

Man honored for lifetime achievement with cows, nuclear physics

By CARRIE WOOD
Staff Writer

In his lifetime, Peter Henning has gone from dairy farming and raising a herd of 500 Jersey's to controlling thermonuclear reactions as a physicist.

On a recent afternoon, 85-year-old Henning pointed to photos that bathed in the sunlight pouring in to his Hunts Point home: One of his wife, Helen, who passed away several years ago; one taken in China recently with two of his sons, a black-and-white of a dairy farm.

"I've had a very full life,"

he said.

So just when he thought that life couldn't get any sweeter, he recently received a call — and a cherry to top it.

He was told to head to Colorado. There, at University of Colorado where he had received his doctorate, he was awarded the George Norlin award and recognized for his life's work.

The award honors alumni for distinguished lifetime achievement. It is the university's highest award and has been given annually since 1930.

George Norlin was the first academic hire for the univer-

sity after its founding in 1876.

"Challenges have just been the stuff of life for me," Henning said.

When he was 17, he turned down a four-year scholarship at Washington State University to manage his father's dairy farm in Sylvanna, Wash., that had 44 cows. He milked them by hand.

"It was pretty brutal work. The milk had to be out on the milk stand by 6 o'clock, so that meant we had to get up at a quarter to 3 in the morning and get started."

In 1942, he married Helena. By that time, he had developed a pure-bred herd of



Submitted photo

Peter Henning

500 registered Jerseys. His herd took extensive prizes up and down the West Coast.

Following that, he was president of the Washington Milk Producers, which became Darigold's largest cooperative.

Under his leadership, a federal marketing order was initiated that insured uniformed pricing of milk for all dairy farmers. The order is still in place today, he said.

"I've looked back on it with awe many times at what we accomplished," he said.

He was later appointed vice-chairman of the Washington Dairy Products Commission, which is responsible for today's 'got milk?' advertisement.

At the age of 34 — with nearly 20 years of dairy farming under his belt, a wife and four children — Henning decided to go to college and tackle physics.

He earned his doctorate in nuclear physics for his work in nuclear spectroscopy from the

University of Colorado.

At Aerojet-General, he worked with a small research group in the field of controlled thermonuclear research.

"I worked on a project to tame the hydrogen bomb — control thermonuclear reactions and that was a lot of fun."

After that, he worked for Varian Associates on cancer therapy.

In the late '70s, he came back to Washington to sell his farm.

He didn't intend to stay, but he ended up buying land and the next thing he knew, he was a developer.

"I thought, 'you know, that looks like a challenge I'd like to do,' and I did it," Henning said.

He started his own firm, WestAmerica Associates, and built 30 buildings — or 750,000-square-feet of office, hi-tech and warehouse space — in Totem Lake and Kent.

He moved to Hunts Point in 1980 and 20 years later sold his buildings.

Since then, Henning has passed his time visiting his five grown grandchildren and traveling.

"We saw a good part of the world before she passed away in 2001," he said of Helen.

He's been very fortunate, he said, to have accomplished everything he has.

"I've never had any great reverses," he said. "It may sound a little funny, but I've never considered myself to be more than a humble farm boy."

Carrie Wood can be reached at carrie.wood@bellevuereporter.com or 425-453-4290.