

# The Energizer

Iowa meat industry legend built businesses with “fire in the gut.”

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

**M**oving his wife and toddler from Chicago, Ill., back to their Iowa roots, Marvin Walter took a chance in the meat processing business. With a production manager/partner and backing from an investor, he started Carriage House Meat and Provision Co.

“It was scary,” Walter says now, his eyes remembering. “We loaded all of our furniture in a cattle truck, threw a tarp over it and came out to Ames, [Iowa]. When you go off somebody else’s payroll onto your own, that’s a risk.”

Almost 40 years later, he and Janice are still in Ames with two grown daughters, three grandsons and a legacy in the meat industry.

“People are always going to want to eat. They’re always going to want quality,” he says. “As the quality of living goes up, as it has in our country, there are going to be more and more high-quality products. The protein business is a good business to be in.”

## The early years

The logic sounds simple, but it wasn’t so automatic.

“I sold the product and delivered from the back of a panel truck,” Walter recalls, leaning back in his swivel office chair with a reflective grin. “My partner ran the plant and made sure the product that I sold got cut.”

Selling to the restaurants meant at least a week’s time between delivery and payment.

“The first years were tough. We needed cash flow,” he says. So, six days a week, they sold retail, direct from the plant to walk-in customers.

“They’d want three steaks, 2 pounds (lb.) of hamburger, four pork chops and a pound of liver,” Walter says. “When we gave it to them, they gave us cash. Cash was king.”

He credits his family and financial supporter Jerry Grauf of Elvaston, Ill., with helping the company succeed.

“When we first started the business, we took out enough to live; but our spouses worked, so we didn’t take more money out of it until it was established, making a profit,” Walter says.

Perhaps that was something he learned during his early life on a diversified family farm in east-central Iowa.



► Entrepreneur Marvin Walter focuses on quality. In 1997 W&G Marketing became CAB®-licensed. It now produces CAB precooked smoked beef brisket, barbecued beef and short ribs.

“My father never wanted to interfere in my decisions,” Walter says. “He wanted me to do my own thing and, if I made a mistake, then I had to suffer the consequences.”

“My experiences growing up on a farm

and in 4-H taught me to be competitive,” he says. “If young people don’t realize it’s going to be a competitive world, they probably won’t do very well in our society.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 146

That spirit followed Walter into his time as an Iowa State University (ISU) Cyclone, where he judged livestock and meats and participated in as many other activities as his schedule would allow.

"I had to earn my way through school," he says, recalling the days of waiting tables, being the "laundry boy" for his Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity house and helping out at the ISU livestock units. "In retrospect, that was a great opportunity, to have to do that."

He earned a bachelor's degree in animal science in 1962 and a master's degree in meat science two years later.

His work ethic, along with seemingly endless energy, made Walter successful in his first jobs for the American Meat Institute (AMI) and as a floor trader on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME).

"I was able to travel the meat industry very broadly. I was able to get into all the slaughter plants and facilities around the country," Walter says. "I decided at that time if I ever got the opportunity with any money, I'd like to be in the meat processing industry myself. So, I worked toward that goal."

Walter capitalized on a void in his alma mater's town. No one was catering to the institutional trade.

He lays out the rationale in one breathless delivery: "We thought if we could come back here and establish a business, and prepare product fresh on a daily basis and deliver it locally, we'd maybe be able to make a go of it."

That's how Carriage House Meats was born. Today, that business is just one of 18, mostly agriculture-related, that Walter and his partners have started, but the list includes a racquet and fitness facility, golf course, and horse stable. He's also part owner

in the company that operates the National Centralized Ultrasound Processing Laboratory & Technology Center (the CUP Lab), which handles data for 26 breed associations.

"Every venture we've ever put together has been from dead scratch. There was nothing there," he says. "We put it together, incorporated it, got financing and hired the people."

### Putting quality first

These days, he devotes much of his energy to W&G Marketing, which opened in 1979. The company specializes in precooked barbecue meats and roasting pigs. A cornerstone of the business has always been quality.

"Quality really pays off in the end, and I don't believe in taking short cuts to get there," Walter says. In 1997 W&G became *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>)-licensed. It now produces CAB precooked smoked beef brisket, barbecued beef and short ribs.

"When you're able to put the CAB label on a product, it is an indication of quality," he says, "and that's what we're all about — something that's special, something that's top-shelf, something that people will buy and buy again, and can depend on."

Brett Erickson, CAB director of value-added products, says Walter and his partner, Darren Dies, demonstrate that philosophy.

"It's amazing how committed they are to doing what's right for the CAB brand," he says. "It's not all about the dollars and the profits. It's about doing what's best for the



beef industry long-term, what's going to achieve the expectation our consumers have for the brand."

Dies, president of W&G, says, "That's Marv's core belief; that's his mantra. If he's going to do something, he wants to be associated with quality, bottom line."

W&G supplied all of the barbecued beef at the 2002 Winter Olympics in partnership with CAB.

"They provide us with products in categories that we might not be in if not for them," Erickson says. "It's difficult to find processors out there that put quality first."

Dies says the company keeps looking for new products and challenges.

"Marv is very supportive and encouraging in trying to start new things," he says. "That's his strength, evidenced by the number of companies that he's started over the years. He's very good at energizing people and getting a concept, then making it happen."

Before Dies started with W&G, the

### Legacy of leadership

Excellence seeks its own kind.

"You have to surround yourself with people who have the same thoughts, desires and skill sets, and then develop their opportunities," Marvin Walter, meat industry veteran, says. "You can't do it all yourself. It's about making contacts. It's about maintaining contacts and working at them."

By leading in organizations from his college days and throughout his professional career, Walter has practiced that involvement and networking with people from across the country. In turn, he's brought vision and leadership to several notable industry groups, including:

- ▶ past director, president and chairman of the board for the National Association of Meat Purveyors (NAMP);
- ▶ past director and Executive Committee member of the Foodservice Committee, National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA);
- ▶ past director of the American Meat Institute (AMI);

- ▶ past director of the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF);
- ▶ past director and executive committee member of the Iowa Cattlemen's Association (ICA); and
- ▶ advisory board member to several departments and organizations at Iowa State University (ISU).

His contributions have been recognized with more than 27 industry awards, including:

- ▶ 1991 National Honorary 4-H Alumnus;
- ▶ 1993 AMI Edward D. Jones Award for Community and Industry Service;
- ▶ 2003 NCBA Vision Award;
- ▶ 2004 ICA Hall of Fame Member;
- ▶ 2004 Alpha Gamma Rho National Fraternity Brother of the Century Award; and
- ▶ 2006 Gamma Sigma Delta Distinguished Achievement in Agriculture Award.

precooked products were Walter's ideas for adding value to the chuck.

"He stays pretty close to producers," Dies says. Walter served on numerous committees with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), feeds cattle at commercial feedyards and even managed a small Angus herd for a number of years.

Walter responded to a beef industry need to get more out of the front quarter of the carcass, so that increased value would trickle back to beef producers. Partnering with CAB and hiring Dies were steps to getting that done.

"You have to be able to identify the concept, identify the opportunity — and you have to seize it," Walter says. "You have to go after it."

When W&G got into the roasting pig business, Walter saw a way to save lives in the process.

"We collect the hearts from those pigs for human heart transplant valves. Those small hearts are used for young children for transplant valves," he says. "They are very, very unique."

They also collect valves in eight plants

**"You have to be able to  
identify the concept,  
identify the opportunity  
— and you have to seize it.  
You have to go after it."**

**— Marvin Walter**

around the United States, used for the same purpose.

Those types of projects define entrepreneurship for Walter.

### **The future**

"It takes fire in the gut. It takes energy, a high level of energy. Determination. Some vision. Good ideas. And it takes money," he says.

He's always found a way to combine all of those into success, but says lately the energy has been harder to come by. More than four years ago, Walter was diagnosed with multi-myeloma, bone cancer.

"I don't know what the future will bring.

Some days are better than others, but in general you just have to do what you have to do," he says. "I've outlived what they thought I would live, so hopefully the future will bode well, but time will tell."

In the meantime he remains actively involved in the businesses he started, but in the role of advisor.

"I get a certain amount of joy out of seeing [my managers] take over and being successful. It's a transition," he says.

That mentoring role is one that Walter has filled well.

"With his wealth of experience, he gives you guidance and direction," Dies says. "Yet he gives his managers autonomy to do what they think is best in the organization."

It's the same way Walter's father taught him the ropes years ago on that Iowa farm.

"He's allowed me to fail and then learn from my experiences," Dies says. "He's always been supportive and patient, but all-in-all, our business has grown, so that patience has paid off."

