



Photo: Jim Heemstra

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Agronomy alum Owen Newlin has been involved with the seed industry his entire career. He served in Pioneer Hi-Bred International's corporate leadership, increasing market share and growing the company.

A WITNESS TO ERAS OF HYBRIDS AND BIOTECH

By Melea Reicks Licht

"DID YOU GROW UP ON A FARM?" OWEN NEWLIN ASKS A recent visitor.

He nods appreciatively when he hears the answer – "yes." It's a piece of information that's particularly meaningful to this seed industry retiree who has seen the industry evolve from conventional hybrids to biotechnology.

Newlin ('51 agronomy, '53 MS) is a retired senior vice president and director of Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc.

The first commercial hybrid seed corn was produced in 1925 and sold to farmers in 1926 by Pioneer. By 1955 over 95 percent of corn grown in the U.S. Corn Belt was hybrid.

"This was about a 29-year period of technology adoption. Two important events were the droughts of 1934 and 1936 during which the hybrids produced some corn, while the open pollinated varieties produced much less. Those were dramatic demonstrations of the value of hybrid corn," Newlin says. "Adoption didn't happen overnight but the droughts gave hybrid adoption a big impetus."

Newlin always knew he'd find his career in agriculture. He grew up on a farm in Polk County, Iowa. To him growing up on the farm meant chores like any other farm kid – mowing and raking hay and caring for his 4-H projects.

He earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees in agronomy Iowa State. Newlin holds his experiences and training at Iowa State in very high regard, especially meeting his wife Doris Jean, a student in household equipment, at a dance exchange with her dormitory and his fraternity. In addition to FarmHouse fraternity and several honor societies, he was elected to Cardinal Key, the Student Union board, served on Ag Council and was active in the Agronomy Club.

"I was active in student organizations in college, or as they call it today the 'ISU experience,'" Newlin says. "Extracurricular activities were very important because they were part of my training – developing and building consensus, and working with people of different opinions."

He also met Louis Thompson, who would become a lifelong friend, at Iowa State. As associate dean of academic programs in agriculture in 1947, Thompson shared a table with Newlin at a college event welcoming entering students. Newlin says Thompson checked-in on him during his degree work. It may have seemed like Thompson took a special interest in mentoring Newlin, but according to Newlin, Thompson made every student feel that way. Newlin was happy to answer Thompson's call three decades later when he was sought out to chair the suc-

successful five-year campaign in support of new and improved agronomy facilities at ISU in the 1980s.

Advised by B.J. (Bugs) Firkins, Thompson and others, Newlin recognized that after his undergraduate degree he still had much to learn about plant breeding and genetics so he sought further education. He worked under George Sprague for his master's degree and also with Iver Johnson.

"I could have stayed at Iowa State for my Ph.D., but I was encouraged to diversify. By the time I left Iowa State I had taken every graduate course that had to do with plant breeding and crops that the university offered," Newlin says.

After completing his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in plant breeding and genetics, he was offered a job at Pioneer as a research assistant in 1955. At Pioneer Newlin began by focusing his efforts on seed quality and yields.

"My education was very helpful since the seed industry is relatively technical and is even more so today. My technological background was useful in making business decisions," he says.

He worked his way up to become president of the North American Seed Central Division of Pioneer in 1967. While there he and his team dramatically increased sales and market share by carefully choosing high performing Pioneer hybrids tailored for their geographic region. As Central Division President he promoted the development of the agronomy service department. In 1986 he was elected senior vice-president of Pioneer. Throughout his career Newlin's philosophy has always focused on farmers.



This photo of Owen Newlin from ISU's 1952 yearbook The Bomb is taken from the page on the Cardinal Key Society, Iowa State's premier honorary society.

"If seed has too many out-crosses, then farmers won't get the maximum genetic potential of the hybrid. The seed needs strong germination and emergence and needs to be relatively pure. That's what we always strived to do," he says.

Looking back on his career in the seed industry, Newlin is impressed with the technological advancements to which he has been a witness.

"The rate of technology adoption now is more rapid. From the open pollinated era to the double-cross era to the single-cross era to now the biotechnology era – I never imagined biotechnology would be possible when I started with Pioneer," he says. "And there is much more potential in the future with genetically modified crops, especially in improving nutritional value and drought resistance."

Newlin's civic involvement since retiring from Pioneer in 1993 is like a second career in itself including two six-year terms as a member and eight years as president of the Board of Regents, State of Iowa. He has only recently cut back on his extracurricular activities and is still involved in the seed industry. He also spends his time enjoying visits with his children and grandchildren. ⑤

NEWLIN PLAYED AN ACTIVE CIVIC ROLE IN SOCIETY, HIGHER ED

Owen Newlin's list of honors and achievements serves as record of his significant contributions to society, especially to the seed industry, higher education and the state of Iowa. Too lengthy to be all-inclusive, the following lists a few highlights of his awards and service.

- President Board of Regents, State of Iowa
- President United Way of Central Iowa and Campaign Chair
- Chairman of the Board of Trustees Simpson College
- FFA - Chairman National Sponsors Board, VIP Citation, Honorary Farmer Degree
- Fellow American Society of Agronomy, Fellow Crop Science Society of America
- Fellow American Association for the Advancement of Science
- Phi Kappa Phi, Distinguished Member
- Chair U.S. Grains Council, Lifetime Achievement Award
- President American Seed Research Foundation
- Honorary Member American Seed Trade Association
- Honorary Member International Seed Federation
- National Corn Growers Association President's Award
- National Agri-Marketing Association, Agri-Marketer of the Year
- Graduate Harvard University's Advanced Management Program
- President Rotary Club of Des Moines, Lifetime Service Award
- Iowa Business Hall of Fame Award, Iowa Volunteer Hall of Fame Award
- Distinguished Achievement Award, University of Minnesota
- President ISU Achievement Foundation
- Board of Directors ISU Foundation (helped establish it as an independent organization), Chair of Five-year Capital Campaign
- Iowa State University Awards
 - Alumni Recognition Medal
 - Floyd Andre Award
 - Distinguished Achievement Award
 - Alumni Merit Award
 - Order of the Knoll Campanile Award
 - Henry A. Wallace Award
 - True and Valiant Award

STORIES ONLINE EXTRA:

Read an essay on the history of the ISU-USDA corn breeding program by Arnel Hallauer, C. F. Curtiss Distinguished Professor in Agriculture and Life Sciences and agronomy emeritus professor at www.ag.iastate.edu/stories.