

Born To Be Mild



This humble Kansas farmer inspires others with home-grown commitment

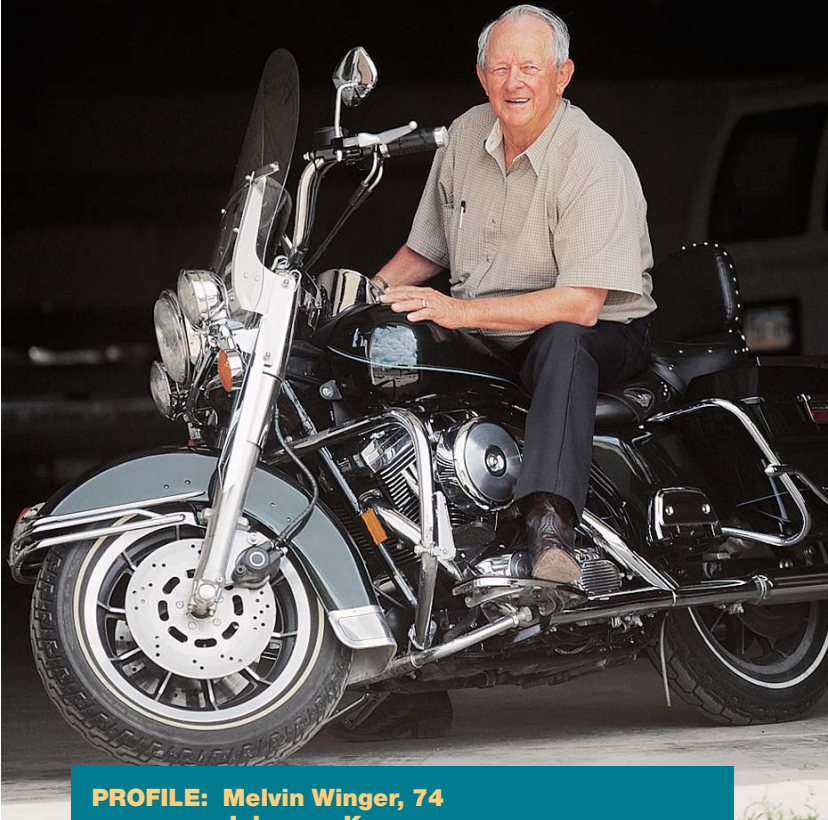
Melvin Winger's unsurpassed track record for successful partnering is proof that you can do well by doing good.

It is a rare man who can inspire loyalty in friends and competitors alike. But ask Melvin Winger's fellow producers and business partners, and you'll get a picture of a beloved and often emulated businessman, an investor angel who would rather sink his money into Main Street than Wall Street.

Winger, the magazine's Top Producer of the Year 2002, has built a 50-year career based on successful rural business and farming partnerships. In the process, he not only leveraged his own personal enterprises, but bankrolled opportunities for a Great Plains community that otherwise would have lost jobs and population. Three out of four rural counties experienced below average economic growth in the last decade, with parts of western Kansas experiencing some of the most severe erosion.

Winger's resumé reads like a one-man economic development agency. In addition to his own 18,000-acre Johnson, Kan., farming operation, Winger has been a full or silent partner on dozens of rural businesses, land ventures,

PHOTO: ADAM JAHIEL



PROFILE: Melvin Winger, 74
Johnson, Kan.

FAMILY: Wife Mona, four children (two deceased) and nine grandchildren. Winger Farms today is operated by Melvin and his two grandsons, Brian and Brant Peterson.

OPERATION: Started in a four-way family partnership, raising 4,500 acres of dryland wheat after he married in 1948. Eventually, Winger went solo. Today, he operates 18,000 acres. But Winger also partners in some 80 irrigation circles across southwestern Kansas. He is part owner in a feedlot, a 5,500-head dairy, three banks, implement dealerships, a golf course and Nicaraguan coffee farms. In total, Winger manages almost 20 farm-related partnerships.

FIRST BUSINESS LESSON: "When you are doing business with people, you tend to only see your side. To make it go, you need to put yourself in another person's shoes. Treat people like you'd like to be treated."

ON GOALS FOR THE DAY: "Something I learned in 4-H, I think. Try to make the best better."

FAVORITE HOBBY: "I really enjoy flying an airplane. You are free as a bird. Up there you are just by yourself, something that doesn't happen often."

TURNING POINT: In 1975, Winger got involved with banking and implement dealerships and bought another farm. "We took on a lot of things and it allowed us to leverage those partnerships to where we are today, though I sometimes wonder how we survived," he adds.

BUSINESS STRENGTH: Diversification is critical, he says. He views his range of operations as intertwined and complementary to each other. One might be losing money, "but you have a chance to get it back somewhere else," he says.

banks, implement dealerships, dairies, and feedlots, with few failures to mar his record. Locals credit him with recruiting the first of several dozen large-scale dairies to western Kansas over the last decade, creating more than 3,000 jobs and galvanizing community support for livestock enterprises. When one California dairyman wanted to relocate to the Johnson area, Winger not only put up personal cash and the weight of his bank behind the deal, he persuaded local citizens to invest \$1 million in the enterprise.

Ulysses, Kan., farmer Donnie Young, the state's former corn grower president, calls Winger "a true king-maker." Winger is the kind of man, says Young, "who can make dreams come true."

Young should know. He is a first-generation producer who began his career with little more than a few thousand dollars. Recently Young realized a lifelong dream by starting a 6,000-head dairy. He says Winger's support was critical to his success.

"I know he wasn't sure our kind of dairy would work, because he built something very different and ours required a much higher capital investment," says Young. "Nonetheless, he was completely open about sharing any information that could help us and gave us plenty of advice. It made a real difference."

Forever young. Longtime associates confess they have spent countless hours trying to figure out how Winger's personality so influences his business success. He is a hard charger who is at heart a humble man, with an unassuming nature.

Ward Nairn, who has partnered with Winger on implement dealerships, banks and other ventures, says his friend "thinks like a 25-year-old. He will make \$1 million changes in his farming operation if they are needed. Other guys 20 years younger will decide just to coast out their career rather than reinvest."

One of Winger's favorite mottoes is, "Live like you will die tomorrow, and farm like you will live forever." This love of progress has resulted in late-career innovations like shifts to no-till production on the 18,000 acres he operates with his grandsons.



PHOTO: ADAM JAHIEL

All who know him agree that Winger is a man who never voices a negative thought. "If you think you can or think you can't, you'll be right either way," Winger says. In short, he rarely lets naysayers slow him down.

Winger served as a county commissioner for 42 years. Steve Irsik, a fellow commissioner and farmer, once asked him how he stays positive. "I just shrug [negativity] off," Winger told him. "You have to focus on how to make things go."

Farming partner Martie Floyd says "Mel is always positive," even when others around him are discouraged. "Our community has things that others don't because he was able to convince people that we needed progress and get everyone motivated."

Positive thinking isn't just some motivational veneer. It is an inner strength that has been tested by

tragedy. Winger lost his son Ed and daughter Sally Peterson, both to car accidents in the last decade. The two were key farming partners, leaving him without next-generation successors. The accidents also orphaned his grandsons, though both say Winger has assumed a key role.

"Thinking positively doesn't mean you don't hurt," says Winger. "You just have to have faith things will get better and that you can do better."

Energetic. Winger's legendary work ethic also impresses friends and co-workers who are decades younger. "His work load would kill two 20-year-olds," says Nairn.

Granted, Winger, a lifelong pilot, is not afraid to put speed to use. He pretty much drives 80 to 100 miles an hour everywhere he goes, friends say. His willingness to move quickly has



After the death of his daughter Sally in 1999, Winger's grandsons Brian and Brant Peterson helped assume her management duties. Regrouping after the loss of his children has been his greatest challenge, Winger says.

high standards he sets for himself, his intellect and personality really draw top people to him."

Winger also has a knack for allowing employees and partners to make decisions and gives them the authority to follow through, even if they aren't decisions he would make, say partners. "Empowering employees and partners is a real key to his success," says employee Terryl Spiker, executive vice president of First National Bank in Syracuse, Kan.

Winger says he learned how to delegate from his mother. "The key is not to be critical but to be positive," he says. "You have to put yourself in their shoes, especially if you disagree."

Altruism. Winger doesn't just keep his leadership skills to his business. He serves on several boards, including the St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. There, on a high-powered board that has included judges, lawyers, industry CEOs and clergy, Winger's leadership has shone, says Lovett Weems Jr., president. "Mel is so unassuming. His humility adds to the sense of integrity that all experience from him," says Weems, who also sent his teenage son to work with Mel on the farms during the summer.

Winger, typically, puts his money where his mouth is. He and his wife, Mona, recently gave the seminary a substantial cash gift, though the couple will not publicize the exact figure.

Nairn says Winger, who has a knack for making money, isn't entranced by it. "He views it as another tool. He'd just as soon lend you money as a set of wrenches," he says

Winger typically shrugs off such testimonials. "You just have to figure out what is right and try to do it," he says. "It isn't that complicated."

It is proof, it seems, that in doing good, one can also do well. ■

The Top Producer of the Year Award recognizes growers nationwide whose careers demonstrate excellence in the business of farming. It is sponsored by Caterpillar and co-sponsored by The Core Group.

saved some of his investments.

"On our first bank we were completely silent partners," says Floyd. But the bank president literally died unexpectedly in the middle of the night. It was up to Winger, who had no hands-on banking experience to take over. Winger would work at the farm or in one of his other local ventures until midmorning, hop in his plane and fly 90 miles to Liberal, Kan., before returning at 10 or 11 p.m. to see if work had gotten done on the farm.

Now Winger partners in three banks. In the end, says Nairn, "the banking industry got a lot more benefit from Melvin than Melvin got from the banks."

Somehow, even a breakneck pace doesn't leave partners and employees feeling left out. "He is a renowned listener. Even if he has an important meeting in 15 minutes, if you need

him you have 110% of his attention," says Floyd.

Nobody wants to let Winger down, his partners acknowledge. "Somehow, he always makes you want to strive to do better," says Nairn. "Not only do you want to impress Mel, you want to outdo him."

That is a key to his success, says Shawn Peterson, Winger's granddaughter-in-law, who works in the farming business. From all outward appearances, Winger Farms should be showing the signs other operations do when key managers are overextended. Winger's 18,000-acre farm, dairies, feedlots and 16 other current enterprises don't, despite the hundreds of details that are not handled personally by Winger.

"I think it is because he has such a loyal support staff and because he delegates so well," says Shawn. "Also, the