

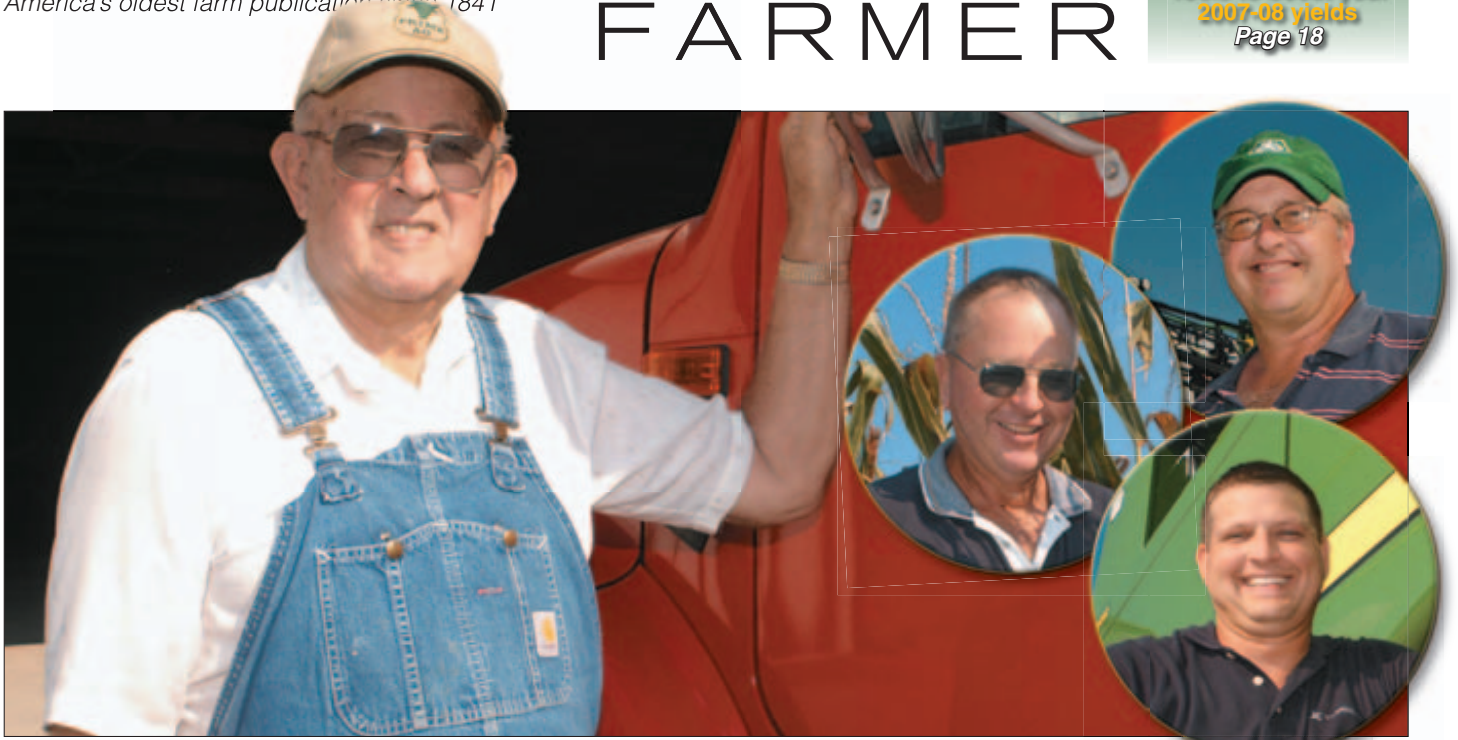
Prairie FARMER

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THREE GENERATIONS: Under the leadership of Kenneth Wachtel, sons Gary and Calvin, and grandson Todd, Wachtel Farms Inc. operates 5,600 acres near Altamont.

Putting stock in family

By **HOLLY SPANGLER**

Key Points

- The Wachtels incorporated back in 1989.
- They brought in new partners only when size allowed.
- All four families live together on the same farmstead.

If the hallmark of a successful family farm is a team with common goals and similar thought patterns, the Wachtels must surely be a poster family. And their agreement in the fact that they have little idea what makes their family farm "work" is not only charming, but fitting.

"Everybody's asked us what makes it work, and I'm not sure that anybody knows the answer," laughs Calvin Wachtel, who farms with dad Kenneth, brother Gary and nephew Todd near Altamont.

It doesn't hurt that they each have their own "little empires": Gary handles the Pioneer seed business, Calvin mans the sprayer and Todd runs the planter. However, they come

together to make decisions, and always with a common goal.

"We want to make sure the farm survives, and we'll do what we can to make that happen," Gary explains. "I think it's our pride in farming, our faith in God and that we have common goals."

Planning ahead moves them toward those goals, and they meet nearly every morning around Kenneth's table for coffee and planning. Says their longtime accountant Darrell

Dunteman, "They're so much down-the-road thinkers, and they're good strategic planners." Strategy is part of the reason they formed a corporation back in 1989.

Staying close

Yet early thought to incorporate isn't all that makes this family unique. After they work together all day, they go home — to houses that are 300 feet apart, all in a line on the farmstead. They each have their own driveway, but a single drive in the back connects them to each other and the farmstead.

And they enjoy it. In the early years, Gary and wife Lynn lived a mile west of the farm and Calvin lived a mile east of the farm. But they were driving 8,000 miles a year, just running back and forth.

Because they had hogs when they incorporated, the Wachtels were able to build on the farm and let the corporation own the houses — a huge tax advantage.

They worried at first about getting in each other's way, but over time they've enjoyed having their kids and grandkids grow up together. Todd and wife Lynelle's 9-year-old son, Connor, has become the family social director.

"The other evening, Connor stopped in and said, 'We're having a party on the deck and you're supposed to come,'" Gary describes. "So we walked over and his mom and dad didn't know anything about it. He had Calvin and his wife, Chris, there, too!"

And since installing what they affectionately call the

"community pool" last summer, they spend even more evenings together.

Their team mentality is evident to the folks around them, too. Lynn and Chris drive trucks, and Kenneth's wife, Betty, did the same until recently. Chris keeps the books, and Lynelle teaches school. All four wives get together to take meals to the fields. Lynn and Chris, incidentally, are cousins.

"They're still the closest family I've ever seen in my life," Dunteman relates. "They keep everything on the table. They are best friends. They're one heck of a team."

■ **Read more about why the Wachtels chose a corporation as their farm entity, beginning on Page 4.**

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