

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Una Belle Townsend

By: Kaylee Snow

YUKON — Una Belle Townsend and a cow named Grady have two things in common: agriculture and Yukon, Okla.

Townsend, author of “Grady’s in the Silo,” which is based on a true story about a cow who got stuck in a grain silo in 1949 in Yukon, incorporates agriculture into her books to help children understand where their food and clothing come from.

Townsend is a long-time educator of more than 30 years and has devoted her life to teaching others – about the importance of agriculture.

“You can’t have an ag-less day,” Townsend said, referring to an Ag in the Classroom (AITC) lesson.

Townsend, who was involved in the creation and the first curriculum development of Oklahoma AITC, saw the value of the program and dedicated much of her time to it. The Texan’s first visit to Stillwater and Oklahoma State University was to begin this process.

“I just enjoy getting the kids into ag,” she said. “They need to know about it. They really need to know where their food comes from and a little about farming and dairies and wheat. I just felt like that was something they needed to know.”

Becoming an Okie

Townsend grew up in Marshall, Texas, but has lived more than half of her life in Oklahoma after marrying an Okie, Virgil Townsend, in 1973. Her grandparents farmed, which is where she credits her first memories of agriculture. She recalls picking berries and cotton for a “few minutes” and once rode her grandparents’ cow Bossy. Aside from this, her passion for agriculture remained in her memories until she dove into being an educator.

She received a bachelor's degree from East Texas Baptist College and a master's degree from Stephen F. Austin State University, both in elementary education. She began her career in Texas but spent 25 of her 30 years teaching in Oklahoma. She primarily taught grades first through eighth at Riverside Elementary School in El Reno, Okla., but was also a librarian. She has lived in Yukon, Okla., since 1975.

Aside from AITC lessons, Townsend took her students on field trips to farms. She was the Riverside 4-H leader for 15 years. She tried to relate everything back to agriculture, which is what led to her being named Oklahoma's first AITC Teacher of the Year. Townsend said she considers this her greatest educational accomplishment.

Beating the Odds

Townsend's first book, "Grady's in the Silo," was rejected the first time she sent it out for publishing. Ten years later, she tried again.

"I had like 1,500 to 2,000 words in it," she said. "You don't have that many words in a children's book, but I hadn't thought about it. I hadn't attended any writing classes or writing conferences, so I had to cut down my story and continue until I finally got what they wanted."

The book was published in 2003. This book won the 2004 Oklahoma Center for the Book Award and has continually been Townsend's bestseller. Both the book and Grady the cow are used in curriculum for AITC lessons by many teachers.

Townsend wrote another book called "Clancy" about a goat that eats wood but spits out the nails. Her remaining six books generally incorporate agriculture, animals or Oklahoma history.

"Ideas just pop in my head or I hear about something and write a story about it," she said.

Sometimes, ideas hit her when she's driving down the road. She'll pull over, jot down an outline of the book and then continue driving.

As a three-time cancer survivor, Townsend is thankful that "God has been good, very good."

Now retired, Townsend spends her days speaking at schools, doing author visits and attending craft shows with her books. Depending on the year, she visits 10-25 schools annually. She attends many of the Oklahoma AITC Summer Conferences and often leads sessions. She's involved with several library and critiquing groups as well.

"The rest of it is supposedly retiring, but I never have found that," Townsend laughed. "I don't know when that happens."

Townsend wrote numerous grants, some were from AITC, for the Riverside Elementary School and library, which awarded the school thousands of dollars over the years. The library was named the Una Belle Townsend Honorary Library in March 2017. She has received numerous awards for her books, including a Children's Choice Award for "Grady's in the Silo," in which more than 10,000 students voted for their favorite book.

Townsend also cans fruits and vegetables, a skill she learned from her mother-in-law, Velma Townsend, who lived on a farm in southeast Oklahoma. She joined the Extension Homemaker's Group, which is now known as Oklahoma Home and Community Education. She has been canning for about 40 years and has won numerous ribbons at state and county fairs. She still enters the Canadian County Fair each year and has been named Canadian County Citizen of the Year.

She has two adult children, Chris and Brian Townsend, a daughter-in-law, Kelly Ross, two dogs and about eight grand-dogs.

Una Belle Townsend has two books coming out in the next year and hopes to continue writing more.

Her favorite quote is, "Don't put a question mark where God has put a period."

She said she plans to continue "preaching" about agriculture because "it's a huge part of everybody's life whether they realize it or not."

Townsend said since she can't pour the information directly in the minds of children, she "has to go the other way and just teach ag."

She credits her continued passion for agriculture to Oklahoma AITC and the women who worked alongside her to develop the lessons over the years.

From the moment a person wakes up between sheets made of cotton to eating dinner grown by farmers, Townsend said "you really can't have an ag-less day. Can you?"

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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 Captions: Una Belle Townsend is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture. She is a published author of eight children's books.



Una Belle Townsend is shown here reading her “Oklahoma Land Run” book to students during an author visit. She visits 10-25 schools annually, often to teach them about agriculture.

