

WARREN WHEAT



BY GAIL GREENWOOD AYRES

A shadow known as “Indian head” overlooks the fields as a combine works during harvest at Warren Farms in Dayton.

WHEN IT COMES TO FARMING, ONE OF THE THINGS THAT GLENN WARREN, 49, LOVES THE BEST IS KEEPING THE EQUIPMENT RUNNING SMOOTHLY. For his brother, Gene, 56, it’s the financial end that is especially fascinating – figuring out the costs of production, the yields, the input costs.

The two men, along with their brother Bill, 46, sister, Tressa Petersen, 58, and parents, Robert “Bob” and Nadine, each 85, are all shareholders in Warren Farms Inc. in Dayton, which is in the southeast

corner of the state.

While Gene, the president of the corporation, and Glenn, the first vice president, actively run the thriving Warren Farms, which primarily grows wheat, Bill works with their father growing apples and pears through Warren Orchards, where he relishes the interaction with customers. (See sidebar story, page 21)

With all that great farming blood, it’s no surprise Tressa, a registered nurse, married a farmer. She and her husband, Jim Petersen, grow apples and cherries in Burbank,

Wash., near the Tri Cities.

This fall the Warren family has been busy planting wheat and harvesting apples and pears.

For their wheat enterprise, they farm about 5,000 acres, part of it leased. However, in a given year, only about 4,000 acres of that is planted in wheat, Gene said. They primarily grow soft winter wheat, but also some dark northern spring wheat and some hard red winter wheat.

The parents have already transferred the majority interest of the corporation to their children



These cars of freshly harvested beans from Warren Farms in Dayton, Wash., will head to New Jersey to become hummus.

to pass the family farm on to the next generation, explained Gene. In addition to the acres that are part of the family corporation, beginning in 1987 Gene and Glenn have each acquired and farmed hundreds more acres separately, as well as leasing different properties.

"It's very complex," said Gene, "But it's the family corporation that's the binding glue that holds all these multiple ventures together."

While Gene said the classic family farm is an "endangered species," he's optimistic about agriculture right now.

"Everything is cyclical, but I think that right now is a good time for farming. I think we're in a good up turn overall for agriculture in this next 20 years with technology being applied and the farms growing larger too."

At Warren Farms, it was a great crop year with both the fall and spring crops yielding well above expectations, the brothers agreed.

"The prices for the most part have been good but the roller coaster ride of the commodities is a little too much to handle at times, although we should expect it," Glenn said. "The reality is that it's politics and

speculators that move the price around more than the basic supply and demand curves."

Because the Warrens farm from 1,300 feet to 3,300 feet in elevation and their annual rainfall ranges from 15 inches per year to more than 40 inches a year, "that can make our winter wheat yield vary from more than 80 bushels to 140 (per acre) depending on what range of variables we are in," Glenn explained.

"We grow wheat because that is what we can consistently grow year after year with a good yield resulting in the highest return per acre year after year. Sure there are some specialty crops and conditions that may net more but they won't do it year after year," he said.

"However, we don't put all our eggs in one basket and do raise various crops over the years and are always willing to at least listen to why we should try something different than wheat," he said.

"It took us about four weeks, working seven days a week, to harvest all the winter wheat," Gene said. "We finished August 27. Then two weeks later we started harvesting Billy beans."

The billy beans, are one of the crops that the Warrens use to rotate with wheat to help control diseases and put nitrogen back into the soil. They also rotate dry peas or sometimes small garbanzo beans, Gene said.

Dry peas are used in split pea soup while Billy beans are used to make hummus. The Warrens' Billy beans head to New Jersey and are made into a kosher hummus.

"The hummus market has really taken off," said Gene.

The operation also has about 40 head of brood stock cattle, selling the calves as yearlings.

Despite the diversity, it's growing wheat that captures most of the time and energy at Warren Farms.

"The biggest challenge is to realize what worked well for you one year is probably not going to work so well the next year," said Glenn.

"The timing of moisture and temperature greatly influence how well a crop does. Disease and weed pressure vary with the crop rotations as well as the elevations and rainfall zones so each may have their own unique challenges to produce a decent crop. "One instance is we can raise decent hard red winter wheat at the lower elevations with less rainfall and meet or exceed the protein requirements. But in the higher rainfall areas, it just doesn't want to work for us no matter how much money you might want to throw at the situation," he said.

"Farming has been quite the education over the years as our dad started out with no air conditioning and few chemicals and fertilizer and moved to more mechanization,"

"It's the family corporation that's the binding glue holding all these multiple ventures together," said Gene.



To keep things moving quickly during harvest, the combine unloads the wheat on the go into the bankout wagon at Warren Farms.

said Glenn, who like all his siblings graduated from Washington State University.

"And now we have moved into a modern electronic world where the imagination is the limit in what you can get electronic equipment to do. You can record or transmit in real time out in the fields without being tied to the wire that fed the landline in the house.

"We have gone from working the fields many times to get a crop in to now managing residue and then in one pass on our farm applying the fertilizer and the seed into firm ground that is untouched other than harrowing, mowing or burning after raising a crop the year before," Glenn said.

Like their father and brother Bill, both Gene and Glenn think being involved in Farm Bureau leadership is important.

"It's critical to have a unified voice for agriculture and natural resources from a grassroots perspective," said Gene, who is near the end of his second two-year term on the Washington Farm Bureau's state board, where his father served for 14 years. Glenn was recently re-elected to his second year as president of the Columbia/Blue Mountain counties Farm Bureau, a post that Gene and Bill have also held.

When it comes to folks who aren't farmers, Gene said, "One thing many don't realize is how environmentally friendly we are. They don't seem to know that we apply chemicals according to labels

and that we soil test to see what our soils' needs are, etc."

Glenn said that a lot of folks who aren't farmers seem to have "trouble visualizing that the crops we harvest are the raw ingredients for what they serve on the table and don't always equate wheat being flour for bread or cookies. What we harvest may be transformed in many ways before it is served in homes across the world."

"Also farming is highly sophisticated and is a lot more than just cows and plows," Glenn said. "There is some technical programming that may be a lot more than the average consumer realizes such as variable rate seeding and fertilizing and spraying. Most don't realize what it takes to keep records of everything just to



Gene (left) and Glenn Warren in front of their direct seed tractor used to seed 5,000 acres of wheat, peas and beans annually.



Bins of freshly harvested Honeycrisp apples surround Bob and Nadine Warren, who have been farming for more than 60 years.

WARREN ORCHARDS

BY GAIL GREENWOOD AYRES

PASSION, PRIDE AND PERSEVERANCE. Those are the three qualities that Bill Warren of Dayton says his father instilled in all four of his children.

The youngest child of Robert “Bob” and Nadine Warren, Bill, 46, manages Warren Orchards, which his dad owns. His brothers – Gene and Glenn – run Warren Farms, which primarily grows wheat as well as other crops and cattle. (See story page 18.)

Bob and Nadine Warren, both 85, say they’re proud of all their hard-working children as well as their eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

“The farm is a good place to raise kids,” said Nadine, who said she wasn’t surprised that all her children have stayed close to their farming roots.

“Our oldest is our daughter, Tressa. She married a farmer and they have an orchard, but she worked as a registered nurse. She takes care of all of us,” Nadine said.

“I’m proudest that I have land that I can pass down,” said Bob. “The farms are incorporated so the boys run it now. We just set back and watch,” he said, with a laugh.

While Bob, who served for 14 years on the Washington Farm Bureau’s state board of directors, may have slowed down a bit, it’s clear he still has farming on his mind and helps out where he can.

“God has blessed our family many times with opportunity to have the land provide for us all

supply food for a person to put on the table,” he said.

Some folks who do know what it takes are their families.

Glenn and his wife, Aileen, have a teenage daughter, Katie. Gene and his wife, Mary, have a 22-year-old son Garrett who is studying agricultural technology and production management at WSU with a minor in business. Their daughter, Kelsey, 20, also at WSU, is studying business with a minor in agricultural economics.

“They work on the farm every summer, making money for college,” said Gene, adding that they are such skilled drivers they are “almost irreplaceable.”

Amidst the technology and the precision, the brothers haven’t lost their sense of awe and beauty of the land.

“I love it that the outdoors is my office that I have to go to everyday and where I can look at the elk and the deer,” said Gene.

Glenn said, “Watching the seed go in the ground when it is dry and wondering if it will even grow and then, months later, harvesting a nice crop, seems to go through my mind every year.”

And that farm equipment!

When he was a little boy, Glenn recalled he always liked to build things in the shop and see how things worked. “That is what I get to still do today—try to figure out how the things work.” He said he and hired technician Lee Winnett, “have a great time fixing things and we are always looking at a way to make something work better.”

While there are plenty of times when the hours are long and hard, farming also generally gives slow times too, the brothers agreed.

“I love the lifestyle and the independence of being a farmer,” said Gene. “Once it’s in your blood, it’s hard to get away from it.” ■

Bins of harvested pears at Warren Orchards represent hours of work.



Empty bins are set in each row, ready for the pear harvest to begin at Warren Orchards.

to work together on the family farm," said Bill.

"Being the youngest, I was able to see my brothers choose areas of interest in agriculture and pursue their interests with degrees from WSU. I was fortunate to be able to do the same. I have to thank my parents for having the vision to create opportunity to build and transfer the farm to another generation."

The orchard includes 55 acres of apples – honeycrisp, gala, yellow delicious, red delicious, cameo and braeburn – and 45 acres of pears

– bartlett, bosc and d'anjou. The operation also includes an irrigated hay and pasture operation with Warren Farms.

"There is risk involved in growing crops from weather and other market factors outside of the farm that can greatly reduce returns. We take our role of environmental stewardship seriously and are always looking for ways to improve our stewardship practices while maintaining economic vitality," Bill said.

"Farming is not about how much money you make," he said, "but about the quality of life you live

and bring to your employees and the community.

While his brothers' farming experience often tends to be more solitary, Bill says he especially enjoys the contact with people – from employees to salesmen to customers – that the orchard allows.

"I like building relationships with and being a part of the community and the consumers of the crops we grow. ... Direct sales at the orchard allow me to share my passion and experiences as a grower and answer questions that people always have," he said.