

HALLOFFAME

During his 33 years as a township supervisor, **Merel “Jim” Swingle** has earned a reputation as a calm, empathetic leader who can handle anything that comes his way. His peers say he’s an asset to the township and has helped make it what it is today: a financially stable community, growing but still rural, that people are eager to call “home.”

‘A wealth of knowledge’**Merel ‘Jim’ Swingle**

**Salem Township, Wayne County
33 years of service**

BY JENNIFER L. FLORER /
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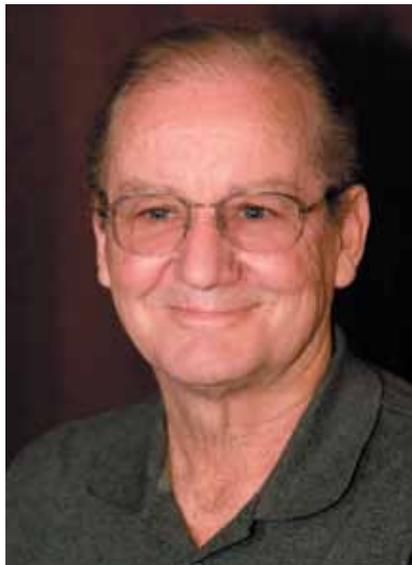
Jim Swingle can tell a good story. And after 33 years as a township supervisor, a stint as an elected auditor, and decades of service as a laborer and then roadmaster, all with Salem Township in Wayne County, he has plenty to choose from.

In 1957, Swingle was newly married to his wife, Arlene, when he signed on as a laborer for the township. The part-time job paid a dollar an hour with no benefits, but it was a good supplement to his income as a dairy farmer.

It was also a good workout during the winter months. When snow and ice threatened, Swingle would stand in the back of a pickup truck driven by his boss and shovel cinders onto the all-dirt roads on command.

“We would only cinder the tops of the hills,” he remembers. “I would barely hang on, and he would say, ‘When you hear one beep, cinder, and two beeps, stop.’”

The next year, his wife went into labor with their first of two daughters during back-to-back snowstorms that still stand in the record books. A bulldozer had to clear the roads, and it took a township truck to get Arlene out and on her way to the hospital.



Jim Swingle has seen plenty of change during his service to Salem Township. He has also played a very big part in making sure it's been change for the better.

That same year, in the continuous cycle of plowing and shoveling, Swingle removed a glove and accidentally dropped his wedding ring. When the snow melted, he returned to the scene — and there was the ring, sitting on top of a fallen leaf.

Swingle’s township service has created more than just memories, though. There are plenty of visible reminders about how much he and his fellow board members have accomplished over the years.

A stability that supports change

Swingle was asked to run for supervisor a good 10 years before he finally agreed. When he did, he was assured he could serve one term and call it quits. Somehow, that one term turned into six.

Change was inevitable for the rural community, especially as the population grew. With more than 1,300 new residents in the last 25 years, the number now stands at just under 4,300.

“We are still a country community, but we change with the times and do what we have to do,” secretary-treasurer Jennifer Wargo says.

Those changes have included establishing a senior center and a 15-acre park complete with walking trail, pavilion, and sports fields. The park has been so popular, Swingle says, that the township is building another ball field.

And then there are the roads, once all dirt, now all paved, and the equipment.

“We put safety first, and we have good equipment,” Swingle says.

The supervisors have managed to do all that and more while still setting money aside in a rainy day fund.

“We’ve only raised taxes once in 33 years,” Swingle says. “We’ve never had to borrow money since I’ve been here. If we couldn’t afford it, we didn’t buy it.”

The supervisors have been fiscally savvy in other ways, too — making good use of grant money, for instance, to help with the park development and equipment purchases.

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The township has also had its struggles. This vacation community, where Swingle says the population almost doubles in the summer, used to take in close to \$100,000 a year in realty transfer taxes. That’s dropped off, but the township has been able to absorb the loss thanks to its healthy financial position.

People skills

Swingle is quick to share credit with his fellow township officials and employees: the supervisors that he says have been great to work with, the secretary-treasurer who keeps things running day to day, and the two full-time laborers that he reports “can do absolutely anything.”

Others have nothing but praise for his efforts.

“He’s just a wonderful person to work for,” Wargo says. “He can handle a situation any way it’s thrown at him. He’s a wealth of knowledge and an asset to the township.”

She adds a few words that speak volumes about Swingle’s character.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen him mad,” Wargo says. “If he ever was, he hid it well. If you picked up the phone and needed something, he would be right there. He’s just a really good person.”

Part of Swingle’s success as a township supervisor stems from his people skills. He has a straightforward philosophy when it comes to answering questions and defusing angry encounters.

“If someone comes in with a question, exchange places with them momentarily and then see how you would answer,” he says. “Sometimes, people need to understand about unfunded mandates and what the township can do and can’t do. If you explain it to them, usually they understand.”

He also paraphrases a Biblical quotation that has served him well: “A soft voice turns away wrath,” Swingle says. It’s come in handy, especially the time someone entered the office cursing up a storm.

“I’ve always considered myself a first responder even though I wasn’t a fireman or with an ambulance service,” he adds. “I put out many fires so we didn’t

get into bad situations.”

Swingle has faced his own personal situations, too. Five year ago, he received a kidney transplant from his nephew. Swingle is clearly back in action. He still works part-time at the township, farms (*beef cattle now, instead of dairy*), and has every intention of finishing out the next three years on his current term as supervisor.

He’s also looking forward to seeing a lot of his peers again this year at PSATS’ Annual Conference in Hershey, an event he hasn’t missed since he took office.

“I meet a lot of people there every year,” he says. “I hear their township’s story, and I tell our story.”

Chances are, those listeners are much richer for hearing it. ♦



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