

Female Faces in Ag

Three women describe what inspired them to blaze their own trails in agriculture.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Agriculture can be a tough industry tempered by hard work, drought and poor prices. But, it can also be a fulfilling and rewarding lifestyle, an opportunity to care for land and livestock, and a wonderful setting in which to raise a family. It's those latter points that attract many to the ag industry — both men and women. Today, the phenomenon of women taking the reins in ranching and agribusiness ventures is more commonplace than ever before.

Since 1969, when women were first allowed in the National FFA Organization, the number of female ag leaders has grown exponentially. At many of the nation's land-grant universities, you'll find upward of 40% women enrolled in ag colleges, while 35% of FFA members are female, and 47% of state FFA leadership positions are filled by young women.

From many of those experiences, more women are going on to be involved in ag businesses, state and national legislatures, and, increasingly, land ownership. According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, the number of U.S. farms operated by women increased by 13.4% between 1997 and 2002, putting women as the principal operators of 237,819 American farms.

The role women play in agriculture is indeed growing and varied. Here, three women share their perspectives on what inspired them to seek careers in agriculture. The panel includes Shirley Williams, Van Buren, Ark., who is the 2005 president of the American Angus Auxiliary and the primary manager of Fair Oaks Farm, a purebred Angus operation she owns with her husband; Lorna Marshall, Burlington, Colo., who is a beef sire procurement manager for ABS Global Inc. and operates a cow-calf operation with her husband and children; and Emily Horton, Riverton, Wyo., a college student who has established her own Angus herd and is currently serving as the National FFA Secretary.

Who or what inspired you to become involved in agriculture and pursue a future in this industry?

For each of these women, being exposed to agriculture at a young age left an indelible impression on their futures.

Twenty-one-year-old Horton was born and raised on a farm and says, "I love the lifestyle and everything it encompasses. I love the fact that as a child I learned the value of work ethic and respect — respect not only for the lifestyle that we live in, but also for the land and how precious of a gift we have to ensure the well-being for future generations of human beings. I want to be in the industry in the future because I deeply enjoy agriculture and hold a true sense of pride in the industry."

Horton credits her father as a motivating influence in helping her develop a true passion for agriculture. She says, "As a successful farmer and cattle producer, I have gained many tools from watching him as a manager and father who exemplifies dedication and unflinching work ethic in all that he does."

Marshall adds, "I have always loved agriculture and the type of character it seemingly creates, and I was fortunate to be involved in the beef industry since I was little. However, my involvement in a really strong, educational-based youth beef breed organization really fueled my interest, along with some wonderful and encouraging parents, mentors and livestock judging team coaches." She says she was also drawn back to agriculture because of the strong values and work ethic of others in agriculture and the lifestyle.

For Williams, who grew up in the city, it was her grandfather who instilled in her the belief that she could one day be a rancher.

She got glimpses of ranching on visits as a young girl to Louisiana, where her grandfather had a ranch and raised cattle and horses. "He told me that I had a real future in the business if I could find a way to convince my mother to let me pursue it. Then he would laugh and say, 'Good luck!'" Williams recalls.

It was an unlikely future for Williams since her family wouldn't even let her have a dog in the house. Williams says her mother was a true southern belle, who, upon seeing her young daughter's fondness for cattle, would typically say something like, "They are really nice dear, but I don't know how you stand the smell and mess."

Fortunately for Williams, her family didn't stand in the way of her pursuing her dream to be involved in agriculture. "They just didn't have any knowledge of the industry to help with direction in my pursuit of a career in agriculture," she says.

As she got into the beef industry, Williams found guidance from other Angus breeders. She particularly credits David McMahan, Belle Point Ranch, Lavaca, Ark., for helping her get her start in 1992, as well as Tom Drake, Davis, Okla., for sharing breeding philosophies. She is also appreciative that her husband, Fred, has allowed her to do what she loves.

"He was raised in the cattle business, but lets me make all of the decisions regarding our cattle," she says. "It's not easy for him sometimes, but I can always tell by the smile on his face that he enjoys watching me micromanage the cow herd. He figures that I am just headstrong enough that I will just have to figure some things out the hard way. He is incredibly supportive and proud of my achievements."

Do women face challenges in agriculture that men may not have to overcome?

By and large this trio says that with hard work and determination, women have the same opportunities as men in agriculture.

"Besides getting hay in your bra and having to find a restroom with walls and a door, women today are pretty equal to men in agriculture," Williams says.

The equipment available today has eliminated strength as an issue, she adds, explaining that outthinking animals and using a little finesse replaces the need for brute strength. "Most of the livestock out there are always going to be stronger or faster than you are, even if you are of the male gender."

Horton says most of the challenges women have to overcome are simply matters



Emily Horton



Lorna Marshall

of perception, such as women being perceived to be at a disadvantage in a labor-intensive profession or that women play a supporter role rather than a managerial role.

"I don't think there are additional challenges," Marshall adds. "At times you may have to prove you're knowledgeable about the industry, but once you do they are more likely to remember you than a male counterpart."

Most importantly, Williams says, the biggest challenge in agriculture is for everyone to find a means to stay in business. "We have gained so much knowledge and technology that none of us can afford to do everything that we have been taught to do and still make a profit in the business," she says. "So, we have to pick and choose what we think we can afford to do, what is meaningful to our customers, and what will allow us to still stay in business."

Why are you passionate about agriculture, and how do you hope to shape agriculture in the future?

Horton, who plans to work toward building her seedstock herd and establishing a heifer development center in the future, says she feels a sense of duty to return to agriculture. "I want to pursue a career in the industry because I feel that it is my role as a young producer to take a leadership role in where our food supply will come from in the years to come," she says.

She adds, "Agriculture is the lifeline of our country. My passion from agriculture is rooted deep in tradition, and it is driven by a goal to be part of something greater than myself. Producing food and fiber for the world is essential for our survival. My passion is raising good, quality Angus cattle and helping other producers to improve their genetics as well." Through her experiences as a national FFA officer, she adds, "I want to shape the future of agriculture by being a part of it and trying to motivate other students to be a part of it as well."

Marshall views agriculture as symbolic of things that are good — hard work, values, caring for God's creations, patriotism, etc. "I want to do my small part to ensure a viable industry for my children, community and customers," she says.

Similarly, Williams, who runs about 50-70 cows, says she loves everything about the business — from feeding and halter-breaking show calves to making the breeding decisions. She also holds in high regard the responsibility of seedstock producers to the industry.

"When I started in the Angus business in



Shirley Williams

1992, the beef cattle industry was starting to become more conscious of end consumer demand for a more consistent, higher-quality product," she says. "It became apparent to me that by studying genetics diligently and taking advantage of the technology that was starting to come on the scene, such as ultrasound, I could contribute, in however small a way, to what was happening nationwide in our industry. If even one animal ...

sired by one of my bulls graded high-Choice or Prime, then I made a difference. It is what drives me today."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 152

More women running farms

According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, the number of U.S. farms operated by women increased by 13.4% between 1997 and 2002. The Census indicates that women served as principal operators of 237,819 farms and managed 59,383,557 acres of land in 2002. According to the report, 84% of the women principal operators were full owners of the farms they operated. The top five states for number of farms operated by women were Texas, California, Missouri, Tennessee and Oklahoma.

Data from the Census also revealed some common characteristics of women principal operators:

- ▶ Most had worked at least 10 years or more on their present farm.
- ▶ 79% lived on their farm, and 52% listed farming as their primary occupation.
- ▶ Women operators were slightly older than principal operators in general. The average age of a woman principal operator was 56.7 years, compared to 55.3 years for all principal operators.
- ▶ The Census also revealed that women principal operators were more likely to use computers for business and have Internet access than male principal operators. According to the Census, 40.4% (96,025) of women-operated farms used computers for business, compared to 38.7% of male-operated farms; and 52% (123,556) of women-operated farms had Internet access, compared to 49.4% of male-operated farms.

Female Faces in Ag CONTINUED FROM PAGE 149

What advice do you offer to other ag women in balancing work, family and personal time?

Marshall points out that the beef industry is wonderfully unique because almost everybody who is involved in it is involved because it is their passion, and that equates to a lifestyle and a passion that is not often duplicated in other fields. However, that dedication also equates to long hours and a real challenge to keep the

proper balance, she adds. Faith and prayer, lots of hugs, and a commitment to make the time she has be quality time are her answers, but, she admits, "It is one of the toughest parts of life to manage."

Williams adds, "Agriculture is no different from any other career that women may choose as far as the balancing act goes. I used to work in an office, and I chose to do cows and kids instead."

Her advice to others is to follow your

passion, no matter what it is. "The best gift you can give your family is to be happy. Don't sacrifice your dreams just to fit into a mold that wasn't designed for you," she says. "There is nothing that women can't do in today's world if they just focus on their goals."

