

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Agriculture Highlight: Eileen Day

Eileen Day's motto for life is more than a movie title.

"It's a wonderful life," said Eileen Day, reflecting on her lifelong, satisfying career as a rancher.

The 83-year-old Woodward resident, who has farmed and ranched in northwestern Oklahoma her entire life, considers herself blessed to have been so deeply involved in agriculture.

"I loved watching the cows have their calves," she said, "and it's just a joy to go out and watch your cattle. You don't get tired of that. I didn't. You can't beat that lifestyle in my opinion. You learn to be responsible, caring and have a purpose, you know, because you're raising livestock ... [to] produce meat for people."

Day grew up helping her father on the ranch with her two sisters, which eventually totaled 7,000 acres of pasture and 1,120 acres of farmland. She recalls the ranch primarily consisting of farmland and pasture for beef cattle, but there were chickens, hogs, a garden and during World War II about 26 head of dairy cattle.

Day said she would milk the cows with her sister, mom, dad and hired hand, each milking around five cows.

"We would get through it pretty quickly," she said. "I could milk pretty fast, and my dad knew how to work me. He told me one day he said, 'Boy, you keep milking like that you'll milk as fast as I do,' which made me milk faster."

She laughed.

"That was his point," she said.

Day's childhood home had no electricity or water until she was 10 years old. Her mother made her own lye soap from hog lard and washed clothes on a board before getting a gas-operated machine that wasn't very reliable, Day said.

The memories of long ago flooded back to Day like they happened just yesterday.

The family had an outhouse, guarded by a “fighting rooster.” Day said she didn’t know why her mother kept the rooster because it would always try to attack the girls when they were using the outhouse.

“It was a different life. I grew up like that, and it was hard work,” she said.

The family worked from sunup to sundown.

“You know you look back, and I’d be so tired sometimes I couldn’t even eat,” Day recalls from memories of more than 70 years ago.

“I was real excited when we got water when I was 10 because it was a lot easier to take a bath than having to heat it on the stove and pour it in the water tub,” she said. “In fact, you’ve heard the story of taking baths on Saturday nights? That was true. That’s what we did when I was a kid. My sister and I got to be first in the water because we were the littlest, and then it was my older sister, and then my mom, my dad and the poor hired hand was last.”

Day’s father was very hard on the girls, but it taught them the value of hard work and led to a wonderful life.

Jeana Day, Eileen’s daughter, said, “There wasn’t anything that my granddad didn’t think my mom could do. He set high expectations for her. He expected her to be the best at ranching, whether it was building fence, gathering cattle, sorting, working calves, buying good quality cattle and recognizing good cattle.”

The family hired several workers over the years, one of whom Eileen would fall in love with. On Dec. 21, 1950, she married Gene Day. They had three children. While the children were young, Eileen stayed at home with them but continued to help the ranch by doing all laundry and cooking for the family and hired hands. As soon as the kids were older, she was back working alongside the men.

Jeana recalls her mother working tirelessly on the ranch.

“Mom worked with Dad running the ranching operation after my grandfather retired,” she said. “When my father died 25 years ago, mother singlehandedly ran [her portion of] the ranch, consisting of 2,300 acres of owned land and 5,000 acres of leased land.”

With the help of hired hands, who often could not keep up with Eileen and were given “walking papers,” she successfully ran the ranch—adding a herd of Texas Longhorns—for nearly 15 years.

Eileen’s father taught her how to take care of the ranch and livestock.

“I like to think we can take care of this land,” Eileen said.

Eileen strived to improve the quality of beef and land, never overstocking her pastures during the droughts. She said she “always believed in really taking good care of things.” She never wanted to hurt the pastures or the cattle.

When asked what her mother has returned to agriculture through her life, Jeana said, “She has produced quality cattle for the beef industry. She has taken pride in her integrity and honesty when

dealing with buyers, giving ranching a good reputation. By being a good steward of the land, she has given back to nature.”

While discussing the struggles of the ranching life, Eileen said, “In farming and ranching, you have your good years and your bad years. It cycles. It’s the way things go.”

In Eileen’s lifetime, she experienced a tornado that destroyed her family’s barn and part of their home, the dirt storms of the ’30s, market crashes, terrible droughts, countless injuries, setbacks and losses, yet she kept ranching. It’s her life.

She just recently quit riding horses around age 75, and she fed her cattle by herself until she was nearly 78.

“I don’t always feel as good as I did when I was 70, you know,” Eileen said.

At 83 years old, Eileen still owns 482 acres, leases 5,000 acres and raises cattle with the help of a hired hand for branding and a neighboring rancher. She’s very active, still cooking Sunday dinners for the family and tending to her flowerbed, even if her daughters are sometimes “just a touch too protective.”

Jeana said her mother deserves to be recognized in the Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture series “for all her hard work and dedication to the ranching way of life.”

She says her mother is humble, faithful and has set a great example for women everywhere.

“She is the true ranchwoman of Woodward County,” Jeana said.

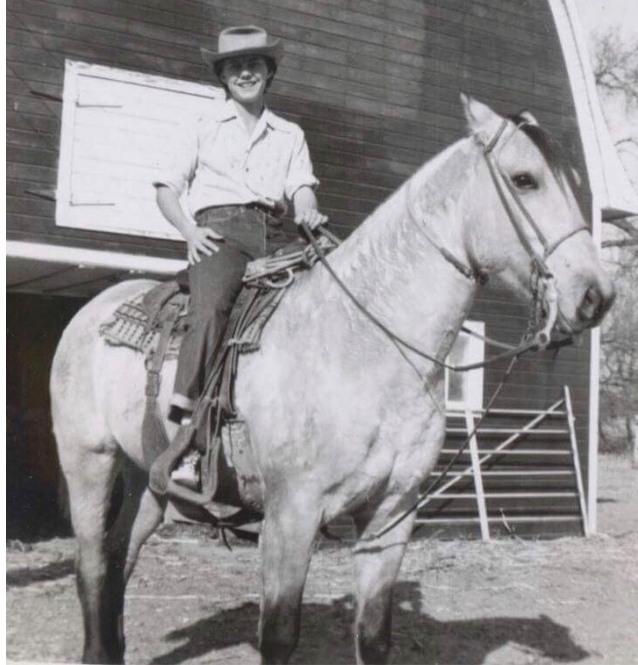
Eileen Day is true ranchwoman, even now, at 83 years old, who continues to live a wonderful life.

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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 14 industry professionals.

Photo caption:

Eileen Day grew up on her family farm during World War II with beef cattle, chickens, hogs and a garden.



83-year-old Woodward resident Eileen Day has farmed and ranched her entire life.

