

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Sue Rendel

Growing up on a registered Hereford cattle ranch in Miami, Okla., Sue Rendel did not expect to have a future in farming wheat, soybean, milo, corn and canola.

“When I met Mark he changed my mind about what was involved in farming,” said Rendel. “I had never been exposed to crops, the big equipment, or plowing the ground.”

Today, Rendel Farms has over 3,000 acres of cropland in beautiful northeast Oklahoma consisting of approximately 2,200 acres of soybean, 1,000 acres of corn, 500 acres of wheat, 400 acres of canola, and 250 acres of milo.

“I most definitely fell in love with farming as a little girl,” said Rendel. “That’s how I got started; I was the third child of all girls and the only one that showed an interest in helping on the farm.”

Both Rendel and her husband were raised in Miami, Okla., where they spent a great deal of time together on the 4-H speech team.

In 1957, the two were married at ages 18 and 20. They went on to Stillwater where both took classes at Oklahoma State University, Rendel studied some accounting classes and Mark studied engineering.

“It seems ancient now,” said Rendel, “but we actually lived in a house where Eskimo Joes is today.”

Eventually, Rendel took a job at the student union to help Mark through school. After he graduated in 1960, Mark went into the Air Force through the ROTC program and they were stationed at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida for five years. In 1965, he was offered a job as a design engineer at John Deere Corporate headquarters in Moline, Illinois.

They bought a small farm in Illinois where they had some cattle and hogs and rented out some land for hay. Admittedly, Rendel said they had no intention of moving again because Mark was really happy with his job.

“The opportunity came up for us to move back to Oklahoma though and it seemed like the right thing to do,” said Rendel. “We moved back here in 1968 and have farmed the same land since then.”

Indeed, the initial ground the Rendels had when they first came back to Oklahoma is still part of Rendel Farms nearly 50 years later.

Rendel and Mark were married 53 years before he passed away in 2011.

“We had 53 years together,” said Rendel, “53 years invested in the partnership of Rendel Farms. We worked hand-in-hand—when he went to the field, I went to the field.”

One thing they both learned very quickly was that timing is everything in farming. Rendel recalled many times looking at dark storm clouds and knowing that she and Mark had a very small window of a few hours to get everything done.

“Of all ingredients that farmers pour into their crops, time is probably most critical,” said Rendel. “If things don’t get done on time, the dreams of success may become nightmares of failure.”

Though her sons Greg and Brent take care of the day-to-day activities now, she is still very involved in the operation, whether it is running to get equipment parts, taking equipment to the fields during harvest, or providing valuable advice. Her daughter Pam and her husband also help work the farm on the weekends during harvest and are building a home on the original 1893 Rendel Farms home site.

“We have family sessions around the kitchen table to talk about what’s planted and what we anticipate to plant,” said Rendel. “I’m still very much a part of the decision making.

“And if they need a new piece of machinery I’m always consulted about that,” laughed Rendel, “Especially if I have any extra bucks to contribute.”

Rendel said farm equipment has been modernized significantly since she and Mark first started farming. Technology such as drones can be used to get over a crop that they wouldn’t be able to go out on otherwise and identify potential issues.

“That’s where my sons have come in more to the picture,” said Rendel, “To stay up with the times.”

Rendel and Mark encouraged their children to leave the farm after high school and go on to college. Greg went to OSU for agronomy and Brent became a nuclear engineer with the U.S. Navy.

“If they wanted to come back after education, great,” said Rendel, “We wanted them to have another education to fall back on, but it’s also an asset to have that knowledge and education on the farm.”

Today Rendel said one of her favorite things to do on the farm is drive her John Deere ATV out to the field when the guys are working to check on how everything is going.

“I love smelling the fresh plowed ground,” said Rendel, “It’s something that’s in my blood. If I’m having a bad day—that’s the way I relax and get through it all.”

But even when you love it, farming is not without its challenges. Northeast Oklahoma is prone to erosion, especially if the land has been worked several times. Rendel said some times you may not know it until the crops have been harvested, and then the low spots become visible. At that point, terraces or other erosion control may be needed to redirect the water to another location.

For over two decades, the Rendel Farms have been one of the largest minimum-tillage soybean producers in Oklahoma, in some years harvesting over 600 acres of no-plow, double-cropped soybeans. Rendel said in addition to saving moisture, no-plow planting has eliminated serious erosion problems.

Her desire to take care of the land is not just evident on the farm. Rendel served on the Ottawa County Conservation District Board for 15 years.

The Rendels actively share crop land, both renting themselves and renting land out to other farmers.

“It’s a great way to continue to farm land that isn’t necessarily for sale,” said Rendel.

Some of the farm land has also been used as test plots for seed and chemical dealers as well as OSU. Rendel said this provides valuable information to the dealers and the university such as the variety or seed that can thrive in the northeastern Oklahoma environment.

“I just want to ensure the land is left better than it was when I got it,” said Rendel. “My father-in-law used to say ‘they aren’t making any new land, so you better take care of it.’ That stuck in my mind.”

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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 Captions

Photo1: Sue and Mark Rendel walk hand-in-hand on Rendel Farms.

Photo2: Sue and Mark Rendel stand proudly in front of their farm.

