

At 105, American Crystal's oldest shareholder has lived the history of sugarbeets in the Red River Valley

Earl Mallinger is American Crystal Sugar's oldest shareholder and likely one of the nation's oldest farmers. He celebrated his 105th birthday on Aug. 14, 2022, and continues to farm about 1,000 acres near Oslo, Minnesota.



Earl Mallinger sits with his sister, Ina Dahlum at his 105th birthday party. She is 101 and lives in her own home in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Contributed / Earl Mallinger

By Laura Rutherford

August 17, 2022 04:47 PM

OSLO, Minn. — On Aug. 14, 2022, the American Crystal Sugar Company's oldest shareholder celebrated his 105th birthday with over 200 guests.

Earl Mallinger, also the longest resident of Oslo, Minnesota, has been involved in more than 100 harvests during his lifetime. He has farmed with both horses and modern farm equipment, and witnessed firsthand the birth of the American Crystal Sugar Company cooperative. Mallinger's family were among the first sugarbeet farmers in the Red River Valley region. His farming career and the American sugarbeet industry grew and developed together, and Mallinger still actively farms today. He grows sugarbeets, soybeans and wheat on 1,000 acres in the Oslo area.

"I guess what keeps a guy alive at 105 is to keep busy," he said.

Mallinger's father Peter was born in Luxembourg. After working as a butcher in France, he came to America in 1895 at the age of 20. He went to Minnesota because he had a sister living in Barnesville. Shortly after his arrival, he worked at a meat market in East Grand Forks.

"Dad didn't know any English and only spoke German," Mallinger said. "He went to night school to learn English and get an education."



Peter Mallinger, Earl's dad, owned a butcher shop in Oslo, Minnesota. Peter, right, declared early in Earl's life that he would be a farmer.

Contributed / Earl Mallinger

Immigrants started coming to the Oslo area in 1878 because of the fertile soil and abundant timber. They built homes along the river, where steamboats carried cargo and mail from Grand Forks to Oslo. Peter Mallinger arrived in 1905, the year Oslo officially became a town. It is believed that the population at that time was 150, and the population of Oslo today is 347 people.

Peter built a butcher shop called the “Oslo Meat Market.” He married a local girl named Hjerda, and the family lived on the top floor of the shop. Earl was born there in 1917. He weighed about 13 pounds at birth and was the fourth of Peter and Hjerda’s seven children.



Earl Mallinger was born in 1917. He weighed about 13 pounds at birth and was the fourth of Peter and Hjerda Mallinger's seven children.

Contributed / Earl Mallinger

“There were four boys and three girls,” he said. “One of my sisters passed away from flu in 1918 and one of my brothers died in the service.”

That same year, Peter sold the butcher shop and moved the family to a house he had built on a farm in rural Oslo.

“Dad took one look at me and said I was going to be a farmer,” Mallinger said with a laugh. “I’m glad he did that. I really enjoy farming and I always knew I wanted to be a farmer.”

The family’s new house had running water and electricity, which was unusual for houses in rural areas at that time, according to Mallinger.

“Dad was very progressive,” he said. “He began farming in 1918 on land he cleared from timber and he started out with wheat, alfalfa and cattle.”

Mallinger attended school in a one-room schoolhouse that had 28 students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

“I walked two miles to and from school each day. As I walked past people’s houses, more kids would join me. Quite a group had accumulated by the time we got to school,” he said. “I went to school until eighth grade. I did awful good in arithmetic, but history and geography were my favorite subjects. I wasn’t good at spelling.”

Mallinger began farming with his father after his eighth grade graduation in 1932.



Earl Mallinger began farming with his father after graduating from the eighth grade.
Contributed / Earl Mallinger

“Dad was a real hard worker and taught me how to work,” he said. “He was willing to try new things, and he first planted potatoes in 1926. That was also the year the East Grand Forks sugarbeet factory started. Before that factory was started, beets were sent to Chaska, Minnesota.”

Mallinger has an incredible memory for dates and events throughout his farming career, and vividly recalls his father’s decision to start growing sugarbeets.

“In 1927, field men from the new factory visited all the farmers and talked to them about growing this unique new crop called sugarbeets. They told us beets would help control weeds like wild oats and pigeon grass,” he said. “We had to hire people to hoe the weeds out of the beets. It was \$6 a ton for beets then. They were not a high paying crop, but they would clean up the land and help the rotation.”

Peter was excited to try sugarbeets and was one of the first farmers in the area to grow the new crop in 1927.

“We had 30 acres of sugarbeets when we started, and Mexican folks helped us by hoeing the weeds,” Mallinger said. “We got the beet seed from the factory, and they got it from Germany. It came from Germany in great big burlap bags.”

At that time, the factory had a drill that farmers could borrow for planting sugarbeets.



Earl Mallinger has experienced the history of sugarbeet farming, from using horse-drawn implements to today's modern methods.
Contributed / Earl Mallinger

“It was a four row horse-drawn planter. We had a lifter that loosened the beets and the Mexican workers put them in rows,” Mallinger recalled. “Then they topped them with beet knives and shoveled them into a truck.”

In their early years of farming sugarbeets, the Mallingers hauled their beets to Oslo.

“We loaded the beets into open railroad cars which took them to Grand Forks. After a while, we had a piling site in Oslo. Then, sometime in the late 1930s, we hauled them to Grand Forks in a truck,” he said. “I didn’t really like that because it was a tough job. Harvest depended on the weather, just like it does now. In 1931, we were still hauling beets on Thanksgiving Day. Later on, when we got pilers in Oslo and Alvarado, it made everything so much easier because we had land in both places.”



The 1930s were a trying time for the Mallingers, as it was for most farm families, but Earl Mallinger recalls fun times as well. This photo of a skating party was taken in 1934.
Contributed / Earl Mallinger

The 1930s were a trying time for the Mallingers and their fellow farm families in the Red River Valley.

“We didn’t have much money then. Nobody did and everyone was in the same boat,” Mallinger said. “We all played kittenball. It was like softball but with a larger ball, a smaller diamond, and an underhand pitch. Everyone formed teams and played together, and we had a lot of teams. Those are some of my favorite childhood memories.”

The family farmed with horses until 1936, when Peter bought a combine.

“I was 19 years old. In Warren, Minnesota, the dealership there would take used horses in trade for tractors and other equipment. We traded horses for a combine,” said Mallinger. “I ran the combine, but I missed those horses. They were extremely well trained.”

The following year, Peter retired from farming. In 1938, Earl and his brothers began farming together. Mallinger married his wife Julia in 1946, and the couple farmed together for over 30 years.

“She was a schoolteacher in Oslo and that’s how I met her,” he said. “She helped me on the farm and loved everything about farming. She drove a big tandem truck and hauled sugarbeets to the factory.”

In addition to farming together, Earl and Julia were passionate about 4-H. They both served as club leaders, and he coached 4-H potato judging teams for many years. The couple had three daughters who live in North Dakota and Minnesota.

“Their names are Barbara, Sharon and Krista. Krista was born on Columbus Day and that’s how she got her name,” Mallinger said.

Peter Mallinger, a pioneer of the region’s sugarbeet industry, passed away in 1952. He was a great supporter of agriculture and his community and was a member of the Oslo Volunteer Fire Department.

In 1970, Earl bought out his brother Felix, with whom he had farmed for 32 years.

“American Crystal used to be called the American Beet Sugar Company. It became American Crystal in 1934,” Mallinger said. “Felix was part of transforming American Crystal into a grower-owned cooperative in 1973, and there was a lot of excitement among the farmers when that happened. I bought beet stock shares that year for \$107 per share.”

In 1978, Julia passed away and Mallinger remarried in 1980.

“Phyllis and I were both widowers and she had three kids. We were kind of like the Brady Bunch. Phyllis passed away in 1992,” he said.

In addition to sugarbeets, Mallinger also grew certified seed potatoes for over 50 years.

“I did about 500 acres that I stored in Oslo. I had eight to 10 varieties and sold seed potatoes all over the United States and Canada,” he said. “In 1993, I was the Seed Potato Grower of the Year for the North American continent. I received the award in Portland, Oregon, and it really meant a lot to me.”

Mallinger credits much of his success to the people who worked with him on the farm, and still keeps in touch with the families of migrant employees.

“I had some awfully good people working for me, like the Martinez family. They worked with me for over 20 years,” he said. “Eugene Dauksavage started working for me in high school. He worked for me all his life. He could run the whole show if I was gone and probably did it better than me.”



Earl Mallinger still farms, though at 105 he hires people to do the fieldwork for him.
Contributed / Earl Mallinger

Today Mallinger hires others to do field work for him but owns some of his own equipment and makes all the decisions for his 1,000 acre farm.

“I never quit farming because it is so much fun,” he said.

Mallinger is assisted by his friend and neighbor, Debbie Hanson, a semi-retired Lutheran pastor. The two have known each other for over 20 years, and she calls herself his “enabler.”

“I drive him around so he can farm and do the things he loves to do. His day starts around 8:30 a.m. with breakfast at Kitty’s Café in Oslo and wraps up around 9:30 in the evening,” Hanson

said. “We’ve done a lot of off-roading and I’ve gotten stuck helping him scout fields, but I’ve learned a lot about farming from Earl.”



Earl Mallinger is a regular at Kitty's Cafe in Oslo, Minnesota.
Contributed / Laura Rutherford

Hanson is amazed by Mallinger’s incredible memory and life experiences.

“You could go to the Sugarbeet Museum in Crookston to learn about the history of sugarbeets in the Red River Valley or you can talk to Earl,” she said. “He has seen the whole industry develop. He remembers it all.”

Like his father, Mallinger is progressive and interested in the latest agricultural technology.

“All of Earl’s fields are tiled. He has seen what tiling can do because he has dealt with flooding before,” Hanson said. “One year he had a field that was flooded. He took the sump pump from his house and put it on a raft he made. He pumped out all the water on 10 acres and sent it down the river.”

In addition to tiling, Mallinger has seen many changes in the sugarbeet industry in his lifetime.

“Some of the biggest advances were going from workers topping sugarbeets with knives to 12-row lifters and new beet drills that could space seed 5 ½ inches,” he said. “And, of course, Roundup Ready sugarbeets. That was an amazing advancement.”

The sustainability of sugarbeets has remained the same throughout the years, according to Mallinger.

“Sugarbeets are a special crop. They are good for the land and have been helping the environment since the 1920s,” he said. “They keep weeds from going to seed and are a very good rotation.”

Mallinger said he feels blessed to have spent his life farming and with his large extended family that includes 60 grandchildren and great-children. His sister, Ina Dahlum, is 101 and still resides in her own home in Moorhead, Minnesota.

“We had about 100 people at the family Thanksgiving last year, so I rented the hall in Oslo,” he said.

As Mallinger reflects on his farming career, he says his best advice to beginning farmers is to work hard, be frugal and put God first.

“If you didn’t inherit land from your parents, start small. Work hard and don’t spend too much money and you’ll be successful,” he said. “Remember that God is in control. You have got to have Him with you. Also, don’t forget to stop and smell the roses. I didn’t work much on Sundays and I still made a good living.”