year is going to be down."

They nod their heads. They've seen the news about the trade war and other difficulties hitting the farm. Susan, who's married to a retired farmer in Indiana, knows them first hand.

Going into the meeting, everyone thought David was close to selling his stake. They had agreed that if a sibling wants to cash out, the remaining owners would buy their share to prevent the farm from being sold to outsiders.

But when Guinnip asks David if he still wants to sell his share, David shakes his head no.

"What do you want to do?" Susan asks in surprise.

David proposes dividing the farmland and passing the parcels to each of their children. That way, he says, the children won't have to fight over future decisions regarding the entire farm. "It can get really unpleasant."

Frustrated, Dan and Susan argue his plan isn't feasible. Hills and dense trees make some of the land difficult to farm. Which of their children would get the land with the hills, and which would get the most productive ground?

Susan suggests they consider reorganizing the farm as a limited liability company. The structure would make it easier to manage as a business, she says, and more straightforward for future generations, allowing the siblings to transfer shares rather than physical acreage.

Dan and Sallie don't think changes are needed; the current structure is working.

Addressing the other big question mark—what happens when Don retires—Sallie says she believes the best path forward is to lease the land to an outside, trusted farmer.

Don Guinnip spends most of the back-and-forth listening. He hardly interrupts, chiming in only when his siblings are done talking. But when he does speak, his family listens. Especially when Guinnip tells them he thinks he can keep farming for about two more years.

"I'm healthy, I like doing what I'm doing," he says. "But I'm not going to live forever."

He suggests they look at putting 40 acres into a USDA program that removes it from production and provides growers with a fixed payment for the farmland. They agree.

After two hours, it's clear that will be the only decision today. They're at an impasse. No successor is named. No one sells their share. No agreement is reached on the trust structure.

The siblings acknowledge they should meet twice a year, as they break for a lunch featuring pulled-pork sandwiches.

Guinnip won't be able to join them for long. A truckload of freshly harvested soybeans needs his attention.

The farm calls

At the local grain elevator, Guinnip is offered about \$10 a bushel for his soybeans. It isn't enough to make a large profit, but he knows it's better than what some growers are getting. His 600 bushels will likely end up in poultry feed in the South.

On the drive back to the farm, he reflects on the meeting. He says the family usually reaches the right decision after they've had time to think about it.

The future of American farming isn't pretty in Guinnip's view. He predicts it will resemble a contract model, in which farmers work the land for someone else, pay rent and are personally responsible for the debt incurred to keep the farm running. Fewer family farmers will exist. The pride they brought will be lost, too.

"When farmers owned the land and lived on the land, they took care of the land and they formed communities that worked together and solved problems and took care of everybody," he says. "You're not going to have that in the future."

The future preoccupying him right now, though, is the 2026 harvest.

Just before Christmas, Guinnip tallies his expenses and sets aside money for taxes and expenses for the coming year's crop. He travels to the post office to mail checks totaling several thousand dollars apiece to each of his siblings.

He managed to earn a profit in 2025, but sold his soybean crop for about \$60,000 less than last year. He's applying for some of the bailout money promised by the Trump administration.

The government funds will help cover fertilizer, pesticides and seeds to help plant new crops in the spring. New equipment isn't on the list.

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