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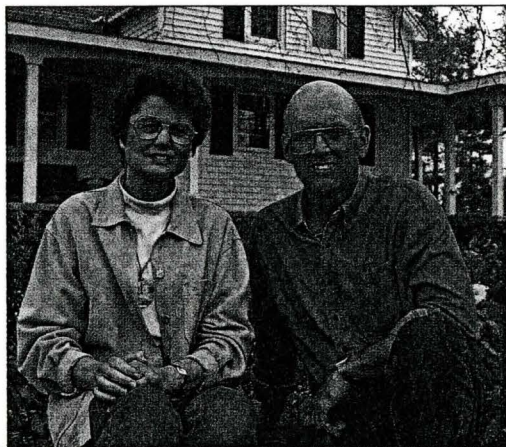


IOWA Master Farmer

John and Mary Miller

*Setting the standard
for sustainability*

Mary and John Millers' goal is to leave the land better than they found it and provide a strong foundation for the next generation.



BY JOANN ALUMBAUGH

Near Cedar Falls, Iowa, in an area rapidly being inhabited by non-farm residents, John and Mary Miller quietly demonstrate a love for the land through their words and deeds. Their Black Hawk County farm has carefully terraced fields, a newly established native prairie and neatly kept livestock buildings. One feels a natural synergy between people, land and livestock.

This synergy has existed in the Miller operation for a long time. Their goal is to leave the land better than they found it and provide a strong foundation for the next generation.

John Miller operates 600 acres and has a partnership with Larry Green in a 140-sow farrow-to-finish operation. G & M Pork, Inc., has survived and prospered through 19 years.

"It's been successful because Larry is a heck of a hog producer," says John.

The house and many of the buildings were put up in the late 1800s by John's great-grandfather. The pig nursery is an old hay barn and the farrowing building is a converted chicken house.

The facilities are utilized to their full potential and the hog enterprise is integrated effectively with the farming operation. John wanted to farm 600 acres to utilize the waste resources from the annual production of 2,800 hogs. A professional agronomist helps manage crop production with the use of soil testing, fertility planning and crop scouting — it's a complete Integrated Crop Management program. The managed manure program reduces the need for

major purchases of phosphate and potash. Nitrogen needs are reduced by almost 25 percent.

"Back in the days of my great-grandfather, you conserved resources without even thinking about it," says Miller. "The fields were smaller and fence rows helped minimize erosion. Also, crop rotations were standard procedure."

His father was a science teacher, and as far back as John can remember, there was an appreciation for the environment. The row of trees that he planted at the age of 13 is now an effective windbreak along the driveway. His first broad base terraces were built in the late 1960s long before such practices became common. He also developed a farm pond at this time for water management and wildlife.

When John was a junior in high school, he received a book called "Round River" by Aldo Leopold as a Christmas present from his father. "This book talked about the country being the personality of the land," recalls Miller. "We are the best at producing crops but we don't know as much as we should about the country. It's not just production — it's commitment."

It's appropriate that Miller served on the first board of directors of the Leopold Center, an educational and research foundation devoted to sustainable agriculture. He helped establish the center's focus and direction, and is still involved with its activities and programs. John also served on the Iowa State Soil Conservation Committee for 12 years and helped develop the Northeast Iowa Research Farm at Nashua.

In their quiet, unassuming way, the Millers show how farmers can live in harmony with their urban neighbors. Mary has given piano lessons in their home for nearly 35 years and is a member of local, state and national music organizations. "It's a career that works well with living on the farm," she notes.

John has not sought media exposure, but he's been in the "right place at the right time" on a number of occasions. The Miller family was featured in a USDA brochure more than 20 years ago, called *People on the Farm: Corn and Hog Farming*. John and Mary hosted the Today Show on their farm and were interviewed by Barbara Walters during a bicentennial special in 1976.

The Millers' thoughtful, articulate answers helped build a positive image for farmers and agriculture in 1976. They continue to do so today by demonstrating their belief in the value of sustainable agriculture.

The Miller children are: Julie, who lives in Lees Summit, Mo.; Brad, Daytona Beach, Fla., and Brian, Portland, Ore. ♦