

Written Profile



Farm: Prior/Dittmer Farm

Location: Prairie Township, Illinois

Date of Origination: 1911

Industry Sector(s): Corn, Soybeans, Wheat, Oats, Hogs, Cattle

A progressive mindset is one of many things that set the Prior/Dittmer farm apart from the very beginning. Established in 1911 in Hancock County, Illinois, the family celebrates one hundred years in operation and contribution to **Agriculture's Lasting Heritage**.

In the early 1900's a motivated young man took a train from Columbus Junction, Iowa in search of a farmstead to purchase in Illinois. As the train pulled into town, Charles Prior noticed a farm and thought, "That's just what I'd like!" Little did he know that the piece of land spotted would become the foundation for a century of family farming. Prior purchased the land in 1911 and began his work as a corn and beef cattle

producer. "He was somewhat progressive for his time," explains granddaughter Joy Swearingen, as she shares how Prior would selectively sort ears of corn for seed collection.



Charles and Clara Prior, 1898



Prior Farm front porch, 1919

Prior passed away in 1920, only nine years after purchasing his dream land, leaving behind his wife, Clara, and five children. As teenagers Prior's two sons stepped forward to manage the operation with their mother, a task that undoubtedly instilled tremendous responsibility and investment in the land. In the 1930's the Prior's son Orvel and son-in-law Clayton Curtis lived on and operated the farm. Daughter Veva and son-in-law Junior Dittmer later managed the farm, followed by Prior's granddaughter Joy and husband Walt Swearingen.

Under the Dittmer name the farm continued the tradition of forward thinking and quality seed production. Junior Dittmer developed Prairie Gold Seed corn hybrid and served as a 35-year member of the Illinois Crop Improvement Association. He also served as the president of the Hancock County Farm Bureau.

"My grandfather, father and husband all looked at farming as a science and a business, as well as a way to raise a family. It was a way for children to feel they were making a valuable contribution to the family's enterprise," shares Joy. "This is important work, and children know that. It gives them respect. They feel a part of something much bigger than themselves." Before moving to the farm, Joy's husband Walt invested in the future leaders of the industry as an agriculture instructor. Walt then managed the farm full time with his wife until his passing in 2009.

When asked to reflect on the sustainability of their farm, Joy explains, "You have to think, not just about today or tomorrow, but about the long haul. Nothing about farming is disposable. Hard work is valuable, and the results can be seen in a long-lasting farm." Joy also shares that saving is a practice successful family farmers embrace. In a lesson so applicable to our time, Joy offers her insight, "Just because I have a crop in now, does not mean I can spend the money I make. I have to save it. I don't know what the next few months will bring."

A progressive mindset and proactive family involvement has fueled the sustainability of the family farming operation. We extend our appreciation to the Prior, Curtis, Dittmer and Swearingen families for allowing us all to be a part of something greater than ourselves. We applaud the family for leaving their mark on American agriculture by contributing to **Agriculture's Lasting Heritage**.



Prior/Dittmer Centennial Farm Reunion, May 2011