

**2005 Spencer Award for Sustainable Agriculture
By Elaine Spencer**

November 14, 2005

On behalf of my brother Bob and myself I want to say that we are delighted to participate in presenting the 2005 Spencer Award for sustainable agriculture to Jerry DeWitt.

This award was created to recognize and celebrate three things that were of central importance to our parents.

The first is Iowa State University, one of the first and finest land grant universities. Our parents were both the first in their families to be able to get a college education. Their time as students here was a seminal experience in both of their lives. It allowed them to spend their adulthood as far greater contributors to their communities and their world than would otherwise have been possible.

The second is the advancement of sustainable agriculture. Decades before the term “organic” referred to a kind of food, our father raised his turkeys with less antibiotics, and grew his corn with less nitrogen inputs and herbicides than other farmers. He did it for two reasons – because he believed it was smarter, more cost effective, profitable commercial agriculture, and because he believed that it was the duty of each generation to leave the land more productive than they found it, and that was one way to accomplish that objective. Decades before “free range” was a more expensive form of poultry, he put his turkeys out on the range at 8 weeks and moved them on the range every 20 days, because moving them one day before the most dangerous pathogen in their droppings became active allowed him to avoid the epidemics that other turkey growers required antibiotics for, to reduced his feed costs, and to fertilize the next year’s corn ground.

He believed that the family farm was the most valuable of institutions, that they are the fundamental building blocks of strong Midwestern communities, and that to be continuing, family farms had to be managed in a fashion that young people could own them and raise their families on them. His form of agriculture – perhaps 20 years before its time but now being built upon by the leaders of sustainable agriculture – was the only form he believed would last.

The third was the continuing partnership between Iowa’s agriculture and Iowa State University that is fostered by Cooperative Extension. Part of the genius of the Morrill Acts, which created land grant universities was not just that they allowed young people from modest means to receive a college education in the practical sciences, but that those universities continually spread the knowledge gained through their research and teaching into the larger community.

Our parents’ relationship with Iowa State University did not end with graduation. If our dad was intuitively exploring the field now being given substance in conferences like this and by people like this audience, his success was dependent upon his lifelong relationship with Iowa State University through its Cooperative Extension program. He just may have attended every extension short course on agronomy or animal husbandry given over a 30-year period. He got to know the professors who taught the courses. He corresponded with them. He challenged their ideas. He offered them the benefit of his insights.

He was fully aware that “sustainable agriculture” could only be commercially successful if it were fully informed by both the science and the art of agriculture as taught at the University and transferred to the larger community through Cooperative Extension.

From what I am told, Jerry DeWitt’s career has been devoted to making that sort of relationship between the most forward thinking farmers of Iowa and the most forward thinking researchers and scientists and teachers of Iowa State University a partnership to lead sustainable agriculture into the 21st Century. As we approach the end of the petroleum age, sustainable agriculture is not only about maintaining the family farm. It is not only about delivering a higher quality product to consumers in a cost-effective way. It is in fact about whether the United States will be able to continue to provide its people with cheap and abundant food, and offer its surplus to the world. That is an essential mission for the sake of our children. It requires a continued and deepening partnership between the smartest thinkers of the university and the smartest thinkers among Iowa farmers. To maintain that partnership requires Jerry DeWitts.

So again, Bob and I are delighted to be part of making this award to Jerry. We offer our wholehearted congratulations on the achievements of his career, and we are honored to have a part in celebrating his accomplishment.