

100 years later, this farm's still growing hops

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Kelsey Thalhofer



Patrick Leavy holds up a typewritten list from 1933 that details Oregon's 505 hop growers at the time.

It's one piece of history he's been able to track down surrounding Leavy Farms, which has been owned and operated by his family for 100 years. After the Prohibition era and a devastating downy mildew outbreak, along with other jarring changes to the industry, only 12 hop farms on that list -- including Leavy's -- are still in business.

Now Leavy and his family are joining 1,144 farmers on another tough-to-make list -- Oregon Century Farms and Ranches. Leavy Farms is among 16 Century and two Sesquicentennial -- 150-year-old -- farms that will be honored at the Oregon State Fair.

The ceremony will be at 1 p.m. Sept. 1 in the Corporate Tent on the west side of the fairgrounds.

Leavy said only a third of the honor belongs to him.

"You don't get to 100 years or 150 years without somebody making a big sacrifice along the line," he said. In Leavy's case, that sacrifice was made by his grandmother, Ella Leavy.

She, alongside her husband, Patrick Leavy, and James Leavy -- brothers who had come from Ireland in the mid-1880s -- purchased a 73.55-acre farm on Butteville Road in Aurora, Ore., in 1912. After dabbling in a variety of crops and livestock, they began growing hops in the 1920s and built a house in 1927 that is still used as the farm office.

When Patrick died in 1941 and James deeded his interest to Ella in 1946, she became the farm's sole owner. For 13 years she ran the farm, with the help of her nine children, until her death in 1954.

Her son, Joe Leavy, took over from 1954 until his sudden death in 1977. He was unmarried and had no children, so his nephew, Patrick Leavy, stepped in at age 23 and still runs the farm.

Leavy never knew his grandmother -- he was born 6 months after she died -- but he knows what she did for the farm.

"She was widely respected," Leavy said, adding that neighbors often sought her business advice. "At that time there weren't too many female operators of farms."

The family farm now spans 300 acres, and Leavy operates the 70 acres of hops still harvested on the original property. Leavy said the farm, which distributes to 15 craft breweries across the U.S. and Canada under the name The Oregon Hophouse, is now going organic -- 30 of its 70 acres have already made the switch and he said it will be fully organic by 2015.

History surrounding the farm's 100 years of production is largely undocumented, Leavy said. He guesses that many farmers before him were too busy working to think about writing down their story, so he files every detail he can find about the history of Oregon hop growers to keep their legacy alive.

"It took three farmers to keep it going," Leavy said, "I just happen to be the one that's alive to talk about it."