

Wilbarger County's Oldest Ranches



One of Wilbarger County's oldest ranches is in its fourth generation and has continuously been operated by the same family for more than 100 years, and plans are in the works to continue operation for at least two succeeding generations. The Round Timber Ranch, with headquarters located just off U.S. Highway 283 in northern Wilbarger County along the Red River, and also includes land in the Lockett and Farmers Valley communities, is being led by Keith Spears, the fourth generation of his family to run the operation. The ranch was established in 1907 by his great-grandfather, Chris Schmoker, who came to Wilbarger County in 1895 and then purchased his first place for ranching operations near Lockett in 1907 (which is still in the family today). He later expanded operations to include land near the Red River and in the Farmers Valley community. "A lot of folks have owned land for 100 years but not continuously," Spears stated. "We have been here since 1907 and never sold any of our land." Spears noted the ranch received a Heritage Award in 2007 upon 100 years of continuous existence in the same family. The ranching operation along the Red River includes rolling terrain, while the land at Lockett and Farmers Valley is flat. It includes stocker cattle, and crops such as alfalfa and wheat. The ranch also is among the few to still create and maintain its own windmills.

It also has a water tank with a one-million gallon capacity on the rolling portion near the river that is used for the sale of water to the City of Altus. Spears noted there is little diversification of the land. "We just try to do what we've always done well," he said. "The river is our boundary on the west and north sides," he added. "If one looks at a map of Wilbarger County and sees a 'finger-shape' along the river -- that is our land." Spears noted the greatest challenge faced by the family through its more than 100 years and multiple generations was the Great Depression of the 1930s when severe drought conditions and low market prices took their toll on many farmers and ranchers. He stated farming and ranching remains a low margin business today due to uncertainty resulting from weather conditions -- particularly in an area prone to drought, along with the volatility of market prices. Another major challenge during the ranch's 100-years plus-- the torrential floods that occurred in Wilbarger County during the summer of 1995 -- came with Spears' at the helm of the operation. "We got 12 inches in May and that was considered a 100-year flood," he stated. "And then in August, we got another 12 inches." Keith Spears' son, Guy Spears, who is set to lead the Round Timber Ranch in its fifth generation, stated swings in market prices are much more volatile than in the past. "We had a 28-cent swing in the price of wheat," he stated. "It would have taken a year to have such a change in price in 1985. Also, the price of our products has gone up, but the profit margins have stayed the same -- low, which leads to great indebtedness," he stated. Keith Spears stated the biggest change in his generation of ranching has been the advent of technology particularly in seeding, and of equipment such as tractors, which now have modern conveniences such as GPS and guiding systems along with comforts such as air conditioning and stereo. "Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined driving a tractor across my fields with global positioning," he stated. In addition to the fourth (Keith Spears) and fifth (Guy Spears) generations who have, or plan, to continue the ranching tradition started by Chris Schmoker in 1907, the ranch has also been led by the second (Chris S. Schmoker, Keith Spears' grandfather) and third (Collins Spears, Keith

Spears' father) generations. Next in line is the sixth generation, Colin Spears, Guy Spears' thirteen-year-old son. Keith Spears noted each generation faced its challenges, successes and disappointments through the years but continued farming and ranching. "My great grandfather had it during the Great Depression and could have decided another career for a better life for his family, but he stayed on to give his children a choice to continue the ranch when they became adults," Keith Spears stated. "Then my father could have taken the land he was given and sold it for a high profit, but he also chose not to so I would have a choice to keep it going. Today, it would sell for at least five times what we paid for it years ago, but it's not for sale and my son will also have choice to continue operating it and pass it on to his son." Guy Spears stated ranching is much more than just another form of employment. "When you're involved in ranching, it becomes a lifestyle," he stated. "I can't remember wanting to do anything but farming and ranching."

Street family farm in fifth generation

One of the longest running farms in Wilbarger County is still in operation today in the same family after more than 125 years and several generations have tended the land through times of prosperity and of drought along with many changes in agriculture through the decades. Don Streit is the fourth generation of a family farm in the Lockett area southwest of Vernon that has been in operation continuously since 1891, when it was started by his great-grandfather, Christian Streit, who came to Wilbarger County from Switzerland in 1882 and began farming in a nearby location some five miles away from the present farm. That original land is still in the family today though it was sold outside the family for a time before it was repurchased, he noted. Don Streit currently owns 240 of the original 320-acre farm started by his great-grandfather, which was later handed down to subsequent generations including his grandfather, Alex Streit and then his father, Chance Streit. Don's son, Darren Streit, is also farming on the land as the fifth generation. Darren Streit noted that the farming operations emphasize crops including wheat, cotton, corn, milo, sesame and peanuts, with cattle consisting of cows



How do you get a huge crowd to gather for your birthday?

Throw the party yourself!

A local member of the Farmer's Co-op, Bonnie Gaines (center), draws a large crowd to Wilbarger Auditorium every October to celebrate his own birthday. Not only does he host the party, he is in charge of the meal as well!

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and goats "to keep the weeds down." Darren noted that peanuts are the most profitable of all the crops although fewer acres are planted than are of wheat each year. Don Streit said each generation of his family farm has survived many decades despite the effects of economics, weather and market changes -- particularly droughts and storms. He stated that the farm actually fared well during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl - both of which occurred in the 1930s. "I remember stories from my father that farmers

in this area fared well during those times," he said. "They didn't have much money but they always still had food on their tables. They knew how to 'make do' during that time." Don also recalls the flooding of 1995 that caused damage to several farms and ranches in Wilbarger County as another tough time. Farming has been a business of cycles through the years of "ups" and "downs", Don Streit added. One of the biggest changes he noted through the decades is that larger farms are now the key to survival as smaller farms are no longer

economical or profitable to operate. "You have to have 1,000 or more acres these days in order to make a living, whereas you could do it with a smaller farm in the past," he stated. "You also have to have lots of money and machinery." Darren Streit added that the factors of economics, weather and market conditions make farming a "riskier" business today than in the past. Don and his wife, Joni, still reside on the family farm at Lockett while son Darren and his wife, Lindsay, live in Vernon.



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