

CENTURY

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Those difficult times prompted a little business innovation, so Arthur and his son, Willie, ran a feed chopper at the store, earning a dollar a ton chopping grain. They used a small gas motor, and they calculated that it cost about 22 cents to run a ton of grain. “It was more clear money than we could get on anything else,” Willie said in a 2002 oral history interview.

They decided to take their feed sales on the road, so they packed their pickup with bags of seed and parked at certain places throughout town each week, selling the chopped grain as chicken feed to city residents. Some stores in town bought five or 10 sacks once or twice a month, so this was a good source of income for the Hamanns.

While Arthur’s grain and feed store was doing well during the Depression, his friend who bought his farm land was not. By 1931, Clarence Carter went bankrupt and turned the farm back to Arthur.

So in 1931, Arthur went back into farming, and he bought himself his first tractor, a Twin City. With it he planted his acreage in dryland wheat, alfalfa, spring barley and left some in pasture.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the whole Hamann family, including John, Arthur, Charlie, Albert and Laura bought more farmland and lots in Island City. By the end of World War II, Arthur was farming about 400 acres.

Willie’s Turn at the Plow

In 1945, after serving in an Army engineer battalion during the war, Willie was discharged and returned home to work again on the Hamann farm. He bought a Model G John Deere for \$1,950 and a rod weeder, using benefits from the GI Bill. He began to diversify and go into specialized seed production, which was more profitable.

Also, in 1947 he bought land in Island City and built a house. He married Delpha Morehead



Submitted photo

An aerial view of the present-day Wilfred Hamann Century Farm 6 miles east of Island City.



Trish Yerges/ For the EO Media Group

The Hamann Angus Ranch sign was erected in honor of Wilfred Hamann’s Angus operation back in 1964, and in September 2019, the family added its Nilsson Farming Inc. business name.

on Dec. 3, 1950, and they had four daughters: Brenda (1952), Rebecca (1953), Ann (1956) and Cami (1959).

In 1956, Willie and Delpha bought 260 acres from the huge Buesings estate, which increased

the Hamanns’ acreage to about 680 acres, with the same boundaries the farm has today. While raising specialized seeds, Willie also engaged in custom seed cleaning in addition to farming.

The 1960s brought changes to the Hamann farm. Arthur passed away on April 6, 1960, and after this, the feed store was closed. With Willie managing the farm, more changes came along.

“In the 1960s, Willie started irrigating with surface water from the Grande Ronde River. An Allis Chalmers portable diesel pump, portable mainline and 4-inch hand lines brought the river water to green peas,” Peter said.

The Hamann family also started raising registered Angus bulls and heifers under the name Hamann Angus Ranch. A metal sign “Hamann Angus Ranch” is prominently displayed at the end of their driveway along Cove Highway to this present day. However, Willie soon learned that the land was worth more farming than it is grazing cattle, so he got more and more involved with farming.

During the 1970s, Willie bought the first four-wheel drive articulating tractor in the valley, a Steiger. He introduced Kentucky bluegrass and along with his neighbor, Bob Gulzow, he started cleaning bluegrass seed in 1975, an operation that continues today.

Rebecca Hamann and Peter Nilsson

Willie’s daughter, Rebecca “Becky,” brought her boyfriend, Peter Nilsson, to the farm to work during the summers of 1976 and 1977. “Back then the farm had about 600 or 700 acres of wheat to harvest,” Peter said.

They married in 1978, becoming the third generation to manage the farm. The young couple bought a 320-acre farm in 1982, and in 1988 Peter started renting the Decker Place, which brought their acres to 1,450. In 2014 they added another 325 acres so today they farm just under 2,000 crop acres.

During their marriage, they had two children, Max, who was born in March 1988, and Madeline in April of 1991. Both

children were raised working on the farm and are involved in its operation today.

During the 1990s, Peter upgraded to a center pivot irrigation system, and a second pumping station on the Grande Ronde River was added. They had been growing peppermint since the late 1980s and built a mint distillation plant in 1994. Today, they have about 900 acres in various grass crops, so they also clean their own grass seed.

“We have shipped a container load of bluegrass seed to China for the past three years,” Max said.

Peter was honored in 1995 as “Young Farmer of the Year” in Union County, recognized for his innovations and improvements to the farm.

Under Peter’s management, the Wilfred Hamann Century Farm incorporated high technology with their irrigation systems, and he purchased its first GPS-enabled tractor. In recognition of all their agricultural improvements, Peter and Becky were honored as “Conservation Farm of the Year” in 2006.

“That work continued with the addition of two miles of tree and shrub rows,” Peter said.

Fourth Generation Steps In

In 2011, Max gravitated back home after being occupied for some time in flight school and at University of Oregon. Madeline also came home to work on the farm in 2013, and another grandchild of Willie’s, Ben Miller, came back to work on the farm in 2015.

In 2015 the family changed its business structure in order to streamline and modernize. Consequently, Nilsson Farming Incorporated was formed by Peter and Becky to do the farming of their own land, Willie Hamann’s land and the rented land.

The future of the farm is very promising as they continue to introduce new crops and technology, but the real core of their success still centers around the commitment of young family members who love the land they call home.