

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY
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Significant Women in Agriculture: Carol Cowan

The words of praise gushed out like hard red winter wheat flowing from an auger to a parallel grain cart in the heart of harvest.

The question had been simple, “What impact has Carol Cowan’s life had on agriculture in Oklahoma?”

Debbie Craig, a long-time employee of Wheeler Brothers Grain in Watonga didn’t pause. She barely took a breath.

“Oh my gosh,” she said, “Carol works herself to death. She’s always working. Oh my, I can’t say enough good words about this woman. We see Carol year-round, whether she’s hauling fertilizer or wheat. She drives trucks, combines, and does any and everything that is needed. She takes meals to the field and then hauls wheat out of that field. She’s what I would consider a 1950s farmwife.”

Such a response is not uncommon. People throughout Oklahoma and the nation have benefited from Cowan’s tireless commitment to agriculture and can’t wait to sing her praises. In 2010 the Monsanto Company initiated an award called America’s Farmers Mom of the Year. Cowan was not only chosen as the Southwest Region winner, but also went on to become the first national America’s Farmers Mom of the Year award winner after receiving more than 4,600 online votes.

“I believe our country would have better people in it if they were all raised on a farm with Carol,” friend Nancy Baker said. “She could show anyone how hard, honest work will make you happy and successful. Every family needs a mom like Carol.”

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.

Cowan, born in 1960, grew up on a farm in southwestern Oklahoma near Tipton.

“I always thought the dirtier I got while helping my dad, the more work it looked like I was doing,” Cowan said. “I got an early start changing sweeps on the cultivator, driving the tractor with the pipe trailer while my parents laid irrigation pipe, chopping cotton and showing pigs in the 4-H. I was a little, short girl, but I could still make it up the side of those tall cotton trailers to tromp the cotton down so my dad could dump more cotton in before my mother pulled the trailer to the gin.”

Cowan’s parents were both from farming families also, Bill and Peggy Dunn. Her dad passed away in 1990 and her mother continues to live on the farm. Cowan is married to lifelong ag producer Rodney Cowan. His parents Orval and Gerri Cowan farmed also, as did their parents.

“I come from a long line of people getting their fingernails dirty,” Cowan said.

Cowan has lived in Watonga in western Oklahoma all her married life and works alongside Rodney on their wheat, alfalfa and cattle operation. She is a member of the American Farmers and Ranchers, Oklahoma Farm Bureau, First Baptist Church and the Oklahoma Agricultural Leadership Program. She and her husband have four children: Ashley Cowan Neal and husband Jeff; Lance Cowan and wife Amy and sons Dalton and Matthew; Kelsey Cowan Shaw and husband Kurtis and daughters Kinley and Kacie; Kari Cowan Hetherington and husband Colby and son Clark and daughter Abigail.

Rodney and Carol have previously served on Oklahoma’s American Farmers and Ranchers policy committee and were chosen by their local AFR to be at the state convention this year. Rodney and Carol were also chosen Blaine County farm family of the year in 1994 and 2004. Carol Cowan is also active in speaking to various groups, promoting agriculture. She has spoken at the state Ag in the Classroom Conference several times, including individual breakout sessions and panels. She has been a source in newspaper, radio and television reports about agriculture.

“First and foremost I must give the credit to my success in agriculture to my husband Rodney,” Cowan said. “I had farming in my roots, but the reason I love farming and ranching and know what I know about the industry is because of my husband. To him I owe the credit for our family operation being so successful and staying current on the new applications for the farm. My husband has always been my biggest supporter, telling me I can do anything I put my mind to. Yes, I can drive that four-wheel drive tractor with the 54-foot implement behind me and not take out the fence at the end of the field.”

Cowan graduated from Tipton High School in 1978, earned an Associate’s Degree from Western Oklahoma State College in Altus in 1980 and then she and Rodney were married two weeks after she graduated from Oklahoma State University in 1982.

After farming with Rodney's family initially, Rodney and Carol farmed 1,200 acres when they first started out on their own. They purchased their first farm in 1994, consisting of 240 acres. They now farm more than 5,000 acres. They started out running 400 stocker calves and now it's more than 2,000 head. Cowan and her husband also pasture cattle in the Flint Hills of Kansas at the family ranch some summers.

"We keep increasing the number of acres we own to someday pass it on to our children to have our legacy continue," Cowan said. "We love what we do and want our children to carry on the tradition."

Their farming and ranching operation is very much family-centered.

"My first job helping out with the cattle operation was to check for bulls," she said. "Rodney told me that would be the best way for me to get used to the cattle, and it also helped him move them through the chute. When we get new calves in, Rodney works one side of the calf and I work the other. We are a true family operation, where our four children helped out in all capacities. We have three daughters, and one son right in the middle of them all. This is because we had our daughter Ashley, then Lance our son, then twin daughters Kelsey and Kari in a little over four years. At one point in time our girls were called 'the Cowan girls combine crew' because the three daughters ran the combines during our wheat harvest.

"We rarely have outside help on the farm, and if we do it is part-time."

Son Lance and daughter-in-law Amy are partners in the ag operation and both contribute greatly. Lance graduated from OSU with an Agribusiness degree and helps "keep us up-to-date on the technology part of the operation" as well as helping with the daily jobs on the farm. Amy was a state FFA officer in Connecticut and a national FFA officer candidate while in college and received an animal science degree from OSU. They have two boys that are the "little farmers." Carol and Rodney's oldest daughter Ashley and her husband Jeff Neal have both completed their doctorates of chiropractic and own and operate two clinics. Twin daughters Kelsey and Kari also got an OSU degree and both are married and have two children of their own.

"They are fortunate to be stay at home mothers," Cowan said. "Kelsey has a BS degree in Animal Science and her husband Kurtis is a production engineer in the oil and gas industry. Kari has a BS in Health Education and Promotion and her husband Colby works for the water department at Oklahoma State University in the athletic department."

When Cowan looks at the grandchildren, the past yields some great memories.

“When I look at the grandkids I remember the times I would drive the tractor and have the twins on the floor sleeping, and have to make sure they weren’t under the brake or clutch,” Cowan said. “Our other two children would ride in the tractor with Rodney. I am proud to know all four of our children were farm raised, and are leading productive, happy lives.

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Photo caption: Carol Cowan has been recognized by the Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture project, an ongoing series.

