When Dr. Gary "Pete" A. Peterson looks at the world, he doesn’t see individuals in their separate spheres; he sees the relationships that connect us to each other and to the earth beneath us. Peterson dedicated his life to studying soil management systems, and the way he views that life reflects his expertise.

Peterson grew up on a Nebraska farm under the loving tutelage of his family, namely his mother and father and four uncles. As the firstborn, Peterson remembers many privileges, but they extended beyond praise and attention. In the pickup truck or the field, his role models “didn’t mind correcting me, encouraging me, telling me everything I needed to know.”

Peterson attended a one-room country school where he was the only kid in his grade until high school, about which he jokes, “I was the head of the class!” The small scale education system was superb, in part because the “community believed in education.” With supportive parents who wanted their son to have experiences outside of the farm and choose his own path in life, Peterson doesn’t remember when he decided to go to college; it was just like it will happen. Initially he was interested in dentistry. After a table saw accident claimed most of his right index finger, he knew he had to consider other options.

At first, he didn’t want to join the College of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), because the only mental image he could conjure of a future career path was putting tags on 4-H calves. However, after spending his first three college years in Chemistry and finding it the wrong fit, Peterson decided to give Ag a try, thanks to a counselor who directed him to take a soil science class with one of the college’s best professors (Prof. R.A. Olson) “It just wowed me. I had never heard of anything like this.” He knew almost instantly that he had found his place and his future.

Due to a strong relationship with Prof. Olson, Peterson’s undergraduate work led straight to graduate school. Due to a strong relationship with a girl – Jackie Flick, he chose to stay in Nebraska for his M.S. degree. He and Jackie married in 1965. By 1967, he had a PhD from Iowa State University under Dr. John Pesek, and a new teaching position in Agronomy at UNL. “I didn’t even know I could be a good teacher until I tried it,” Peterson laughs. He always loved both the teaching and research aspects of his career. His career research goal was to conduct experiments that helped farmers make better management decisions.

Through a year-long sabbatical experience at Colorado State University (CSU), he made career changing connections. When CSU needed a new Soil and Crop Sciences professor for dryland soil management teaching and research, Peterson found himself the subject of a hot pursuit. Reluctant to give up his career at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, he knew he had a tough decision; “I went home and fussed and made lists of why we should stay at Nebraska, but I realized, if I ever wanted a new challenge in life, I thought I better go. So I did.” The change led to his partnership with Dr. Dwayne Westfall, and to some of the most enjoyable and fulfilling accomplishments of his career.

Together, Westfall and Peterson took on the challenge of changing the dominant wheat-fallow system on dry land farms. Their experiments led to real change among the farming community, and one of Peterson’s proudest, but most humbling, moments was hearing from a farmer, “You and Westfall have changed
everything out here. We don't do it exactly like you do in your experiments, but we've all changed our ways.”

Gary knew from a young age the importance of working together, and that carried him throughout life. “Almost every paper I ever had was co-authored,” he grins, “Cooperating with other faculty members and not trying to be the lone ranger, it’s been how I've been able to do things.” Even as the Head of the Soil and Crop Sciences Department, Peterson made sure to respond to emails in a timely manner and confirm his appreciation of every undergrad, graduate student, and faculty member to create the rewards of a rich community.

Retaining as much moisture in the soil as you can and avoiding summer fallow leads to improved crop yields; similarly, retaining respect for each other, collaborating and saying thank you, yielded more fruitful connections between individuals and the university. With a simplicity that belies the complex science behind soil and human relationships, Peterson smiles and says, “It's all about the people.”