

Cooperative system leader Harlan Stern to retire

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt



With 40 annual meetings to his credit (31 in Holyoke) and countless success stories in his career history, Grainland Cooperative's President/CEO Harlan Stern is entering the retirement realm July 1.

Grainland board member Ernie Krogmeier noted at the June 2 annual meeting, "Harlan joined this community 31 years ago. His talent, energy and dedication to our cooperative have made him a leader of the entire cooperative system."

Stern was honored for his service June 3 at the Summer Managers Conference sponsored by Cenex Harvest States (CHS), and held in Nebraska.

He was also recognized at the June 2 Grainland annual meeting, where current members, and former board members specifically, paid tribute to Stern's dedication and ability in leading the local co-op on a path to success, even in trying times.

Co-op career spans 40 years

Growing up on a farm near Ipswich, S.D. made agriculture a natural career choice for Stern. He served as a livestock inspector for several years and later worked for Railway Express Agency before launching his career with cooperatives.

Stern's 40-year career with the cooperative system started in 1969 when he met Vern Thorsen at the airport in Aberdeen, S.D. Thorsen was then serving as Farmland Industries Division 3 manager, and he was interviewing Stern to become part of the Farmland management training program. Thorsen was in Holyoke for the June 2 annual meeting, representing the beginning link to Stern's co-op career.

Accepted into management training, Stern moved his family to Selby, S.D. and entered the six-month training program under the late Mel Jansen. Stern describes Jansen as an excellent teacher and wonderful boss. Jansen talked Stern into staying in Selby, where he started in sales and later was in charge of the agronomy division.

When Jansen moved to Longmont in 1973, Stern was given the opportunity to serve as general manager in Selby. Jansen was the last individual he worked for, as Stern has held general manager positions ever since, working under boards of directors.

Stern admits he was pretty green when he took his first general manager job. "I got in there right before the Russian wheat deal, so that was a real baptism by fire," he added. "We experienced a lot of wild markets and shortages back then, similar to what we just experienced recently," noted Stern.

After moving to Lake City, Iowa in 1976 and managing there for a couple of years, the Sterns moved to Holyoke in March of 1978 when Harlan accepted the general manager position for Holyoke Co-op.

About a year and a half into his time in Holyoke, Stern said he had the notion he wanted to work for FarMarCo. He was all set, then realized it wasn't where he wanted to be. Clyde Einspahr, Holyoke Co-op board president at that time, made Stern reapply and go through the interview process before returning to Holyoke Co-op. Now, close to 30 years later, Stern is extremely glad he stayed put.

Over the years, Stern is appreciative of his career that gave him the chance to meet people from many different fields, to serve on boards of other related organizations and to travel to

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places many folks never see.

He served on the Colorado Co-op Council, South Dakota Co-op Council, various advisory committees of Farmland Industries, twice on the Colorado Grain & Feed board, president of Farport Transportation involving 17 co-ops in the 1980s and president of North Platte Petroleum Partners, also involving a handful of co-ops in Colorado and Nebraska.

Additionally, as an advisory group member of Agriliance (now owned by Cenex Harvest States), Stern had the chance to travel to strategic areas such as Galveston, Texas and the Pacific Northwest, to observe agricultural practices there.

He was instrumental in getting Hyline Marketing, LLC (involving seven area co-ops) organized in the mid-1980s and served as president all of its years of existence.

Also during Stern's management tenure, Holyoke Co-op added a C-store, which now operates as Ampride. In an era of LLCs, propane sales for Holyoke Co-op, Grant Co-op, Haxtun Co-op and Haxtun Oil Co. and Elevator formed Tri-Energy, LLC for propane sales. Farmland Industries became involved, and the LLC expanded to GEMM Energy and included cooperatives in Wray and Yuma. Holyoke eventually sold its share to M&M Co-op in Yuma.

From the Russian wheat deal in the mid-70s, to high interest rates later that decade and on to the PIC program and government storage, Stern has stories and strategies for them all.

Various modes of government storage programs made elevators scramble to move grain to other locations when harvest was nearing, noted Stern. That spurred the Hyline Seven group to buy an elevator in Kansas City for storage, he added.

Citing the continued need for all this room, Stern pointed out what production has done in the last 30 years. While corn yields were at 165-170 bushels/acre yields, they're now upwards of 200 bushels, with some farmers in the sandhills seeing 300-plus bushel corn. The county wheat average yield was in the mid-30s and is now seeing 60-plus yields.

Stern feels that curve will continue as technology advances. "Most of the advancement I think we'll see will be in genetic development," he added. Through the breeding process, he anticipates seeing more drought tolerant, nitrogen efficient and insect resistant corn.

The merger trend has been prevalent amongst cooperatives in the last 15 years, noted Stern. In fact, he recalls a meeting in the late 1980s regarding a merger of the whole Hyline Seven group. "In hindsight, many say it would have been a great thing for this part of the country," said Stern.

Approximately five years ago, a merger for Holyoke, Amherst and Grant, Neb. was well underway, ready for a vote and informational meetings, when Grant backed out. A merger proposal involving Holyoke, Grainland (Haxtun and Fleming), Amherst and Paoli failed in August of 2006. But a Holyoke, Amherst, Grainland (Haxtun-Fleming) merger proposal passed in October of that year and took effect Feb. 1, 2007.

Serving as the new Grainland's President/CEO for the past two years, Stern has shown strong leadership in making the merger successful. He is quick to emphasize, "It's never been Harlan Stern that made this enterprise go—it's been the hard work of our employees and the support of the members."

Working with 45 directors and former directors of Holyoke Co-op/Grainland Cooperative, and 12 with two former cooperatives, Stern acknowledged at his last annual meeting, "Working with them has been one of the highlights of my cooperative experience."

Citing the value of the cooperative system at the June 2 Grainland meeting, Stern said such meetings remind him of why he's such a believer in the cooperative way of doing business. "There's no other system where those who do business with a company have such a stake in

the success of the enterprise.”

Sterns to remain in Holyoke

Harlan and his wife Mona plan to continue to reside in Holyoke. Quick to point out he doesn't plan to sit around, Stern's woodworking hobby, which he acquired in the last six or seven years, could see a great deal of his extra time.

Specifically interested in clocks, Stern's clock-building interest took root 13 years ago when he took his mother to a clock shop in South Dakota, in the town where she grew up. The clockmaster had some beautiful pieces, with some multi-thousand dollar price tags on them. Stern noted the guy never makes any two alike and never advertises.

The seed was planted, and Stern's new hobby was launched several years later. Three of his masterpieces—large grandfather clocks—have been recent prizes to Co-op members and an employee. He plans to continue to pursue his woodworking skills.

Family is important to Harlan and Mona. They plan to continue to spoil their four grandchildren. Their family includes son Ryan and his wife Lathy and their daughter Melia, 1 1/2, of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.; son Trent and his wife Jill and their children Anna, almost 9, and twins Rhylan and Dylan, 3, of Olathe, Kan.; and son Troy, who died in 1982 at the age of 15.

Approached about whether he'll consider consulting or contract management, Stern says, "Give me a year or so, then I'll answer that." For now, he plans to enjoy well-deserved retirement.