



Connected to the Family Business

By Lori Ward Bocher

From his childhood memories to his plans for retirement, it's difficult to find one major area in Bob Reinders' life that isn't somehow connected to the family business.

Bob and his brother, Dick, are the fourth generation to be involved in the Reinders family business that has been located in Elm Grove, Wis., since 1866 (see July/August 1996 issue for more on Dick and the business history). Three of Bob's children, along with three of Dick's children, represent the fifth generation.

"I'm fortunate. My children all have good business educations," Bob says. "Once in a while I think our children are foolish to come into business with us. They could go out and work for other professional organizations, make good salaries, and have fewer problems.

"But they all worked part time for us while growing up, so they enjoy it," he continues. "It's a challenge. I don't care if it's my kids or Dick's kids, they all diligently work to better the company. They don't get anything for nothing."

Sounds a bit like Bob's situation when he was a young man.

"I come from the old days," says Bob, who was born in 1932. He remembers attending a four-room grade school with outhouses in the rear; walking a mile and a quarter to school; passing the blacksmith's shop so he could see the horses; and working in his father's store.

"While I was in grade school and high school, I had the opportunity to work in my father's place," Bob recalls. "Well, maybe I didn't have the opportunity. I was told to. I was at the feed mill unloading 100-pound bags from the box cars when I probably only weighed 98 pounds.

"I was doing grinding for the farmers when they brought their grain in," he continues. "One summer Dad had me work on the coal truck as a helper which included shoveling in the coal bins.



Bob Reinders

"He did not have too much mercy on me," Bob says of his father, Roland, who is still somewhat involved with the family business at 90 years of age. "He was a very fair father. But he thought I should work, so I did."

Elm Grove was a different place back in the 1940's when Bob was growing up. "I can remember many times in the fall of the year I would walk from my parent's house down to work carrying my shotgun along to shoot a pheasant or rabbit on the way. It was country living since Elm Grove was a rural town then," he says.

"I can drive around Elm Grove today and point out the houses that were there when I was a kid delivering newspapers," he adds. "I could name every one of those people then. It was a friendly town."

From his childhood, Bob also remembers when a fighter plane crashed in their back yard in 1943. He remembers how he helped fight the fire when the Reinders feed mill burned down in 1949. And he remembers the flood of 1952 that deposited four feet of water in their warehouses.

When he reached high school, Bob attended a parochial school in Milwaukee. "I walked about a mile and a half over to Bluemound Road and then hitch hiked to school every day," he recalls. "When I got a little older I bought a motorcycle which I rode even in wintertime. Then I got smart enough to get a car."

And still, he worked in the family business. "I worked hard, played hard, and kept out of trouble," Bob adds.

After he graduated from high school in 1950, Bob went to Michigan State University to study agriculture because he had planned to go into the family feed business. "I always thought I'd come back to the family business — not that I really liked the feed manufacturing business, but I didn't know what else to do."

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As fate would have it, he never did finish his studies at Michigan State or go into the feed business. His schooling was interrupted by the Korean War where he served in the Navy for two years as a machinist in a ship's engine room.

After the war, he decided to attend the University of Wisconsin in Madison. But one semester later, the urge to return to the family business lured him away from Madison. "I came back that spring, looked around, and didn't see any farmers," Bob remembers. The family business was geared toward farmers at that time.

"Elm Grove was becoming a suburb. The suburbanites came into our store to buy fertilizer, grass seed and vegetable seeds. I thought that we weren't focusing in the right direction! Why don't we just get into the garden supply business?" So his father gave him a section of the store, and he was in business.

He did not return to school the next fall. "I saw that I had to get into business real fast," Bob points out. "There was so much business coming in that there was no sense in going back to school. The opportunity was there and if I didn't capitalize on it at the time, it would be too late."

After starting the retail garden center, he started selling consumer power equipment — Toro, Simplicity, Jacobsen. "One thing led to another," Bob adds.

In 1958, he was asked to take over the Milwaukee metro market for Jacobsen commercial turf equipment. "Ralph Christopherson, Art Horst and I had the Jacobsen franchise for the whole state," Bob explains. "And I was quite happy with it. The only trouble was, I had a small territory that had little growth potential."

He looked into buying the Toro franchise from the R.L. Ryerson Company in 1968 or 1969, but it went to a friend of his, Jack Eimerman, who purchased both the Toro consumer and commercial lines. "Later I met Jack and he said, 'I don't care anything about the commercial business. Why don't you buy my commercial franchise?'"

And so in 1971, Bob assumed the task of taking over the commercial Toro franchise for the whole state of Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Shortly before that he had hired Lee Strebel as his sales manag-

er. "He really helped the turf division get up and going," Bob recalls.

"About 1971 I made another smart move. I hired Ed Devinger," Bob explains. "He worked as a salesman for us up until 1975, when Lee started his own Toro distributorship in Florida. Ed became our sales manager then and is now manager of the turf division.

"Another good, quality person," Bob says of Ed. "Because of his hard work and devotion, you couldn't ask for a finer person to have in the company.

"I went from starting a business to hiring people and having them run the business," Bob explains. "I ended up more as a general manager with the normal business problems of banks, insurance, OSHA, personnel. I thought I was more adept at that, and there were a lot more people out there who were better at sales than I was."

In 1973, the company started the Reinders Turf Conference which continues to be held every other year at the Expo Center in Waukesha.

Also in 1973, Bob almost lost his life when another flood hit the business. "I was trying to pump water out of the basement of our retail store, and I kept losing the suction prime," he remembers. "So I decided to move the portable pump downstairs. I forgot about the carbon monoxide. I needed oxygen to be revived."

In recent years, the Reinders company has been concentrating on opening branches. In 1989 they opened a branch in Appleton, and this past year they enlarged their facility there. In 1993 they opened a branch in Madison, and they will be building a new facility this fall at the intersection of Highways 30 and 51.

A branch in Stevens Point was open for business during the summer months of 1995 and all year long beginning in 1996. "In 1997 we're probably going to add service and parts up there," Bob adds.

Why the new emphasis on branch offices? "You've got to be in the geographical market where the customer is," Bob answers. "If you're not in the market, you're not going to get their business. You don't deserve their business. If they have a problem or need something fast, we're right there to take care of it.

"Service is the main thing," he continues. "With the branches, we can staff the facility with a couple of

mechanics and give same-day service. Or we can have equipment available if something breaks down. If we get a call from a customer whose equipment broke down and it's critical, we'll be out there the same day. You can't do that if you have to travel over 200 miles.

"Where are we going to go from here?" Bob asks. "It's hard to say. We keep on expanding. We're looking for other product lines. We might look at another allied business that's somewhat comparable to our business."

Having worked with his father and uncle...then with his brother...and now with his children, nieces and nephews...Bob has a bit of experience and wisdom in family matters.



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"When it was just Dick and me, our father left us pretty much to do what we wanted," Bob remembers. "He would provide guidance, yet give us the opportunity to make decisions. When Dick and I disagreed, it was usually over small details, like what color the bathroom fixtures should be. Business wise, if he wanted to do something, I'd say OK. And if I wanted to do something, he'd say OK. We got along great that way.

"We shared everything," he continues. "We both put in our hours and never questioned one another. I hope the next generation can do the same. Dick and I can sit across the hall from each other in our offices and holler back and forth, and in two minutes we have a decision. When you get more people involved, that gets harder to do.

"In the last three or four years I've been working on telling the children about corporate problems and having them help make corporate decisions. And I want them to understand that our managers who have worked for us are extremely knowledgeable in their field of expertise and we need their input.

"We have meetings. We have discussions," Bob says. "You sit down with a son or daughter or niece or nephew to try to tell them a better way of doing things. You know how hard it

is to try to tell your child something? It's also that way with business."

Bob is extremely proud of his six children. One daughter, Mary Reinders Quick, manages the Reinders wholesale salt and feed division. Son Mark is responsible for the Reinders branch operations and facilities. And daughter Ann manages the Madison Reinders store.

Three others have jobs away from the family business. Son Robert is a real estate developer in Cincinnati. Son Mike manages a Best Buy store in Illinois. And daughter Lynn works with disabled children.

With the fifth generation firmly entrenched in the family business, 64-year-old Bob is looking toward retirement. But he plans to wean himself gradually. "I worry about retirement," he admits. "In the last two or three years a number of my close friends have taken early retirement. But I don't know if I can do that.

"When I look at my dad, he had an opportunity to take off and go, to do a lot of traveling. But he still had a place to come back and work," Bob points out. "I think that's probably more what I want to do. I do some traveling now. And sometimes I commute from northern Wisconsin."

Bob has a log home in Lac du Flambeau near the Woodruff-

Minocqua area. "A lot of times I leave work on Thursday night or Friday noon, and I come back Sunday night or Monday morning," he explains. "I take a briefcase up there, utilize a fax machine, and receive phone calls. So I still run a business. But with the quality people we have, I'm not missed for three days. I can get away for a long weekend.

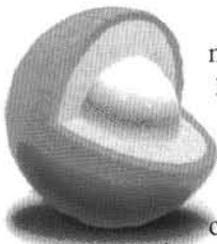
"But I don't know about retirement," he adds. "I can't stand sitting around. When I'm down here, I'm at work by 7 or 7:30 in the morning, and I don't walk out until 6 o'clock at night."

When he's not working, Bob likes to hunt and fish, which is one reason he loves to head up north. His northern hideaway includes a 30 by 40-foot "toy garage" where Bob keeps his tractor and other "toys". The garage also contains a workshop.

Bob enjoys traveling to other locations, too. Recently he's been to Australia, Florida, Arizona, Alaska and on hunting or fishing trips. He used to be a pilot, but he sold his share of the plane to Dick after putting it down in a field once.

So expect to see Bob Reinders at work for a few more years. He may be away once in a while, but he plans to remain connected to the family business. After all, just like his father, that's all he's ever known. ♣

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