

Family Finds the Blessings in Harvest

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Fernando Salazar/The Wichita Eagle

ANDALE — From the driver’s seat, Kent Winter keeps an eye on the horizon, noting approaching storm clouds rolling in from out west. His other eye focuses on the thousands of wheat heads flowing each second through the header of his combine. As the John Deere roars down the field, the view is peaceful, serene — waves of golden wheat dance in the wind; red-wing blackbirds flit periodically ahead.

His mind isn’t on the view. “Harvest time is when the pressure can ramp up pretty good,” Winter said. “You do the best you can to roll with the punches. I’m thinking about what I need to do to start planning for next year. I’m rotating this wheat ground with corn, milo, soybeans and alfalfa. I’m thinking about the fertilizer — did I have enough last year? Did I put on too much? Too much nitrogen will cause the wheat to lay down and hurts the yield. I’m constantly evaluating what I did last year and what I can do to try and improve.”

He calls them his 10 busiest days of the year. But, as in every year since his great-grandparents settled near Mount Hope in the 1890s, he says the wheat harvest has been all about finding the blessings. It is about working together with his wife, Susan, and their eight children. It is about keeping the family farm together and planning for the future. “The wheat crop has nine lives and this year it really went through a lot,” Winter said. “We had a dry fall and an extremely dry winter. Then, in February, we got that 20-inch snow and that was a huge game changer. It just came in the nick of time. Every wheat harvest can be difficult, but one of the most surprising things is that this year’s crop is yielding better than expected.”

In some places in his dryland fields, the yields have been better than 60 bushels to the acre — a miracle considering the challenges of this past year's growing season. Freezes arrived after some of the wheat had left dormancy and jointed, and hail pounded a number of fields.

But across this crop, one of Winter's sons, Alan, is running another John Deere combine. More sons, Phillip and Kurt, are keeping a John Deere tractor and trailer busy going from combine to combine and driving underneath the giant augers as harvested wheat comes tumbling out into the trailer. From there, the bounty is taken to the waiting semis and on to the Andale Farmers Co-op elevator.

The boys know the signal — Kent Winter will flash the combine's lights if he needs them to come quickly. He doesn't stop the combine; he keeps it going as the boys pull up alongside. Winter flips a switch. When he's finished dumping, he signals with a circling finger, indicating they should move away. And, Winter smiles wryly, cellphones help everyone to stay in touch. "Before cellphones, some farmers had two-way radios. We didn't have that," Winter said. "And to tell you the truth, now, I don't know how we got along without them." Indeed, he says, the days of fixing the farm machines with just a hammer, screwdriver, crescent wrench and grease gun have given way to technicians with fancy diagnostic equipment.

His wife, Susan, has brought turkey sandwiches to the field. There are also chips and cookie bars and sliced cucumbers from the garden to munch on. Each grab and go. There's not much talking with nearly half of this year's 800 acres harvested. "I grew up with harvest," Susan Winter said. She was a Bergkamp, a family of dairy farmers from Garden Plain, before marrying Kent some 30 years ago. "I wanted to marry a farmer because I think it is a great way to live. It keeps everybody busy," she said.

A meadowlark calls in the distance as she stands beside the family car. The St. Joseph Catholic parish church steeple in Andale is visible from the Winter wheat field.

While the wheat harvest is going on; the Winter children are preparing 4-H projects for the Sedgwick County Fair in July. They grow three acres of sweet corn. As soon as the wheat harvest is done, they'll begin harvesting the corn to sell at the Farmer's Market each Saturday in Wichita.

Susan Winter's day began at 4 a.m. She gets up that early, she says, to have some quiet time to contemplate and to think about what needs to be done for the day. Kent got up at 6; the kids at 8. During harvest, the family will easily go until 10 or 10:30 at night. "It is hectic, but at the end of the day you are tired — not sit-at-the-computer tired, but physically tired — and I like that feeling," she said. "It is a blessing at harvest for everybody to be working together."

The machinery is bigger and more computerized and technical than what either Kent or Susan grew up with. But in the end, Kent Winter said, the end result is still all about having faith. Old-timers, he said, used to claim that if you could see a church steeple from the land, the land was worth more. "We were lucky to avoid the hail. However, next year, it might be our turn," Kent Winter said. "We were fortunate enough to have a shower or two. With farming, you don't know what to expect. You try to be ready for everything. You do the best you can with the season. But in the end, Mother Nature makes the final call what will happen. Timing is everything."