

Measuring Success: A Portrait in Sod
David Florezak, Jr
(Published in *Northwest Quarterly* magazine)

Tim Cooling is a successful man; anyone who knows him would say so. But there is success, and then there is success.

Let me explain: a successful man is not necessarily a rich man, and a rich man is not necessarily a successful one. It all depends on how you measure success. How does Tim Cooling measure success? When I asked him, this is what he had to say:

“Sometimes I measure it by how good the turf is.”

I waited a few moments for an elaboration that was not to come. It was not the kind of response I had expected. “OK.” I said. “Let’s try another question. As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?”

“A sod farmer I guess.”

“When you look out over your 800 acres of sod, what do you see?” I asked.

“I see sod.”

“Hmmm.”

Toward the end of the interview, I had begun to paint a picture about Tim Cooling. His chronic understatements seemed to me to be the result of his busy schedule. I did, after all, impose an interview on him in the middle of a work day, and being responsible for seventy-some employees and an ocean of sod makes for a busy day. But as we talked further, I slowly began to realize that I may have met people like Tim Cooling before—honest, hard working people—the kind of people who have that humble, earthy, grounded aura about them. Yes, I *had* met people like him before, with that same economy of words—and suddenly, distinctly, as the expression goes, the silence was deafening. You might call them “the salt of the earth” kind of people. I prefer “the heart of the heartland.” Tim Cooling is just that sort of man, and those same qualities that make you want to trust him to house-sit your sick puppy have worked to make him and his family the kind of people you want to landscape and sod your yard.

The story begins in Rockford in the late 1950’s with a load of dirt, a patch of grass, and a respectable man. Joe Cooling began simply enough, delivering topsoil locally. From topsoil he added landscaping to his repertoire, which created a demand for sod.

His son, Tim Cooling, reflects on the company’s simple roots. “The first time he actually cut [sod] out of the front lawn,” he chuckles. “yeah, he used the front yard, and that was 1959 I think, or 1960.”

Since its inception, Joe Cooling and Sons, Inc. has moved on from its humble origins in the front yard and has since relocated to Cherry Valley in 1989, growing into a prosperous sod farm and landscaping company, employing over 75 people and boasting an 800 acre plot.

But there is no boasting with Tim Cooling. In fact, arrogance seems not to be in his lexicon. As any small business owner will tell you, a business lives and dies by their name alone. And it is the face behind the service or product that substantiates that reputation; how well a business maintains it helps determine its longevity. Tim Cooling knows this better than most. “The name my parents’ built, their hard work of getting a good name [has benefited our business].” Indeed, a strong company name is actually a reflection of the strong characters running and has been a key factor in transforming Joe Cooling and Sons, Inc. from a dig-a-hole-in-the-front-yard business into a thriving corporation.

And the Coolings rely on their good name and customer service now especially. In these tough economic times, and with a major downturn in the housing market, the Coolings find themselves having trouble matching supply with demand. “Growing enough sod to have, but not too much, [is a challenge] because it’s a two year crop—so you have to plan two years in advance, which is kind of hard in farming” says Cooling.

Lucky for the Coolings, sod doesn’t have the same kind of problems that other crops can have. While insects and small mammals can have a devastating effect on certain crops, sod tends to be resistant to these critters. Even diseases are a rarity. Really the only natural enemies of sod are those ominous, marauding cows you see slinking alongside the interstate, but Cooling pays them no attention. Instead, he focuses on what matters most—the people. With a medley of employees, customers, and vendors, you would think that he would have his hands full—well, he does. But regardless, the favorite part of his job, he says, is “giving people what they want, and working with vendors and other people to get things done.”

“So, it gives you a measure of satisfaction to make the customer happy?” I asked.

“Yes. I just like seeing people work together.”

Speaking of “the salt of the earth,” the Coolings also grow a special salt-resistant sod to be planted along the roadside—perhaps those marauding cows get some of his sod, anyway.

If you would like to visit Joe Cooling and Sons, Inc. sod farm, it is located at 4400 Wheeler Road in Cherry Valley, IL 61016