

# **OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY**

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**PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Feb. 23, 2018

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## **Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Clara Wichert**

By: Kaylee Snow

**FAIRVIEW** – When Clara Wichert fell in love with a farmer by the name of Lloyd Wichert, she did not realize what she was getting herself into.

“I was very naïve,” Wichert said. “I was barely 19, and we went over to his parents to talk about the wedding. I remember Lloyd’s father saying, ‘We cannot have the wedding until after the wheat is planted and it is up a couple of inches.’ I thought, ‘really?’”

The two married in 1959, and Wichert began farming with him immediately. The operation consisted of 600 acres of canola, alfalfa, wheat and cattle. Wichert had grown up on a farm, but her father thought women belonged inside the house. Because of this, Wichert didn’t have much farm experience.

“He told me my job was in the house to iron and starch his shirts, to cook and to clean,” she said. “My job was to learn how to do things in the house.”

However, Lloyd didn’t think so. Wichert laughs about it now, but she recalls how difficult the transition was for her.

“I always got yelled at, so that was very difficult for me,” Wichert said.

She described herself as a “tender soul” and often just “went in the house and cried.”

“One time, he needed me so bad when we were planting wheat that ... I had to drive the tractor home because we had four or five plots of land that were at a distance,” Wichert recalled. “I cried so hard all the way home that when I got out of the tractor, he said, ‘I didn’t know. I won’t ever make you drive the tractor again.’”

Wichert was “scared to death” and recalls rolling backwards at a stop sign while in front of another tractor.

“It was not a pleasant experience for me,” she said.

### **Dust Bowl Days**

Wichert was born in 1940 in Fairview, Okla., at the end of the Dust Bowl and in the middle of World War II. Her father grew wheat and had a few chickens and cattle.

“I was born on the farm in a bedroom, in the southwest bedroom,” Wichert laughed. “I was born in a home. I don’t know if they had a doctor or not.”

While the family did have water and electricity, they didn’t have all luxuries.

“We had an outdoor toilet, and I remember that very well, and it was a long way out there,” Wichert said.

While Wichert has sweet memories of playing on the farm, it was hard back then.

“I watched my father with tears in his eyes stand by the window,” she said, “and it was very imprinted on my mind that the wind was blowing and the sand hills were blowing too, and he had resowed his wheat at least three or four times. Farming is a lot different now.”

### **Tough Times, New Beginnings**

When Lloyd passed away in 1998, Wichert surprised everyone, including herself, and continued farming.

“I had to keep track of all the expenses, and I had to go and sell wheat,” she said. “I had never done that before. I had to learn to watch the wheat prices.”

Wichert sought help from the Oklahoma Farm Bureau (OFB) and Oklahoma State University on when to sell her wheat.

“I even asked the top wheat guy at OSU, and he told me you’ll never go wrong when you sell the wheat at three different times: at harvest, right after the first of the year, and then you might keep some a little bit later. I thought, this is complicated,” she laughed.

Wichert’s sons, Jeff and Rex, pushed her to continue farming.

“My son [Jeff] said, ‘You will learn how to do this,’” Wichert said.

She took classes to learn how to use a computer and type so she could keep better track of the expenses.

“I felt pretty good about myself that my son Jeff made me do it all,” Wichert said.

For the next 15 years, Wichert would farm alongside her sons and was fully responsible for the farm.

“The day I had to write a check for \$15,000 for spray and fertilizer,” she said, “I could hardly make myself write that check.”

During this time after her husband’s death, Wichert found new beginnings with the OFB and Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom (AITC). She served on the OFB Women’s Committee for 15 years and chaired the committee for nine years.

“I never thought I would do that in my life,” she said.

Wichert gained immense knowledge about agriculture during her time as chair. Her involvement with AITC began at Fairview Public Schools (FPS) before there was an organization.

“I would come in every month and do a class about agriculture,” she said. “Some of those kids are in high school now, and they said, ‘Oh, we remember you Mrs. Clara. You always came to our classroom and did Ag in the Classroom.’ I always enjoyed that very much. That was very much a part of my life after my husband died.”

Wichert said she loves teaching agriculture because it’s fun for both her and the children, and it became her “heart.” The kids still know her as “Mrs. Agriculture” and the “Ag Lady.”

“I remember in 1981 going to the first Ag in the Classroom event, and I’ve been very involved with that ever since,” she said. “Even now, last week I went to a couple schools and read some books that Ag in the Classroom sponsors. I have learned so much.”

Living and working on the farm helped Wichert become a better agricultural educator. She said AITC is important because there are many children who don’t know much about where their food comes from.

“There’s not very many of us left that live on a farm,” she said. “Oh, they would be eager to tell me they live in the country, but they knew nothing about agriculture, and the kids today don’t. It’s just a foreign word.”

Wichert was recognized as the 2012 National AITC Ag Advocate for her efforts in creating agricultural curriculum and increasing agricultural literacy at FPS. She was awarded the 2017 Volunteer of the Year by the Fairview Chamber of Commerce and the 2012 Distinguished Service to OFB award winner. She was also recently recognized as Mentor of the Year through Mission Mentors at FPS for continuing to serve as a one-on-one mentor to students.

## Today

Wichert continues to stay active with Major County Farm Bureau and keeps herself up-to-date on AITC events. She still mentors a little girl at Fairview Elementary School once a week.

She's a breast cancer survivor since 1982 and "not because of the two years of chemo, but it's through God."

She's watched her husband lose his battle with colon cancer and her barn burn to the ground a couple years ago. Still, she keeps her faith.

When asked what keeps her going, she said, "Definitely my faith in God and realizing that he has a plan for my life. As I look at my life, I think, 'Who would've dreamed I'd get a national award for Ag in the Classroom?' I just have to believe that God had a plan."

Now in her late '70s, she gave the farm to her sons a couple years ago.

"That's what Lloyd made me promise to do before he died," she said.

Her sons still say she owns the land until she dies. Jeff lives on the farm and is a crop adjuster, and Rex works for Syngenta in Tennessee. Wichert has three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. When it comes time for harvest, everyone comes home to help. They think it's fun, which makes Wichert smile as she recalls the hard times.

"I know my two sons, they wouldn't sell an inch of their land that my husband and I farmed, oh no," she said. "They are men of the soil, and I know that doesn't happen very often today ... [Agriculture] is very important. It keeps us alive. If you're alive, you use agriculture from the minute you get up to the minute you go to sleep."

When asked about Wichert's transition from someone who nearly hated agriculture to someone who is heavily involved and an agricultural advocate, she simply said, "It happened gradually."

"I often think my husband is laughing in heaven because I have turned out such a neat agricultural person," she said, because agriculture became so important to her, particularly after he died.

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Editor's note: This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of industry professionals.

Photo Caption: Clara Wichert, pictured at the Oklahoma Farm Bureau Convention, is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture for her contributions to the industry. Photo credit: Oklahoma Farm Bureau

