

## Features



## Terry Swinger Inducted Into Pemiscot County Wall of Fame

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Caruthersville, Missouri - Terry Swinger who was raised in Dexter, Missouri was recently inducted into the Pemiscot County Wall of Fame for his generous contributions. The event was held at Caruthersville Public Library where his son, Anthony Swinger, gave a speech and presented the award.

The speech is included below.

"Once upon a time - either during or shortly after the War of 1812 - there was a boy named Jacob. His parents decided to move from Germany to the United States to pursue a better life. Their trip across the Atlantic was anything but easy. Their ship was caught in the remnants of a hurricane, it wrecked, and it had to be towed to the coast of Greenland. Had it not been for the heroics of the crew, Jacob and his parents would not have survived. Instead, they went to Greenland, waited several months for a rescue ship to come for them, and then boarded that ship which carried them safely to Philadelphia."

"In the years that followed, Jacob moved to Ohio and started a farm. His son, Samuel, moved to Illinois and started a farm. Samuel's son, Levi, moved to Stoddard County, Missouri and started a farm, and Levi's son, Everett, followed in his footsteps."

"On a Saturday in 1941, the second child of Everett and Emma Swinger was born in a farmhouse in Stoddard County. They named him Terrence but called him Terry for short. Growing up on the farm, young Terry Swinger did the same things that other southeast Missouri farm kids did. He played with his friends. He went to school. He

read books and did his homework. And of course, he worked hard on the family farm. He chopped cotton. And he couldn't stand to chop cotton. So much that he decided his older brother would be a better fit for following in the family footsteps and staying on the farm."

"When Terry was 11, his older brother, Bill, got his driver's license. One weekend, Terry pleaded with Bill to take him into town one night. Bill gave in and as they left the house, he said, "We're going to stay out all night." That bothered Terry since he'd normally go to bed early, anyway. Well, by 11:00, Dad was exhausted. And by 1:30 a.m., Bill ran out of energy, too, so they started driving back to the farm. As they drove, a truck approached them and flashed its lights. When they got close enough, Bill and Terry recognized that it was their dad. When he pulled up by them, he told them to go on home and then wait outside so he could talk to them before they went in. As they waited in the driveway, they knew they were in trouble. And they dreaded what was coming. Finally, Everett Swinger pulled in and got out of his truck. And he said to them: "Boys, if you haven't gotten it done by Midnight, you're not gonna get it done. So why don't you get home by Midnight from now on?"

"Years later, when I was a kid, I always wondered why Dad went to bed so early. Now I know why. In the 1950s, Everett Swinger's best friend was Dr. Poe, the optometrist in Bloomfield for many years. Dr. Poe told Everett that at least one of his children should go to optometry school because, as he put it, being an eye doctor was the "best job in the world." So after graduating from Dexter High School in 1959, Everett's son decided to give it a try. He went to the University of Missouri to do his undergrad work, then enrolled at Southern College of Optometry in Memphis."

"When this young eye doctor graduated from SCO in 1964, he had to choose a place to open his practice. He'd always planned on returning to southeast Missouri, and in the end, it came down to a choice between Caruthersville and Perryville. As you know, he picked Caruthersville. His first office was at 106 ½ West 12th Street, on the second floor over Peck Hayden's pharmacy. And he moved into an apartment just a short walk away, next door to Carl Baskin's pharmacy."

"Caruthersville had only one optometrist until 1964: Dr. Carl DeHoff. Dr. DeHoff and Dr. Swinger soon met and quickly developed a positive professional relationship. Personally, they also became good friends. Ultimately, Dr. DeHoff sold his practice to Dr. Swinger when he retired in 1976. But a few other things happened between 1964 and 1976. In 1972, a young optometrist – and fellow SCO alum – by the name of Doug McKillip moved to Caruthersville and joined Dr. Swinger's practice. Before

that happened, in 1970, Dr. Swinger became a father. And before that happened, he met and married Sue Clayton, a Dunklin County native who worked as a florist by day and a cocktail waitress by night. The two of them did not meet by dumb luck."

"Sue - or mom, to me - was really good at developing elaborate schemes and seeing them through. On some random day in the 60s, Sue saw Terry walking down the street and said something to the effect of, "He's mine!" So, she had one of her friends, Buddy Formby, schedule an eye exam. During the exam, Buddy talked Terry into joining him for a drink after work at the Casanova Lounge – which just happened to be where Sue was working. I think you can figure out where it all went from there. As the years went by, Terry Swinger continued to practice optometry, give motivational speeches, teach Dale Carnegie (which he did for 25 years), be active in the Masonic Lodge and as a Shriner, and serve his community in multiple ways, including serving as president of the local chamber of commerce in 1968, serving as president of the Caruthersville Rotary Club in 1986, serving as a Rotary district governor, and attending lots and lots of Rotary International meetings. When I say, "lots and lots," that means he had perfect attendance at Rotary for 28 years."

"Also, as the years went by, Dad and Dr. McKillip expanded their optometry practice buying offices in Kennett and Portageville. He frequently traveled to Jefferson City to lobby the legislature on behalf of the optometric profession. Because of his efforts, he was honored as the Missouri Optometric Association's Optometrist of the Year in 1986. He also served on the State Board of Optometry, spent some time as the Missouri Optometric Association's President, and led the North Central Optometric Society in the mid-90s. North Central is a 10-state organization. The thing I remember most about that organization is that Dad would go to its meetings each February. In Minneapolis, I'm sure they got a very good deal on the hotel rooms."

"He also traveled outside the country a few times, including humanitarian missions to El Salvador and Guatemala. If we had time, I think he would tell you that each of those trips was life changing. And he could tell you how. He also made it to Europe a couple of times and saw two Popes in person. He's the only Protestant I know who has seen two Popes in person, and actually met one. While all of this went on, Terry Swinger never forgot what mattered at home. He was always there for Mom, as her husband, and always there for me, as my father. Anytime I called him, no matter what the circumstances, he took the call. Not everyone can do that, or will."

"And he has always made time for his first love and favorite hobby: Fishing. He could easily spend 12, 14, or even 16 hours at a time in his boat on Reelfoot Lake. I don't

think he ever ran a marathon. But when it came to fishing marathons, nobody did it like him. Many of Dad's best friends over the years have been his fishing buddies. It was also through fishing that he really bonded with his in-laws. I've never seen anyone have a better relationship with his mother-in-law than the one my father had with my Grandma Clayton. They spent many, many hours fishing together, often staying up all night and fishing under the lights. One incident really illustrated how strong that bond became. One day, my parents had a disagreement as even the best of couples will, and Mom started to complain about him to her mom, my Grandma Clayton. After only a few words, Grandma cut Mom off and said, "I don't ever want to hear you complain about Terry again!" Mom said, "But you complain about him sometimes." Grandma snapped back, "That's different!"

"Years later, Mom was diagnosed with cancer. Stage 4. Treatable. But terminal. A tough, tough journey that no one deserves. Mom couldn't have asked for a better caregiver than Dad. He stayed at her side for the final 19 months of her life. And he made sure all her final wishes were honored. After Mom passed, Dad moved into a new phase of life, marrying Delila and building a fantastic partnership and marriage that continues today. Dad has truly had the two best partners and supporters a guy could've asked for. He also embarked on a second career, in politics. He was elected to the Missouri House of Representatives in 2003 and would serve in the House through 2012. When he joined the legislature, someone gave him some advice: "When you vote, put your conscience first, your constituents next, and your party last." He followed that advice to a T."

"I think the legislative accomplishment he's most proud of is the "Rebuild Missouri Schools" legislation, which made it possible to rebuild Caruthersville High School after the 2006 tornado. Among his other accomplishments, he served as the House Democratic Caucus Chairman from 2009 through 2012 because of his diplomacy and management skills. And then there's the accomplishment of simply seeing others in the legislature and public office as fellow public servants, and not as Democrats or Republicans. He worked constructively with legislators across party lines. And while he was at it, he made many, many friends across the political spectrum. In 2015, Terry Swinger received the Dean's Award for Meritorious Service after giving the commencement address at the Missouri College of Optometry."

"A few years before that, he received not one but two Lifetime Achievement Awards. He really cherishes the one he received from his alma mater, Southern College of Optometry. Several thousand optometrists have graduated from SCO over the last 80

years. But only about 100 have received the Lifetime Achievement Award. He also received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the St. Louis Optometric Society: The only non-member of the society to receive the award. It's going to be a real honor to see Terry Swinger's name on the Pemiscot County Wall of Distinction. It's a fitting tribute to a man who has given so much to his community and still gives so much to his friends and family."

"But what really matters is this: He's the greatest fisherman I've ever met. And he's the greatest father I could've ever asked for."

Congratulations Mr. Swinger on your many years of great work in Pemiscot County, Missouri.

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