



By Amy Bickel Photography by Harland J. and Suzanne Schuster

From the seat of his combine, Kent Winter has a clear view of his acres of ripened wheat fields, as well as the western sky. A storm is brewing.

"I don't know if there is hail in it or not," he says with a worried look. The soft-spoken Sedgwick County farmer isn't the complaining type—especially about rain. After all, it had been a dry spring coupled with a string of dry years. But with so much at stake this time of year, the mass of dark clouds makes any farmer a little antsy. Knowing forecasters were predicting a deluge, Winter had been up until 5 a.m. that morning baling hay. Now it's nearing evening and he wants to get what wheat is ready to cut binned before the rain comes.

"Right now, it would make me happy if we could miss the rain for a few days," he says before adding, "That might be asking too much." It's wheat harvest time in Kansas. And for the Winter family, June's marathon is a test of tradition.

Winter, a veteran farmer, is embarking on his 32<sup>nd</sup> wheat harvest, and he knows all too well the realities of farming. Even for the earliest pioneers, farming was an uncertain business. You can't control the rain. You can't control the prices. A hailstorm—what farmers call "the great white combine"—could take out his entire crop.

Top that all off with the economic effect. "This is one of the largest annual paychecks that I get," Winter says.

**Steeped in tradition**

For 98 percent of Americans, wheat is just what bread is made of. But in Kansas, the nation's breadbasket, the annual rite is steeped in tradition and history. For thousands of Kansas farm families, wheat harvest is a way of life. For the Winter family, helping bring in the nearly 9 million acres of Kansas wheat each year has flowed through their veins for five generations.

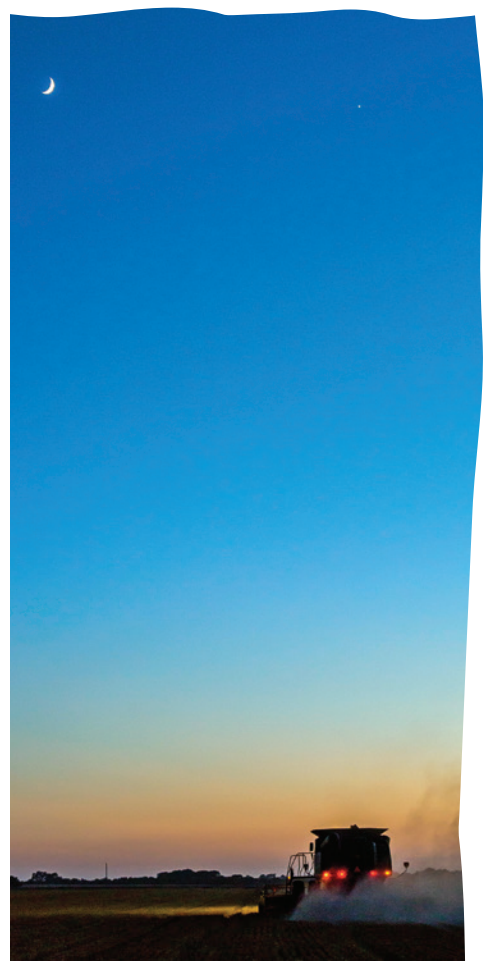
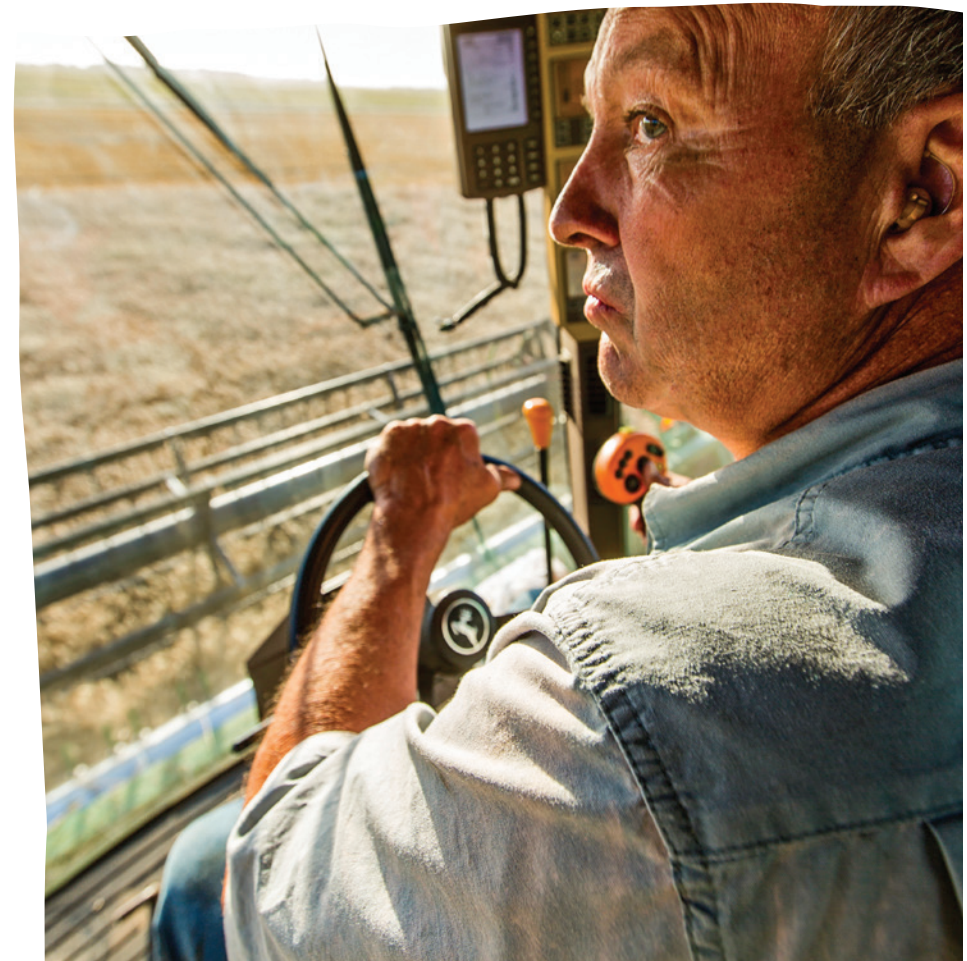
The harvest payoff is a time they look forward to each year. But it's not easy. There is no 5 p.m. quitting time or weekends off. When the wheat is ready, they cut until Mother Nature makes them to stop or something else, like an equipment breakdown, occurs.

The harvest knowledge has been passed down through generations. Kent's great-grandfather, Frank Winter, came to Kansas as settlement began to move west. He found a homestead in Pottawatomie County near the now-defunct town of Flush. However, as the family story goes, Frank, in 1891, journeyed to Sedgwick County to visit a friend.

While there, Frank paid \$5,000 for a 165 acre farm. A Winter family member has been farming in the area ever since.

"The situation popped up before the days of cell phones," Kent says. "He bought the farm and then went home and broke the news to his wife. She cried for three days."

Kent's father, Alvin, 87, grew up in the 1930s. His wheat harvest days were spent atop a tractor, pulling



For many families that farm wheat, harvest has become a tradition like none other. This rings true for Kent Winter, his wife, Susan, and their eight children, as they complete their 32<sup>nd</sup> harvest. Susan tends to bees, a young Claire helps with the laundry and the sons aid Kent in planning for the harvest.



a combine across the acreage, choking in wheat dust and taking the brunt of the heat.

“We didn’t have air conditioning,”

Alvin says, adding that the family’s first self-propelled combine was purchased around 1950. Even that didn’t have a cab.

Times have changed, Alvin says. Today, a single combine with GPS technology can tell a farmer how many bushels to the acre he is yielding as well as the moisture level. Modern combines, which can harvest at least 120 or 130 acres on the perfect day, perform the work once done by hand and by horses.

Alvin doesn’t drive a combine anymore, but he still drives the grain truck—a Ford he bought new in 1969. He drives it to the nearby elevator at Andale, dumping the load and hurrying back for the next one.

He is also no-nonsense when it comes to the harvest ritual. Harvest, after all, is a serious time. There is a lot at stake.

“It is a chore,” he says as he watches his son and grandson head the combines in for the night. “You make one mistake and it could cost you time, money.”

### Good prospects

Sometimes perils aren’t man-made.

The Winters, like all farm families, rely on the revolving seasons. Some bring hail. Some, including the past several years, bring little rain.

Sometimes, there is too much moisture, especially if it comes during wheat harvest. The mid-June storm system Kent had been watching from the combine burst over his farm, dumping more than six inches.

The farm’s two combines would now be idle for several days. “We’ll just have to roll with the punches on this one,” he says.

That’s what you do when you are farmer. Winter, like all in the profession, is an eternal optimist.

On a spring day six weeks before harvest, Winter couldn’t help but smile about his prospects.

After a dry spring, he was getting rain—enough to muddy his boots and enough to give him more confidence that this year’s harvest could be better than expected.

“All this stuff was hanging on by its fingernails,” Winter said back in May as he stood in the waist-high, thick stand of wheat, adding that late spring rains gave the crop the boost it needed.

Six weeks later, he maneuvers the combine through the wheat, which is yielding better than he ever expected.

“It’s all a function of the weather, and there is some luck involved too,” he says.

Yet, even with the speed, size and technology packed in today’s combines, there is still a sense of urgency during harvest. The rain during harvest most likely will shrink the kernels and hurt the quality. The harvest marathon isn’t a sure bet until it is safely in the bin.

### It’s in their blood

Winter notes the weather and the fluctuating prices are just part of the gamble of farming. Maybe that is why he never intended to return to the family farm after college. However, in that time, he realized there are things you can’t ignore.

Little things.

Family tradition. A love of the land. A hard work ethic. Seeing a crop you worked hard to sow in the fall be harvested.

A job well done.



“When I graduated from high school and went to college, coming back to the farm wasn’t really in my plan,” he says. “Then, in college, I realized the opportunity I would have if I came back. I liked the lifestyle and the opportunity to raise a family on the farm.”

He changed his degree from business to agronomy. He worked for a western Kansas company for a few years but returned to the farm in the early 1980s.

It’s the perfect place to raise a family, says his wife, Susan.

Once harvest arrives, it’s like clockwork—start early, end late and everyone lends a hand. Susan delivers lunches as the combines sail by and fields of gold await a roaring graze.



Ken and Susan have eight children. Mary, Anne and Jill have all graduated from college and are married. Alan, the oldest boy, is in seminary to become a priest. Grace is beginning medical school. Phillip is still in college. Kurt, a senior, and Claire, a freshman, both attend Andale High School.

While not all can come back for the June rite anymore, Susan loves to see the family working together, bringing in the harvest.

Phillip and Kent drive a combine. Kurt drives the grain cart with the help of Claire, who is learning the job for the first time this year. Kent's brother, Fred, helps drive a grain truck, too, in between his job as a Wichita firefighter. And Alvin still makes his daily trips to the fields, monitoring the progress and driving a truck when he is needed.

"It is a family time, it really is," Susan says. "I'm sure other people have things they do with family, but this is ours."

Susan has a harvest job, as well. She makes the harvest meals.

She stands on the dirt road next to the wheat field, holding five sacks of lunches and waiting for the crew to come and get it. The Winters' two combines don't stop for much. When the wheat is dry enough, they get rolling, typically not halting the machines until well past sunset.

Therefore, harvest meals are on the run. On this night, it's hamburgers and potato chips.

Kurt eyes his mom and the bags of food as he unloads wheat from the grain cart into the nearby semi. He pauses for a moment as he contemplates his favorite part of harvest.

"It might just be supper," he says.

For Winter, harvest is family. If it wasn't for them, there would be no reason to anticipate wheat harvest other than for a paycheck.

"A lot of it is a sense of accomplishment you achieve working hand in hand with the rest of your family," he says. "That's one reason I enjoy it." **KS**

Alvin Winter, Kent's father, steps out of the farm truck to check the progress.

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**OCT 25** { 2:00 PM: "Damn Yankees"  
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**OCT 26** { 6:30 PM: Queen Neelah Talent  
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**OCT 27** { 7:00 PM: Queen Neelah Coronation  
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**OCT 28-30** { Food Stands, Carnival, Band Stand Acts  
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Oct. 30, 4:00 PM: Kiddie Parade  
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