

The Legacy of Norman and Margaretha Geiger Spencer

A Tribute by Elaine Spencer and Robert Spencer



Norman Spencer was born in 1918 on a Woodbury County (IA) farm, the same farm on which his grandfather had first tilled the prairie sod. Later his parents moved across the country road to a quarter section of the land. Margaretha Geiger Spencer was born in Homestead, Amana, in 1921. Although trained in the strict tradition of the Amana Church, she was in the first group of Amana children allowed to attend high school after the Amanas changed from a closed communal society. She also was in the first group to go on to college. Norman and Margaretha met at Iowa State University, where Norman graduated in 1940 with a degree in Agricultural Engineering, and Margaretha graduated in 1944 with a degree in Home Economics.

After Norman was discharged from the service in the South Pacific during World War II, the couple returned to the farm where Norman had been raised. He farmed the land until 1987. Farming was both vocation and avocation for Norman. He approached it as a business, as a science, and as an art.

In the early 1950s he experimented with saving the runts in each litter of pigs and raising them for market by removing them from the sow and hand feeding them with formula. As a result, he could market one or two more pigs per litter than other farmers. His scientific bent led him to experiment with altering the hours of light and darkness. This practice moved the sow breeding cycle forward so that their litters would be born - and would go to market - two months before most pigs. This allowed him to capture the high markets when demand exceeded supply rather than the low markets when gluts of spring pigs were ready.

Those two innovations were recognized in 1954 when he was named one of Iowa's ten Master Swine Producers. The same unique vision caused him to quit hog production two years later and turn to growing turkeys - a much trickier animal to raise successfully. He realized that any farmer could copy his innovations in hog raising, and wanted to do something where thought and judgment would give him more of a competitive advantage.

Before the words "organic farming" had been coined, Norman developed ways to use nature's own defense mechanisms instead of the pesticides, herbicides, and antibiotics upon which other farmers increasingly depended. While others - often unsuccessfully - attempted to fend off epidemics in their turkeys with heavy, continuous doses of antibiotics, he prevented epidemics by moving his turkeys to clean ground before any epidemic could get started. And while other farmers had their corn flattened by corn borers, Norman's crop stood tall because he didn't use herbicides that killed the corn borers' natural predators.

He used only enough nitrogen and fertilizer so that in an average year it supplied the nutrient needs of his crops. Other farmers used more, so that in the unlikely event that the other key ingredients of the crop - sunlight and rainfall - turned out to be perfect, they would get the maximum possible production. Perhaps one year in ten, he didn't have the highest yield in the area. Ten years out of ten, he had lower costs and more profit than his neighbors. By the time he quit farming, most farm wells and many rural town wells in Iowa were unsafe for drinking because the excess nitrogen most farmers applied had polluted the groundwater. Norman had the water in his farm's well tested the year he sold it. The water met clean drinking water standards.

Throughout his career, Norman maintained an active relationship with Iowa State University's College of Agriculture. He was on a first name basis with the dean of the college and various professors. He learned from them, and they learned from him. By the end of his career, he believed that the college had put too much emphasis on bigger and more expensive machinery, requiring larger farms. There was more emphasis on greater capital investments than young farmers could muster, and increased use of herbicides and pesticides. He wrote a scathing letter to the dean, lambasting the college for having imperiled the family farm by research and writing, funded by the major implement and chemical manufacturers.

Nearly a year later he was at a meeting where the dean was in attendance. He avoided the dean; unsure they were on speaking terms. The dean approached him from across the room, greeting him, "Norman, I want you to know we took your letter seriously. You are right that we need to refocus where we are going. We've just gotten \$2 million from the legislature to start a center for the family farm, where we intend to focus on the issues you have raised." That center became the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

Norman believed that a farmer does not really own his land; it belongs to God, and he is at most its steward for his generation. He also believed that his last act of stewardship was to place the land in the hands of its next steward. Although his land had been farmed by his father and grandfather before him, when Norman got ready to leave the family farm, he refused to sell it to either of his children. He knew that their lives were elsewhere, and that they would necessarily be absentee landlords.

Norman thought the best stewards were those who farmed their own land. He sold the farm to a young farmer with ideas about how to operate it better. The winter before he sold the farm, as his next-to-last act of stewardship, Norman had a bulldozer rebuild the terraces that protected the hills from erosion. That was an investment usually amortized over 20 years, from which he would see no return. It was one bit of extra security, however, that the next steward would at least meet his minimum standards.

While Norman farmed, Margaretha was a homemaker in the broadest and best sense of the word. The "home" she made was not just for her family, but also for the larger community and the state. Uncounted community projects were advanced because of her leadership. She was a founding board member of the Iowa State University Home Economics Alumni Association and served ten years on the board. In 1971, Margaretha received the Siouxland Iowa State University Key Award for service to the university and her community. In 1976, she

received the Iowa State University Helen LeBaron Hilton Award for her contribution to the College of Home Economics.

Norman and Margaretha's children, Robert Spencer, DVM, and Elaine Spencer (both 1971 ISU graduates), created the Spencer Award in Sustainable Agriculture. This award is to recognize significant contributions to the advancement of ecological and economic practices that will make agriculture sustainable, and the family farm secure for the future. It is meant as a lasting memorial to their parents' central belief that it is the obligation of each generation to leave the world a better and healthier place for the next generation.

