

# Benefits Of A Retirement Party

*It's time to embrace this rite of passage  
as a positive for farmers.*



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**Dick Wittman, a well-known consultant to** agriculture businesses across the country, recently observed that we seldom have retirement parties for farmers and ranchers.

If you look at almost any other industry or business, we celebrate when workers complete a 40- or 50-year span of work. We honor their dedication and commend their contribution. People reflect publicly about how they've been positively influenced and offer written memories to commemorate the occasion. We present gifts and offer our well-wishes for the next stage of the retiree's life.

This happens much less in production agriculture. In fact, retirement frequently has a negative connotation, often emanating from one's peers. Your coffee shop cohorts look down on you for not going to the farm each day or joke that you're out of touch with the daily details of the business. Dialogue doesn't go much beyond markets, weather, politics, gossip and critiquing other farmers, keeping you conversationally tied to the farm. Taking up a new hobby or imagining a second career might even be seen as symptoms of psychological or relationship problems instead of a healthy habit or new passion. "Ed has taken up cycling. Retirement must be driving him crazy!"

## CELEBRATE THE CHANGE

In production agriculture, retiring is too often seen as some sort of defeat or something to be ashamed about rather than as an accomplishment to be recognized. We stigmatize retirement by telling stories of people who died in their easy chair the day after they stopped working at the farm (which would mean, based on the number of times I've heard those stories, that the elderly population should be significantly less than it currently is). Or, we suggest that a retiring farmer or rancher "had" to leave because they couldn't get along with or watch their adult children run the operation.

We act as if someone has done something wrong if they want to move on from their "First Mountain"—

what columnist David Brooks calls one's first career—to climb their "Second Mountain" or their next vocational challenge.

What if, instead of looking at farmer and rancher retirements as something akin to failure, we made a point of celebrating the change? Some of the benefits might include the following.

### KEY ADVANTAGES

- ▶ The transition would be smoother. Succession is hard, because letting go involves a psychological transition. By not celebrating retirement, we make it harder for the senior generation to make the mental changeover and hand control to the next generation. As a result, conflict and hard feelings emerge between generations.
  - ▶ The community would benefit. Seasoned farmers and ranchers have a wealth of problem-solving experience along with other unique talents and gifts. If we celebrated the transition, the next step for a retiring farmer or rancher might be to use those gifts in ways that help many other people in either a different job, at a church or in charitable, industry or community work.
  - ▶ Relationships would improve. One of the challenges when the family is deeply involved in the business is that boundaries between the management, ownership and family systems become blurred. (Think of the number of times you've talked about crops or cattle at the holiday dinner table with in-laws or off-farm siblings present.) Celebrating retirement creates, or solidifies, a boundary between the business and the family. People have more room to grow in their family or business role. And, the senior generation has the opportunity to experience more of a family relationship, which is often what they crave in the last chapters of life.
- A retirement party for a farmer does not need to be a funeral. By intentionally focusing on and celebrating the senior generation's transition, your business succession planning, family relationships and the broader community all benefit. ///

