

“R.T. married Willie, and they had three daughters, two of whom died as children of diphtheria,” Bensel said.

Their daughter Margot Jane married Alva Foster, which couple’s daughter Janice Elaine married Don Bensel in 1955.

“The early crops raised were dryland wheat, alfalfa and some milk cows,” Bensel added. “They farmed with horses until about 1919.”

R.T. built a house, barn, granary and sheds during this early period.

“In 1923, a fire destroyed most of the home except the living room,” he said. “It was salvaged and moved across the creek with a team of horses to its present site, and added on to in 1926. The living room was remodeled into the kitchen.”

This house still stands today. Bensel’s son Kelly and his wife Brenda live there.

Willie died in 1939 and R.T.’s brother Bayard and his sons helped him keep the farm going at the time.

“R.T. got depressed after his wife’s death at 41,” Bensel said. “He almost lost the whole place, but a lady friend from Los Angeles bailed him out. No one knows what his relationship with the mystery woman was.”

Bensel said it was the goal of he and his wife Jan to get back all the parts of the original homestead sold off during the Depression.

“My sister-in-law inherited half of what was left,” he said. “We were able to buy her out, including the 40 mountain acres. We finally achieved our goal.”

Wheat and alfalfa still are the farm’s main crops today. Kelly Bensel raises alfalfa and a neighbor farms the wheat acreage.

R.T. Gilliland Farm was one of a dozen farms and ranches the Oregon Century Farm & Century Ranch Program recognized in 2021. The program is a state-wide recognition effort honoring farmers and ranchers who have worked the same land for at least 100 years. The program is administered through the Oregon Farm Bureau Foundation for Education. It is partially funded through a partnership of the Oregon Farm Bureau, Wilco, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, & OSU Libraries’ University Archives.

Since the start of the program in 1958, 1,247 farms and ranches across the state have been registered. Oregon’s is one of the oldest agricultural heritage programs of this type in the entire nation.

There also is a Sesquicentennial Award for farms and ranches that have existed for 150 years or more. Forty-seven family operations have reached the sesquicentennial mark so far.

The program requires the completion of a formal application process for properties that could meet the criteria. Successful applicants receive a certificate signed by the governor. A durable metal road sign to identify their property as having historic Century Farm or Century Ranch status also is available. Additionally, each family is honored during a special ceremony and reception at the Oregon State Fair.



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— Don Bensel



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

TOP: Don Bensel sits in the only remaining part of the original homestead on the R.T. Gilliland Farm, which was established in 1914 and recently designated a Century Farm. ABOVE: R.T. Gilliland Farm was one of a dozen farms to receive the Century Farm honor in Oregon in 2021.