

Hamann Farm moves into second century of production

By Trish Verges

For the EO Media Group

Among the prosperous farms of Union County is the Wilfred Hamann Century Farm, founded in 1918 by the family patriarch, Arthur William Hamann, and operated sequentially since then by Wilfred Hamann, his son-in-law Peter Nilsson and Peter's son, Maxfield Nilsson.

Wilfred "Willie" Hamann, 96, still lives on the farm, but it's Peter Nilsson and Maxfield "Max" Nilsson who currently handle the day-to-day operations. Peter, 70, enjoys the winters off, leaving the winter operation of the farm to Max.

Assisting Max on the farm are his cousins, Ben Miller and Jordan Martinez. And for the past five years, Max's sister, Madeline Nilsson, also worked on the farm. During the busy harvest seasons, Hamann farm hires about 24 farm laborers, many of them family members, who drive combines, tractors and trucks or work pulling weeds in the fields.

"Labor is our biggest headache," Peter said. "No one wants to work seven days a week, long days and seasonal employment. It's hard to find kids to work because if they aren't family, they have to be certified to run anything mechanical."

Peter credits the farm's success and longevity to "innovation and diversification, coupled with custom cleaning and distillation, which have allowed four generations of our family to work full time on the farm and enjoy the farming lifestyle."

Today, the nearly 2,000-acre Century Farm, about 6 miles east of Island City on Highway 237, produces winter wheat, alfalfa, Austrian peas, Kentucky bluegrass, peppermint, fine fescue, wheatgrass and sunflowers.

The Hamann-Nilsson farm operation has seen tremendous technology changes over the past century, "going from implements pulled by a team of horses on a 180-acre dryland crop farm to self-steering tractors that receive signals from a satellite," Max said.

The rich family heritage of the Hamann Century Farm has been because of the dedication and hard work of four generations of the Hamann-Nilsson family.



Submitted photo

Willie Hamann, 96, with his dog, Ruby, operated the Hamann Angus Ranch and seed farm starting in 1947 until his retirement in 1978.

Early Beginnings

The farm's founder, Arthur Hamann was born Oct. 15, 1885, in Hancock County, Illinois, the son of a German immigrant named John Frederick Hamann (1859-1932) of Holstein, Germany. John Hamann, 19, came to America in 1879, settling initially in the township of Wythe, Hancock County, Illinois, and working as a farmhand with Claus Hamann, 17, at the Henry Nagle farm.

John married Caroline "Carrie" E. Meyersick in Wythe on March 14, 1883, and they engaged in general farming in that county. Four children were born there: Arthur, Charles, Albert and Laura Hamann-Taylor.

By 1900, the John Hamann family had relocated to the township of Marmaton, Bourbon County, Kansas, where they farmed at least through 1905. Shortly thereafter, the family came by the Union Pacific train to the Grande Ronde Valley, where in 1907, John Hamann bought a farm of his own.

He lived in the Grande Ronde Valley for 24 years, and for 20 of those years, he was associated with the Blue Mountain Grange. He was known as one of the valley's most prominent agriculturalists in his day. He died at age 72 on Oct. 17, 1932.

Life in Grande Ronde Valley

John's eldest son, Arthur, worked on the family farm initially, and then he met Clara Augusta Schroeder of Island City, who with her parents arrived in the Grande Ronde Valley in 1905. Arthur and Clara were married in Quincy, Illinois, on March 2, 1915, and returned to the Grande Ronde Valley to make their home and farm.

Arthur and Clara purchased their first farm, about 150 acres, from the Norris family in 1918. The property included a barn, corral and house along the highway.

"Those structures were gone by World War II, and then Arthur transitioned down to the

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— Max Nilsson

farm's current site," Peter said.

Arthur and Clara had two sons — Leland, who died in infancy in 1921, and Wilfred "Willie," born in September 1923, who survived to inherit the farm later.

While farming during the 1920s, Arthur suffered two significant accidents. One day while using a team of horses to pull an implement, the horses spooked, and it resulted in Arthur breaking his femur. Left in the middle of a field, alone and miles from town or the doctor, he managed with difficulty to unhitch the team from the implement and each other, mount one of them and ride for help.

As a result of this fracture and how it healed, he had a chronic limp in his gait.

A second accident occurred in 1927, when a sliver of steel embedded in Arthur's eye.

"Infection followed, and his eye had to be removed," Peter said.

At this point, Arthur decided to sell his farm, and he effectuated a lease option sale at the beginning of February 1928 to his neighbor and friend, Clarence M. Carter, who took immediate possession of the land.

Planning ahead, Arthur had already purchased land in Island City and later built a house. The population of Island City was about 68, and many residents had cows, chickens and gardens on their properties, something Arthur liked about living in town.

"Soon, Arthur started a business in Island City, A.W. Hamann and Son Feed Store," said Peter.

The Great Depression

Arthur's grain and feed store was just beginning when the Great Depression of the 1930s arrived.