



12 PACK Could Heinen Brothers become Heinen Family Agra Services some day? Glenn (left) and Scott Heinen (right) are joined by their wives, Leah and Kaylene, respectively, and their children. Scott and Kaylene have four kids, Colton, Jacob, Kate and Isaac. Glenn and Leah have four, too—Nyah, Will, Marin and Grant.

Heinen Kin

Focusing on customer service and future opportunities fuels Heinen Brothers Agra Services' growth

*By Jay Calleja
Manager of Communications*

Growing up on a farm in the '80s during a severe farming recession, Scott and Glenn Heinen's parents implored their three children to seek careers in anything but agriculture. Farming was hard work, but hardly rewarding back then. Mr. and Mrs. Heinen didn't want to wish that lot upon their offspring. "The '80s were tough," Scott says. "We were raised by two very stout, devout German Catholics. They liked to work. They worked a lot. My father was much older than my mother, and he still remembers the Depression. So, they were very frugal with their money."

That thriftiness, coupled with 700 acres of farm ground and a hundred head of cattle, enabled them to pay for three college educations at Kansas State University (KSU) for their children. "Still to this day, I don't know how they did that," Scott says. "They didn't tell any of us to come back. I remember, 'Don't come back. Get a degree. Go away. Don't come back.' Well, all three of us, including my sister, came back, to my mother's dismay. She likes to tell the story now. She didn't like it so much at the time."

Today, Scott and Glenn are the co-owners of Heinen Brothers Agra Services, a full-service aerial application, agronomy, ag retail and trucking company headquartered in Seneca, Kan., and operating in 11 states. Scott is seven years older than Glenn and the oldest sibling. Their middle sister, Marya, also works in agriculture. She and her husband Neal sell purebred angus cattle.

“Despite all the urging and chirping and bantering not to come back, we knew we were coming back,” Scott says. The only question was how. “We decided if we wanted to farm the way we wanted to farm, we were probably going to have to have a side job or business.”

Scott and Glenn had always had a fascination with airplanes. They built model airplanes and made paper airplanes that they would test by climbing up to the loft of the hay barn. They would throw them down to see whose went the farthest. After they picked up the airplanes, they would do it again. Whenever their father hired the local crop duster to treat their farm, Scott and Glenn would watch eagerly from the edge of the field as the ag pilot skillfully plied his trade.

Scott graduated with a degree in aviation science from Kansas State in 1993. After graduating from KSU, he started Nemaha Valley Aerial, named after the valley they grew up in in Seneca, Kan.

Whereas Scott majored in aviation, Glenn majored in agronomy in college. He had dreamed of being in the Air Force when he was a kid. By high school Glenn concluded the military might not be for him, but the possibility existed to join a different Air Force—Agriculture’s Air Force. He loaded for Scott while he was in high school and began flying for the business in 1998, after his freshman year at K-State. “Agronomy caught my eye. The flying bug was there. It was the

combination of the best of both worlds for me,” he says.

Glenn attended KSU from fall of 1997 to 2000. Throughout that time, he continued to work with Scott at the flying operation. They had always gotten along, and that brotherly bond paved the way for an eventual partnership. They changed the name of the business to Heinen Brothers Agra Services in 1998, and Glenn became a full partner in ’99.

“The business wasn’t that great, and I pretty much told him, ‘Well, if you want to be partners, just sign on the debt and you’re in,’” Scott says. “We laugh about that today. There was no buy-in. He pretty much took on half of my debt load and away we went.”

The evolution was natural, Glenn says. “One day when I was still in college we just agreed, ‘Okay, you’ve been doing it as long as I have. Let’s just keep going.’ It was pretty informal.”

Eighteen years later, joining forces has proved to be a shrewd move on the Heinen brothers’ part. The company has expanded quite a bit since their early days. Today, across its full operation, from trucking to farming to aerial application, Heinen Brothers has 48

employees, not counting pilots, and 14 aircraft. Besides Heinen Brothers’ headquarters in Seneca, Kan., they have a small outfit in Texas; two bases in Kansas; one in Nebraska; HB Texoma, an operation they acquired in Altus, Okla.; and Bonne Idee Air in Mer Rouge, La., an operation they purchased from Scotty Meador three years ago.

Heinen Brothers offers agronomic services, ag chemicals, anhydrous ammonia, dry and liquid fertilizer, precision ag, ground application and aerial application services to its customers. “We’ve grown from word of mouth and a reputation for getting things done,” Glenn says. “Our philosophy is that we treat it like it was our own, and we both do it how we want it done and that’s what we’re going to do for our growers. If it’s nothing that would satisfy us, then we’re not going to sign off on it.”

For all its diversification, aerial application remains the company’s lifeblood. “We are an aerial application service. We laugh and joke all the time that you just need to embrace the inner crop duster because that’s what we are,” Scott says. “We do it. We know it. We’ve lived it. We do well with it. We understand aircraft maintenance.”



SIBLING REVELRY Scott and Glenn have been partners in Heinen Brothers Agra Services since 1999 and friends for life. A seven-year age gap prevented any sibling rivalries from developing.

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SCOUT'S HONOR Glenn Heinen oversees the farming and agronomy operations at Heinen Brothers and enjoys wearing different hats. “I couldn’t be in one spot every day,” he says.

Last October, Scott and Glenn opened their own maintenance shop with three full-time mechanics, led by Jerard Haas, to do all their aircraft maintenance in-house. They are working toward standardizing their fleet of 14 aircraft and prefer Air Tractor 502s and 802s with PT6A-34 and -65 engines, respectively. They had helicopters in the past and are mulling the idea of getting back into the rotorcraft market.

Heinen Brothers’ growth has been gradual and continual, with several small acquisitions along the way. Acquiring Bonne Idee Air in Louisiana was the first big move, in Scott’s mind, creat-

ing a presence for them in the South and opening the door to treat other crops.

Crop diversity and exposure to different types of seasons are the most important criteria when Scott and Glenn consider potential acquisition targets. “Instead of expanding acres ... we figured that if we expanded our season, then we would just naturally expand our acres,” Scott says. “We had a really big worry that we were very heavily vested in corn. And all it was going to take is one little hiccup in the market, [and] here we’d saddled all these airplanes to spray corn. When we look at the operations that we buy, we like to

buy operations for different cropping situations and different seasons.”

DIVIDE AND FLOURISH

One reason their partnership has been so successful is because the brothers’ divergent interests complement each other well.

“We’ve always been able to stay separate because we really don’t have the same likes at all. Glenn loves agronomy, soils, fertilizer, and that stuff just bores the heck out of me,” Scott says. “I don’t want to look at bugs and weeds any more than Glenn wants to look at a busted prop governor¹.”

Glenn takes care of the farming operation and the agronomy. Scott handles the equipment, maintenance and airplane purchases, as well as overseeing their advertising and banking initiatives. Scott used to supervise the pilots, but as the crew grew he handed those responsibilities over to a chief pilot they hired, Jim Uselton, which he says has been “a Godsend.”

Glenn doesn’t fly as much as he did when it was just Scott and him, but he still logs 300 to 400 hours of ag time a year. He considers himself to be a glorified pinch hitter. “I’m just the utility guy,” Glenn says modestly. “I’ll do whatever I gotta do. If he needs help that day and I’ve got to load, I don’t care. I’m here to get the work done in whatever respect that involves me in.”

The variety is what Glenn enjoys most about his role. “I couldn’t be in one spot every day,” he says. “I like the seasonal changes. I like the fact that I get to run a combine in the fall, and then I like the fact that I get to work with growers and help them on their fertilizer and input decisions. And I like rolling around in the spring and summer, and I get to go be a pilot. I like wearing the different hats.”

¹ Per Wikipedia, a propeller governor senses the speed of an aircraft engine and changes the propeller blade angle to maintain a selected RPM regardless of the operational conditions of the aircraft.

Scott stopped flying ag after the 2007–2008 season because there were too many distractions that he was bringing with him as an operator into the cockpit. “It got to the point where I have so many things going on in my mind, I’m not paying attention to what I was doing. And when I realized that I really wasn’t fully engaged in what I was doing, I probably shouldn’t be doing it.”

The straw that broke the camel’s back came when Scott took one load out in an AT-401. “[Then] I got on the phone and it idled from 6:30 in the morning to 1:45 in the afternoon because I couldn’t get back to the airplane because I kept taking phone call, after phone call, after phone call. And I realized, “This is asinine; I’m losing money.”

Although he misses it, spraying just isn’t practical for Scott anymore. The phone never stops ringing during the summer. “I’m on the phone 12 hours



THE FLEET Heinen Brothers has 14 aircraft in its fleet comprised primarily of Air Tractor 502s and 802s.

a day practically during the corn season,” he says.

To take some of the pressure off their shoulders, the Heinens expanded their leadership team, hiring their chief financial officer away from their local bank five years ago. Jack Willmeth had been their banker for 15 years until Heinen Brothers outgrew the local bank and had

to go to Farm Credit. As the Heinens bought more AT-802s and more operations, the banks got more demanding.

“At that point, I realized quickly that I couldn’t speak banker. I could do it because I have enough business classes, but it was starting to consume my time,” Scott says. “We’re farming about 3[000] to 5,000 acres, we’re running

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“We’ve got some of the best in the business. They know what we’re doing is important, and they see the value they bring to the farming community.”

—Glenn Heinen, on Heinen Brothers Agra Services’ employees

the trucking company, we’re running ground rigs, we’re selling fertilizer, we’re running these airplanes all over the United States. It started to get very demanding with the bank. I said to [Jack], ‘I need a CFO or I need somebody. You don’t know of anybody?’ and he said, ‘I’ll quit tomorrow. I’m tired of the banking regulations.’”

Bringing Willmeth on board has been crucial to their expansion. “We were financially okay, but the fact that he could talk banker and convey that to the bank was a big deal for us,” Scott says. “He’s a big part of what made us decide we can branch out.”

NEXT MOVES

Heinen Brothers stays focused on customer service and future opportunities by developing current, three-year and five-year plans. They review those plans with Willmeth and their general manager, Doug Beck, and adjust accordingly if needed. “We try to plot our course,” Scott says. “It doesn’t always work that way because things throw us curveballs. Life is live.”

“Right now the biggest problem we’ve got is time. We have a large amount of constraints put on our time, Glenn and I—where we have to be, what we have to do. We each have four kids. Our wives both have good jobs and are the real unsung heroes. If it wasn’t for Kaylene [Scott’s spouse] and Leah [Glenn’s spouse], we wouldn’t have gotten to this point. So, between trying to balance out family and the

business, the five-year plan looks different than it used to.”

Even though Scott is 44 and Glenn is 37, they are already talking about succession planning. With eight children between them, they want to be prepared in the event some of their children want to work in the business. Scott and Kaylene’s oldest son is 18. Glenn and Leah’s youngest son is 3. “We don’t know if any of our kids want anything to do with this, but this thing has gotten to a size that we already recognize that we don’t know how we would transition it at this point,” Scott says. “We’re just trying to be prepared in case we bring in the next generation.”

The Heinens’ business is constantly evolving. If there is an app, product,

computer or widget that will make his pilots safer and more efficient, they will consider incorporating it into the business. Last year, they began applying variable-rate dry fertilizer by air. They also made variable-rate liquid applications.

“We had really good success with it last year,” Scott says. “It’s a much more precise application. You may end up putting it on heavier where it needs to be heavier, and lighter where it needs to be lighter, and you’re net gain might be zero. You might still be putting the same amount on, but you’ve put it in the right spot where the soil types and the soil test came back and said we needed that [there].”

The Heinens worked closely with Hemisphere GPS, which is only 30 miles from Heinen Brothers’ headquarters, when they started testing variable-rate applications. Hemisphere worked with them on integrating the crop sensing maps that dictate the variable rates to apply with their Satloc GPS units. (Fertility maps based on years of soil sampling reveal how much or how little to apply to different parts of the field.) The collaboration was



FULL SERVICE Operating in 11 states keeps Heinen Brothers’ planes busy, but the company also has a thriving ag retail side and a trucking arm, HB Transports, which hauls commodities across the country.

so productive that Scott and Glenn recently hired John Lueger from Hemisphere GPS to be their new GIS/contract specialist. Lueger handles all of Heinen Brothers' GIS mapping and government contracts.

Heinen Brothers will have three aircraft set up for variable-rate applications this season. "We're pushing the variable rate, particularly on fertilizer," Scott says. "We're going to roll it out in Kansas full-bore this year on corn."

"It's going to be a lot bigger this year," Glenn agreed.

The Heinen brothers are less certain about where UAVs might fit into an aerial applicator's business model. "Where does it fit right now in our operation? I don't know," Glenn says. "I don't know that the industry knows yet. Maybe I'm wrong... I just don't see anything that's commercially marketable yet that I feel like any of our customers need or want or would pay for. I know they do lovely things, and somebody's going to come up with something."

Scott said they are about to purchase their first UAV but intend to use it more for P.R. than agronomy purposes. "With the precision mapping stuff... I'm in the camp that the satellites are going to outdo the drones before too much longer," Scott says. "Just because you don't have to have the manpower, which is a drawback to anything. People. It comes back to employees."

In that department, Scott and Glenn say they are sitting pretty. "We've got some of the best in the business," Glenn says of Heinen Brothers' employees. "They know what we're doing for everybody is important, and they see the value they bring to the farming community. They're top-notch."

Heinen Brothers Agra Services won the Environmental Respect Award for the state of Kansas in 2016. The annual stewardship competition is sponsored by DuPont Crop Protection. Much of the criteria relates to facility management

and cleanliness, as well as community outreach. Scott and Glenn are big supporters of FFA, Boy Scouts, 4-H, Air Explorers and other youth organizations.

Not ones to rest on their laurels, they are aiming for a regional Environmental Respect Award this year. ■

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