

Unverferth Mfg. — From Family Farm and Good Neighbor to High-Tech Business

by Marlene Weeks, Publications Editor

Being neighborly and helping out others in one's community has always been a wise and considerate choice. Turns out, it is also a good business practice, as the Unverferth family can attest. For decades, they have designed, produced and sold parts and equipment that their fellow farmers said they needed but could not find. By proactively responding to neighbors' unmet needs, the Unverferths have built a business that now serves farmers across North America and in the international marketplace.

Foundation

In the 1930s, farmer and innovator Lawrence (L.G.) Unverferth invented a beet blocker for mechanized thinning of sugar beet beds, which was granted U.S. Patent #2,009,332 in 1935.

In 1947, after his son Richard returned from serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, the two men began making step plates and unloading control levers for Massey Harris combines. The family manufactured the devices in their barn near Kalida, OH, and Richard drove across the country, selling them out of the trunk of his car. Eventually, they began making additional products in order to help neighboring farmers. For example, at that time, corn pickers did not have husking beds, so the Unverferths developed their own pickers/huskers and began to market them.

This venture proved successful, so L.G. and

Richard officially launched their own business, Unverferth Manufacturing Co. Inc. The company originally manufactured dual- and triple-wheel components and systems for tractors. Later, production expanded to include running gear, gravity boxes, tillage and spraying equipment, large grain carts, seed tenders and other products primarily for grain farming.

In the 1960s, Unverferth constructed a new Kalida facility where it consolidated its administrative, production and warehouse operations, and then added new product lines, including farm wagons, grain and bale elevators, refuse

containers and spike-tooth tillage tools. The company also continued to produce wheels and related products, and introduced high-clearance narrow wheel conversions for tractors.

As the Unverferths continued to operate their family farm and to interact with fellow farmers, they recognized the need to design and develop new custom products to meet growers' specific needs. As a result, they developed a number of patented designs, such as contoured runners that allow grain wagon wheels to turn on a tight radius, header transport rest brackets, and all-wheel header transports that enhance steering capability.

Innovation

In 2012, the company was awarded a patent for its Seed Runner tender with self-filling conveyor design, which generated great interest when it premiered at the National Farm Machinery Show in Louisville, KY. Previously, a farmer had to enlist a second

person to help open big plastic seed bags after raising them up and over the side of a gravity box or seed tender with a forklift—10 to 12 feet off the ground. With the self-filling seed tender, one person can do the job and needs only to raise the seed container 3 to 4 feet, which is both easier and safer.

In 2013, Unverferth partnered with Raven Industries to introduce the UHarvest Data Management Solution for displaying and managing grain cart and harvest data. This technology allows a

user to capture data for each load, upload it to a cloud server, and use it to run reports by grower, by field, by the farm from which a commodity is harvested, and by total aggregate production. The virtual terminal is ISOBUS-compatible, so it plugs into an ISO port and uses a tractor's ISO monitor as a touch-screen interface, instead of requiring a separate box in the cab. The system includes a Wi-Fi connection point for sharing information with tablets and smart phones within a 400-foot range. Unverferth and Raven are working on an application, set to launch in 2015, that allows the system to use Android or Apple devices to upload



Unverferth Manufacturing Co. Inc.'s administrative offices at its home base in Kalida, Ohio.

data to the user's Slingshot account while in the field. In the meantime, UHarvest won an American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers (ASABE) 2014 AE50 Award, which recognizes products ranked highest in innovation, significant engineering advancement, and impact on the market served. The company will receive the award again in 2015 for its Equalizer track for grain carts.

Association

Unverferth joined the Farm Equipment Manufacturers Association in 1975 and since then has remained an active and engaged member. In fact, Richard Unverferth served as Association president for 1987-88.

"Association membership has been a good relationship-builder for us," said Jerry Ecklund, Unverferth's Communications Manager. "It provided excellent learning experience for us when the company was getting into the shortliner business. It's a great organization



One of two expansions Unverferth completed in 2014 was at its facility at Delphos, OH.

in all the equipment and buildings we want, but it's the people who make this company what it is," he stated.

Ecklund said the company continues to grow and add products to its lines, and in recent years has benefitted from "a good business climate." Last year, Unverferth expanded its facility in Delphos, OH, where it manufactures grain-handling and seed-handling equipment, in order to streamline product flow and add space for indoor storage of parts. It also broke ground last summer on a new sales branch in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, that now enables the company to better supply and serve dealers and farmers in western Canada with wheels and other ag-related parts.



The company received a patent for its self-filling Seed Runner tender, which made its debut at the 2006 National Farm Machinery Show. The larger 4955, introduced in 2014, also provides patented self-filling convenience.

for non-tractor farm equipment manufacturers, and its annual meetings and *Shortliner* newsletter are valuable industry resources."

Determination

Unverferth is still family-owned, with Richard's son and L.G.'s grandson, Steve, serving as president.

Ecklund emphasizes that, in addition to its lineage, the people who work at Unverferth are the key to its success. "We can invest

"I wish we had a crystal ball and knew what the government and the industry will do in the next year," Ecklund said. "It would sure help a lot of farmers and businesses with our planning." In the meantime, "we believe in growing conservatively, knowing that ag has big ups and downs," he said. For example, he noted that one of the "ups" is a boost in businesses sparked by the temporary extension of Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation in December, which prompted many Unverferth customers to call the company and ask about the availability of products that they usually request in February and March. A "down" is not knowing where commodity prices will go and if or when Congress will again take up the matter and provide a permanent, or at least long-term, solution in 2015.

Since its founders' formula for combining innovation with determination and a desire to help one's neighbors has proven successful, Unverferth will continue to rely on that strategy. AGI