



DRYLAND WHEAT is Appel Specialty

BY GAIL GREENWOOD AYRES

DESPITE A SLOW START BECAUSE OF A COLD, WET SPRING, THIS WAS A GOOD YEAR FOR WHEAT FARMERS, with well above-average crops and reasonably good prices, said Steve Appel, a dryland wheat farmer from Dusty in Whitman County.

Living with his wife, Dianne, in the fertile Palouse region of southeast Washington, the third-generation farmer has seen a few wheat harvests in his 59 years. He's working the same land his father did. And, he raised his family – daughter, Stephanie, 30, and son, Peter, 22 – on the same farm where

he was raised.

Steve has a unique perspective and background on farming, having promoted U.S. agriculture and America's family farmers and ranchers at home and abroad for years.

In November, he plans to retire from his post as the Washington Farm Bureau president, where he has served since 1994 – making him the longest serving president in the organization's history. Steve also served for seven years (from 2001 to 2007) as the vice president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the first farmer from

the Pacific Northwest to serve as an officer of that organization.

During his time as president of the Washington Farm Bureau he spent some 120 to 160 days a year on the road. He also has had the opportunity to travel more than 100 times to Washington D.C. In fact, in 2001, he had the opportunity to meet President George W. Bush.

"He's the kind of guy you'd like to live next door to," Steve said.

"I know there was some talk that he wasn't smart and I never believed that, but I was amazed at how he followed what we were

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Farming dryland wheat in the fertile Palouse region of southeast Washington has a quiet beauty amidst all the long days full of hard work for Steve and Dianne Appel. As shown in the center photos, Dianne creates beauty through her wheat weavings, which have found their way into homes throughout the world. All photos are courtesy of Dianne Appel.



There's always a sense of relief when the crop is safely harvested and loaded for transport.

talking about in agriculture. He is a very smart man. There wasn't a thing that we brought up that he didn't know something about."

Steve enjoyed traveling throughout the world – finding a trip to Cuba especially fascinating – as well as to 47 of the states, to learn about and promote farming. But he also loves to be home on his tractor.

"I always wanted to farm," said the seventh of nine children of Don and Edna Appel.

"I learned to drive a tractor at about 10 years old. There's never any lack of something to do when you grow up on a farm. We had space to run around and time to run around."

Now as an adult, calling his own shots suits him well.

"I love the independence of being your own boss. It's my choice every morning what I'm going to do. Now, if I don't do the right thing the farm could fail, but I could choose to go fishing today. If you're punching a clock, you don't have that opportunity."

"I like not having to work five days a week. Yes, sometimes I have to work seven days a week, but other times I can work three or four days a week," he said.

While Steve and Dianne both attended Washington State University in Pullman with the initial goal of becoming veterinarians, something President Richard Nixon did in 1972 changed their direction.

That year the Nixon administration signed an agreement--the Russian Wheat Deal-- to sell wheat and corn every year to Russia.

"The demand for wheat and corn basically skyrocketed," recalled Steve. "It just changed the whole

economy of wheat farming for a while."

"That timing was perfect for us. With 40 years between my dad and me, this made it possible to make enough income for him to step back and for me to step in."

So, Steve switched gears to study agriculture and both he and Dianne graduated early in the winter of 1973, allowing the newlyweds to join Steve's father, who had some health concerns, in time for spring planting.

"He offered me the opportunity and I jumped at it."

Now Steve and Dianne own 640 acres and farm a total of 1,930 acres. In addition to the winter wheat, they also grow barley, and are easing out of sheep and adding in a small beef cattle herd.

And now, nearly 40 more years have gone by since he began work with his dad, and he's beginning a transition with his son, Peter, who moved with his wife, Laura, onto the farm in May.

"We'll be working together for a while and are hopeful for a smooth transition and that the economics are right."

On the Appel farm, they operate on a three-year rotation. About a third of the fields are planted in winter wheat, a third in spring barley or wheat and a third left fallow, Steve explained.

They always plant some sort of soft winter wheat, but the varieties change depending on what's being developed.

A typical good harvest will bring about 75 to 80 bushels of wheat per acre, he said. (While a bushel is a volume measure, it's now figured at 60 pounds for wheat, Steve explained.)

Barley, on the other hand is sold by the ton, with about a ton and a

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half per acre considered a good yield, he said.

This year’s wheat was planted the first week in October of 2010 and harvested the second week in August 2011, which is a little later than typical.

One of the banes of a wheat farmer is wheat leaf rust, a fungus that thrives in cool, damp weather and can affect the yield of the crop.

Steve said this was a bad year for the fungus and he, like many farmers, had to spray fungicide to protect the crop.

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And, believe it or not, Whitman County is “hands down,” the biggest wheat producing county in the country. (It does help that the county is bigger geographically than those, say, in Kansas.)

The Appel’s wheat is sold through a co-op. About 60 to 70

percent of the wheat grown in Washington is shipped overseas, primarily to Asia and the Middle East. That’s because the type of wheat grown isn’t as desirable in this country, because it doesn’t rise as much in baking.

“Also, we have a real shipping advantage over the rest of the country, having easy access to ports,” Steve explained.

Just like back in 1972 with the Russian Wheat Deal, politics can make a huge impact on farmers. In fact, when Russia invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979, President Jimmy Carter responded by halting all shipments of grain to the Soviet Union in 1980. However, Canada and Australia stepped in to sell the Soviets grain, leaving U.S. wheat farmers in a difficult situation.

“Overnight our prices were cut in half and we had all that wheat and all that corn. Suddenly what we thought was the reality of our business changed very rapidly,” Steve recalled.

Since then, the president no longer has the authority to place an embargo without Congress, he noted.

“What the government is going to do next – be it regarding tax issues, property rights or foreign policy – can have a huge impact on our business. Of the agriculture produced in the U.S., 70 percent is consumed by U.S. citizens. Consequently we are very dependent on having access to the world market.”

The government’s impact to farmers is one thing that Steve believes most non farmers don’t always understand. Another misconception, he said, is that somehow farmers are abusing the environment.

“It seems like the average person on the street thinks we use all sorts of terrible chemicals and do terrible things. That’s just not true.”

“We’re not abusing the land for profit. We love our land. Most of us inherited the land from our fathers and many plan to pass it down to their children. So we’re not going to abuse it. We go to great efforts to treat the farm and soil well.”

His wife Dianne agrees.

“He has a very deep love of the soil and what he can grow on it. He really cares about what he’s doing,” she said.

Dianne, a volunteer extraordinaire for the FFA program in the Colfax School District, grew up in Seattle, but says she’s always been a country girl at heart. She’s also known for her beautiful wheat-weavings that she sells at a nearby store. Dianne’s wheat weavings have found their way to many countries around the world.

What has been the key to success on their farm?

“I’ve always been conservative on how I operated the farm. I stayed aware of new things but didn’t do lots of experimentation,” Steve said.

“I haven’t carried a huge debt load and try to only buy what we truly need and not what we want – there’s a huge difference. I try to keep my nose clean but pay attention to what is going on around me – and I pray a lot.

“We’re so dependent on weather, which of course we have no control over. And we have no control over aspects like the market demand.

“So, I live by something my dad said a lot: ‘You do the best job you know how to do and leave the rest to the man upstairs.’ ■