

Blackman family: Farming for more than a century

By LEE JUILLERAT
For the Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. — For more than a century, members of the Blackman family have been farming and ranching in the Henley area of Klamath Falls.

It's always been challenging, but 2021 was exceptionally daunting. Because of the ongoing drought, the Bureau of Reclamation decided not release to water for irrigating. That left water users like the Blackmans improvising.

"It was a pretty rough year," says Rodney "Rod" Blackman of Blackman Ranch Inc., of finding ways to irrigate their several hundred acres primarily used for potatoes and grain. "It's ironic because when my grandfather began here, he was promised he'd get all the water he ever needed."

Instead, in 2021 the Blackmans left 300 acres unirrigated. A neighbor provided water for another field from his wells and the family leased other land serviced by other wells.

The Blackman Ranch was founded in December 1919 by Thomas Walter "TW" Blackman, Rod's great-grandfather. He and



Rod Blackman

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his son, Will, moved to the Klamath Basin from Weleetka, Okla., where they had co-owned a dairy. In 1920, when Will took ownership, he wondered if he'd made the right decision.

Rod, Will's grandson, is glad Will decided to stay. "It's a point of pride," he says of the family's longevity and history. "You don't think about it until it happens."

Rod and his wife, Virginia "Ginny," thought about the family's 100-plus years during ceremonies last August at the Oregon State Fair, where the Blackman Ranch was honored as a Century Farm through the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program. The recognition was actually approved in 2020 but was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although still for-



Blackman Family

Rod Blackman's grandparents, Will and Ina, in 1956.



Blackman Family

Virginia "Ginny" Blackman helped with trucking in her younger years.

mally known as the Blackman Ranch Inc., the family phased out cattle in the late 1970s and since then has grown crops, mainly potatoes, wheat and alfalfa, along with sugar beets and have rotated fields with onions, barley and garlic.

According to "Recollections of Grandma Ina Blackman," recorded by then 85-year-old Janis Blackman Kafton in 1975, TW and Will had visited Klamath Falls at the urging of Will's sister, Cleola, and her husband Bert Blake, who "rather liked the looks of the country and especially the prospect of getting good land with irrigation." Afterwards, TW and Will decided to move to Klamath Falls.

After buying the property, Will returned to Oklahoma to retrieve Ina and their children, Phillip and Janis. The train trip west proved challenging. Most of the family became ill with influenza and deboarded in Sacramento, where they were confined in strict isolation for a week. They finally arrived in Klamath Falls in February 1920.

According to "Recollections," the family bought a Model T Ford, "just enough furniture to get by," some basic farm equipment, including a walking plow, cultivator, two horses, a cow, some pigs and a few chickens. Helpful neighbors made life easier, with one providing land to pasture



Lee Juillerat/For the Capital Press
The Blackmans' license plate tells their story.

Will's cattle while another loaned the family a cow.

Ina wrote how some women gathered to "work on quilts for a bit of social life and visiting" while others helped at harvest time.

"Recollections" include tales of bad roads and challenges at harvest times. There was water for the animals, but "there was no running water in the house. They had to carry water in from an outside well."

After Will died in 1962, ownership transferred to Ina. Following her death in 1984, ownership transferred to Duane and Darlene Blackman, Rod's parents. Rod and Ginny took ownership in 2009 following Duane's death.

"She helped with everything and now does the bookkeeping in the office," Rod says of his wife's role in managing the farm.

Rod served as president of the Klamath County Potato Growers Association and was a member of the Oregon Potato Commission, which represents the potato industry in trade development, research and legislative affairs. "I did my tour of duty," he says.

He remains active in farm operations, "I try to be involved," such as driving the harvester and hauling potatoes, but the day-to-day duties are handled by his stepson, Tad Kloepper.

"It's been a lot of hard work," Rod says, especially in an era of droughts and water issues. "It isn't always easy, but we're proud to be a part of history."

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