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2024 - Stewards of the Land (Sandy Carlson,
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Roots in the Hills

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Recommended Citation

Wiggins, Rene and Mike (2024). "Roots in the Hills," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Indifference
John Richardson

ROOTS IN THE HILLS

WIGGINS RANCH CONTINUES CENTURY-OLD LEGACY

In the aftermath of the Civil War, William H. Wiggins (1841–1917) was among the many who traveled west to forge a new life.

William had faced the horrors of being a prisoner of war in a Confederate prison in Salisbury, North Carolina. Hailing from Cuyahoga County, Ohio, he embarked on a journey that would shape the future of the Wiggins family and leave a lasting legacy.

In 1871, William made his way to Kansas, where he settled near Eureka, Kansas. As Eureka began to grow, William moved once again and staked his claim on a piece of land 11 miles northwest of town along the banks of the Fall River. The property is still owned today by William's great-granddaughter, a testament to the enduring spirit of ranching families in the Kansas Flint Hills.

By his side through the years was William's wife, Rebecca White Wiggins (1848 – 1939). Together, they raised seven children on the farm. As the story goes, William was a true “jack of all trades.” He was not just a farmer and rancher but also a skilled blacksmith, carpenter and even a part-time local doctor. William delivered several babies around the area, set broken bones and stitched up wounds for his neighbors.

One such neighbor was George Washington Bailey, another Civil War veteran whose great-grandson, Wayne Bailey, lives near Hamilton, Kansas, and has been a lifelong friend to the Wiggins family. George found himself in a prickly situation mowing hay one day when his team of mules spooked and dragged the sickle bar mower over his foot. Knowing that William Wiggins was handy with a needle, he made his way down the road for help. After William sewed up the wound, he

asked George how it looked. With a wry smile, George replied, "I think it needs one more stitch on the left side."

Frank Wiggins (1873 – 1949), William's second oldest son, struck out on his own in the late 1800s. He purchased school patent land (land officially deeded by the state to various buyers who had paid for their land in full) near Teterville, Kansas, in the community of Ruweda. With a team of Morgan mares and a pair of mules, Frank broke the sod on his 120 acres. He fenced off a single acre using long, narrow rock posts for corners and hedge posts for a front gate. Eventually, he would build a native stone house, but in the early days Frank lived in an open-fronted lean-to shed with only his father's old canvas Army horse blanket for protection from the elements. While much has changed since then, a portion of the stone house still stands, and the Mike Wiggins family now owns the original 120 acres. One of Frank's rock corner posts also stands in front of the Wiggins ranch house, another reminder of the family's deep roots in the Flint Hills.

Frank and his wife, Ella Spain, raised seven children. The youngest, Albert, born in 1924, began working at a young age for neighboring ranchers, sharpening hedge posts, fixing fences and breaking colts. As he grew older, he helped with the receiving and shipping of cattle, driving them on horseback across the Flint Hills to and from the rail yards. Albert joked that he "spent

the first half of his life waiting for a train and the second half waiting for a truck" to ship cattle. Albert's father gifted him seven Shorthorn-Hereford cross heifers upon his graduation from high school in 1947. The Wiggins family has been in the cow business ever since.

In 1952, Albert married Darlene Zimmerman, and together they moved into an old farmhouse southwest of Thrall, Kansas. A far cry from cozy, the rented farmhouse was bitterly cold in the winter months. Albert used old newspapers to insulate the north walls and block the drafty wind. During those early years in the hills, Albert and Darlene welcomed two children, Debbie and Mike.

Albert continued to build his cowherd, experimenting with different breeds to cross with his Shorthorn cows. Ahead of his time, he bred the cows to an Angus bull and later settled on the Brangus breed. Through the years, the Wiggins Ranch became involved in multiple research projects, collaborating with area universities to study bull performance traits, carcass data and more. Albert was influential in the growth of the Brangus breed, working closely with Brinks Brangus and Camp Cooley to develop genetics for the breed.

Pigs were a significant part of the Wiggins Ranch operation for many years. Albert wasn't afraid to diversify to make ends meet. When someone complained about the hog smell, his response was always, "It

smells like money." Mike, Albert's son, recalls many hours spent working baby pigs and hauling loads to the stockyards near downtown Wichita, Kansas, with memorable stops along the way. Later, when the pigs had all been sold, Albert purchased a flock of 200 ewes to fill the open paddocks. Mike eventually lowered the count to about 20 ewes, then sold them all after his daughter Lindy finished showing lambs in 4-H.

In the late 1960s, Albert and Darlene ventured into another business endeavor, purchasing Flint Hills Feed and Supply, the local Purina feed dealership in Eureka. For over 30 years, they owned and operated the store. Darlene made the daily trip to town six days a week, managing the store and keeping the books. She sold the business shortly after Albert's passing in 2001.

Albert and Darlene purchased the existing ranch headquarters in the early 1970s. Albert had done some day work for the former owner, Arthur Parks, and the two had partnered on some pig-related ventures. Arthur passed away unexpectedly, and his widow Treva asked Albert to move his family to the ranch and help her. When Treva later decided to move to town, she sold the ranch to the Wiggins family.

Today, the ranch is comprised of 10,000 acres of owned and leased pastures, along with a small feedlot.

Mike and his wife Rene manage the daily operations. Their daughter Lindy and her husband Justin Knowles also reside on the ranch, with Justin helping Mike full-time. Lindy owns a marketing business and takes care of the ranch's website and promotional work. Mike and Rene's son Latham and wife Abbey live a few miles east of the ranch headquarters. Latham is the agriculture education teacher and FFA advisor at Madison (Kansas) High School. His summer break is spent helping on the ranch. Abbey teaches science at Hamilton (Kansas) High School and agriculture education to grade school students.

"WE SHOULD LEAVE IT BETTER THAN WE FOUND IT."

Albert and Darlene's daughter Deb and husband Mike Burtin have also been heavily involved with the ranch over the years. Their two children, Matt Burtin and Mica Coulter, also call Eureka home. Mike and Deb own a herd of purebred Brangus cattle, emphasizing raising registered Brangus bulls.

All four of Albert and Darlene's grandchildren grew up on the ranch and were involved in 4-H, FFA, sports and rodeo. They have plenty of stories to tell of helping work cattle, hauling mineral and riding in the feed truck. Many of



Into a Swale, She Rides
Johne Richardson

these stories involve a misadventure of one kind or another, such as getting a vehicle stuck in the mud or encountering a swarm of bees in the working pens. Seven great-grandchildren make up the sixth generation of the Wiggins family in Greenwood County. The older ones are already learning to ride horses and help where they can.

Albert has been gone more than two decades, but his influence is prevalent at the ranch. He was passionate about the Flint Hills and the incredible natural resources of the native grass prairies, often saying, “We should leave it better than we found it.”

The ranch’s leases include landowners from whom the Wiggins family has been leasing for more than 90 years — one year at a time. Proper grass management and integrity are the biggest factors in sustaining those long-term relationships across multiple generations.

Knowing that the ranching operation depends on the pastureland’s availability and quality, the Wiggins family continues to employ management strategies to help the native grasses flourish. Proper stocking rates, timely burning and aerial spraying

are all important tactics used to control overgrazing and encroaching weeds like *Sericea lespedeza*.

Albert’s guidance is still evident in the cowherd on the ranch as well. While it still consists primarily of Brangus-Angus cows, Mike has continued his father’s breeding experiments by using a few purebred Hereford bulls in recent years.

The ranch operation has grown to include not only the cowherd but also the care of approximately 3,000 yearlings each summer and tending to more than 500 cows owned by others. In 2019, the ranch took on another new venture — selling retail beef directly to local consumers. Albert often spoke of his dream of a restaurant that featured his beef. This recently became a reality through a partnership with Napoli Italian Eatery in Wichita, Kansas.

The Wiggins family’s passion for moving the beef industry forward remains alive and well. Each generation has emphasized the importance of preserving the native grasslands and passing down the subtle arts of horsemanship and cattle handling. It is a legacy rooted deep in the Kansas Flint Hills and one the family is proud to carry on.

Mike Wiggins and wife Rene own and operate the Wiggins Ranch just north of Eureka, Kansas. A Kansas State University graduate, Mike served as an agricultural education teacher after college, coaching successful livestock judging teams at the state and national levels. He returned to the family ranch in 1990. When not working cattle, Mike enjoys hunting and spending time with his four granddaughters.