Harvest

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the field to the elevator. Son, Gary, 63, came back to the farm about 40 years ago after college, taking over the operation.

But sometimes, even in the wheat fields of Kansas, family traditions gradually come to an end.

The father and son, it seems, are the last generation of Barkers to

Gary and Ruth Ann's children both have their own professions -Matthew is a nutritionist at a pet food company, and Bryce works in security at a prison. As Gary puts it, after years of driving machinery during high school and college, neither had an interest in coming

But as fate would have it, strangers do become family.

130-year-old farm

From the seat of his tractor, Gary Barker has a good view of the ripened fields around him.

It's just day three of the Kansas wheat harvest and there is still a good week of cutting left. Despite a dry start to the year, he couldn't be happier with this year's prospects.

"We have had good years, and we have had bad years," he said. "As far as this year, the yield is good.'

Farming, after all, is an uncertain business – even for his pioneering ancestors. Mother Nature is fickle. Global markets are unpredictable. It's the hardest part of farming, he said. There is so much he can't control.

Wheat, after all, along with cattle and milo, has always been one of the Barker family's biggest paychecks. The age-old knowledge centered around the nine months from planting to harvest has been passed down generation to gener-

Gary's great-grandfather, Galen, homestead in Pratt County in 1882, bringing with him his wife and children, including an infant boy, Claude

Claude farmed and, along with brother, Louis, built a wooden elevator at nearby Waldeck in 1912. As cooperatives formed, the brothers sold the elevator in 1920 to Cairo Co-op.

Claude didn't marry until he was 50. Son Carter came along in

Carter grew up on the farm in the 1930s and 1940s. At age 12, with men fighting in World War II, Carter was driving the grain truck during wheat harvest - hauling wheat with a 1939 GMC pickup.

He's been hauling wheat ever since, adding he never considered any other occupation than farming. College was never an option.

'Farming is all I know," he said, adding by the time he graduated from high school, his dad was nearing 70. "I've always liked it. It

has always been enjoyable." He married Marjorie - raising



Gary Barker, left, and his father, Carter, right, will turn over the reigns to their farm near Cairo over to Trey Langford, center.



In 1920 two brothers, Louis and Claude Barker, owned and operated a small elevator 3 miles west of Cairo at Waldeck. The Barker brothers sold their facilities to the cooperative. This 4,000- to 5,000-bushel elevator served the farmers' needs until additional facilities were constructed in 1942.

their two children, Deb and Gary, on the farm.

Gary, too, grew up helping - driving the tractor, helping with wheat harvest and haying.

"Fifty cents an hour – you couldn't beat that," said Gary.

Carter said he always knew Gary had the same passion for

farming. 'That's all he ever thought about growing up," Carter said.

School came easy for Gary, who graduated from Kansas State University. His mother always told him to go off and become a doctor.

She'd tell him - "Go where the money is."

Instead, Gary married Ruth Ann in college and returned to the Pratt-area farm – following in his father's footsteps. He has a cow/calf operation, as well as the crops. And Carter still helps where needed - along with selling farm machinery - something he's done for more than 50 years.

"We decided to come here and make a million," said Gary with a laugh. "I found it is a lot harder making that first million.

"It really has been good for us," Gary said as he drove a tractor pulling a grain cart back and forth from the combines to the line of trucks sitting on the edge of the dirt road. "It is a great place to raise a family - the Pratt community and on the farm. Growing up on the farm, kids get to see a lot of things that most kids never would. We have just been truly fortunate.'

The first generation

The farm's past is evident from Gary and Ruth Ann's home. Black

and white photos of family line the walls - from the grain elevator to plowing with horses.

But for generations - the farm has been changing. Knowing his two sons weren't coming back to the farm, Gary had decisions to make. One thing he knew - he didn't want to see the farm swallowed up into someone else's operation.

"I really don't want that," said Gary. "I wanted the farm to

It's the long-term trend. Quietly over the years, farm operations have become bigger and the number of farmers has decreased. In 1950, when Carter was starting on the farm full time, there were 135,000 farms in Kansas. By the time Gary came back in 1976, that number dwindled to 78,000, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

These days, there are only 61,000 Kansas farms. Less than half are operated by full-time

The average age of the Kansas farmer has been more than 50 since the 1970s – and now has crept up to 58. Moreover, with input costs and the equity it takes to farm, it is difficult for someone without the farming tradition to get their foot in the door.

So, you might call it serendipity when the paths of a hopeful kid and two experienced farmers

Trey Langford didn't grow up on a farm.

But as a 14-year-old high school freshman, his dad told him to get a job. He contacted his best friend, Weston Goyen, whose father farmed in the area.

Weston said his dad didn't need help, but his grandfather and uncle, Carter and Gary, were always needing hands.

Gary laughs as he thinks of

Trey's first job on the farm spending the entire summer mowing the property atop a cabless Ferguson tractor.

He paid his dues, said Barker, adding "We gradually worked him up doing more.'

As Trey expressed his passion for farming and cattle - venturing to Kansas State to get a degree in ag economics, Gary and Carter saw an opportunity to mentor a young man.

How it all worked out, Gary doesn't recall. But both he and his father agreed they wanted to give Trey an unique opportunity.

'I'm very lucky," said Trey, as he drove a truck to the elevator at Waldeck. "That is the best way to put it: lucky. For them to give me the opportunity to take part in it."

Trey said his dad, Sonny, encouraged him about his choice of profession. Sonny passed away last year.

'I knew it was what I wanted to do," Trey said.

He continues to learn the ropes, he said. On this triple-digit harvest day, he does a little bit of everything that is going on amid the busyness of harvest – dumping trucks, driving combines, cultivating the newly cut wheat stubble – just like Gary used to do. He's even introduced some precision technology, teaching Gary how to operate the GPS in the tractor.

"It's just the type of person you want to work with - good temperament, good work ethic, familiar with technology," Gary said.

They are all taking it slowly so he can handle the investment. Moreover, Gary doesn't plan to retire anytime soon. But eventually, Trey will have

more responsibility and Gary less. Even Trey's wife, Heather, is helping Ruth Ann and Marjorie some with the evening meals. Trey fiddles with his ringing cellphone as he drives down the

road. He is waiting for a call from his wife, Heather, who is due any day with their first child – a son. For now, it's just Ruth Ann on the other end. She has a water jug for

The marathon of wheat harvest continues. And it is still about family and tradition. After washing up, they sat

around the dinner table, swapping stories. There is Howard Hamm, who grew up on a farm near Carter. His family doesn't farm anymore, but he has came back from his home in Oklahoma for the past few years. Bob Ogle, a retired custom cutter, still drives the combine for the Barkers. There is also Norman Forssberg, a retired Pratt middle school and high school math teacher who has driven the combine for the Barkers for 50 years.

In coming days, Gary's son, Bryce, his wife and 11-month-old grandson joined the crew, helping bin seed wheat that will be planted this fall in anticipation of the next harvest.

Hand

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ago, Forssberg, was the new teacher in a new town. He and his wife moved next to no other than the local barber.

Who, of course, in a farming community like Pratt, knows a bit about everything.

"I was visiting with him in the yard and told him I was kind of looking for some summer work - that I had done construction, grown up on a farm," said Forssburg. "The next day Carter (Barker) came into the barber shop to see if anyone knew where he could find some help driving his combine for the remainder of the harvest.

The rest, of course, is history. Fifty harvests later, the 74-yearold is still circling the Barker

farm fields this June for Carter's

Maybe it's the food that has kept him at it, he said with a chuckle, noting Gary's wife, Ruth Ann, and Carter's wife Marjorie, always serve a hot meal at noon.

On this day, on the menu was smothered steak, mashed potatoes, rolls, relishes, beets and fruit salad, along with dessert.

You can't beat the eating we get out here during harvest," he said. "The cooks feed us well."

Forssberg, however, is not a stranger to the field. He grew up on a farm in Phillips County. He eventually ventured to the University of Kansas, and got a teaching degree. He taught at a couple different schools before he moved his family to Pratt.

He spent the next 30-some years teaching math at Pratt USD 382. His summers, however, were spent helping the Barkers – especially during

wheat harvest.

He retired from teaching in 1999. But not from the combine.

"I still look forward to each year," he said of wheat harvest. "But I don't think I want to go back to teaching.'

He doesn't listen to the radio. He just listens to the sound of the machine and the wheat going through the header.

Gary Barker calls him a math whiz of the field, proclaiming Forssberg, who drives a combine without any yield monitors or precision tools, figures the bushels per acre of a field by watching the grains pour into the bin.

Not quite, says Forssberg with a chuckle. But notes that if it takes 20 minutes to fill up the combine bin, "It's pretty good wheat.'

"A good wheat crop always makes it even more enjoyable," he said of harvest.



Travis Morisse/The Hutchinson News

Norm Forssberg operates a combine on the Barker farm Wednesday near Cairo. Forssberg has been helping the Barker's for the past 50 years with harvest.



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