

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Wathina Luthi

By: Jack Carson

(Gage, Okla.) – Growing up near Guymon on a family farm founded in the early 1900s, Wathina Luthi is a descendent of agricultural pioneers who first homesteaded Oklahoma. Today she is recognized as one of the pioneers of modern agriculture not only in her home state but nationally.

And it all started with two pigs.

She and her new husband, Chuck, went from Panhandle State University to Woodward where they wanted to pursue farming, ranching and raising pigs. Both her and her husband's family had raised swine on their farms and they both enjoyed working with them.

“I told him he needed to find something to keep me busy or I was going to get a job in town,” Luthi said. “We got two sows and that's how we got our start.”

In the beginning, the Luthi hog farm was no different from most hog farms from decades past. Pigs were bred and raised on the farm and then fed until they were ready to be sold to a pork processor. By the 1990s the two-sow operation had expanded to 125 head.

“We ground our own rations, had our animal health programs and marketing,” Luthi said. “It was a good operation but when we had the chance to contract with Murphy Family Farms in the 1990s we thought it was a good opportunity for us and we took it.”

As contract growers, the Luthi family now found themselves operating a 3,650 head sow farm that provided weaned feeder pigs to other contract growers. Husband Chuck took care of the “outside work” and Wathina raised the hogs.

“When people would ask Chuck about the pigs he would always tell them they weren't his pigs,” she said. “He would say, ‘If you want to know anything about the pigs you'll have to ask my wife.’”

An accounting major in college, Wathina excelled at keeping records of not only the financial side but also the production methods and activities of the family farm. If the farm was going to be successful it had to be both economically and environmentally sustainable.

“Hard work and keeping track of what worked well and what didn’t was a lot of it,” Luthi said. “Our goal was to be successful and sustainable for the next generation to take over.”

One of the problems large livestock operations face is dealing with animal waste. The Luthi family found the solution was in processing the effluent from the hog farm in a way that reduced odors and created high quality fertilizer for pastures and crops.

Their program was so successful that in 2004 the Luthi farm received one of four National Environmental Stewardship Awards from the National Pork Board. The family also received the Oklahoma Pork Council’s first environmental stewardship award.

“We are very proud of these recognitions,” Luthi said. “But even more than that we were glad to be able to share our experiences with other people to promote and tell the farmer’s side of the agriculture story.”

Her knowledge and ability to communicate with both farmers and consumers didn’t go unnoticed by the pork industry. Luthi was called to serve as a member of the National Pork Board and served two full terms. Today she remains on the board’s Swine Health Committee. She is currently a member of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board.

“The Swine Health for the NPB committee is concerned with all aspects of swine health issues and helps direct industry funding in a number of research and outreach programs,” she said. “It’s really very rewarding work.”

In fact, Wathina Luthi says one of the most important jobs in agriculture today is telling the story of modern farmers and ranchers to an increasingly urban audience.

“We have to become more transparent and show people our concerns for water quality, food safety and the welfare of our animals,” she said. “We continually look to improve the health care, nutrition and well-being of our animals because it’s the right thing to do and because it’s what we want to do.

“Agriculture has changed because the demand for food is much different than it was a few generations ago,” Luthi said. “We have to communicate that story better.”

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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: Wathina Luthi of Gage, Okla., has been recognized by both the Oklahoma Pork Council and the National Pork Board for her work in the swine industry.

