The Guillot Family Farm, Five Generations and Going for More

By: Blair Dahl

Benji Guillot woke up the morning of this interview believing he was the third in his family's generation of farmers. He was wrong. He is fifth in the line. The morning of this interview, as I am traveling out into the country, the houses get further apart, the sun shines brighter, I see more birds, I slow down without realizing it, and I meander up a gravel drive to a simple house in the middle of the Guillot family farm. I have been invited to sit with three generations of Guillots at the morning meeting time....that window in the early day after the morning chores have been done, breakfast has been eaten, coffee has warmed everyone up, and it is now time to discuss how to work the rest of the day. Around the table were Benji Guillot, his father Reece, and his grandfather Cleveland. These three men and their families are keeping alive a profession, a history, a livelihood none of the rest of us could live without.

Oldon Guillotte and his wife Zelema Abshire homesteaded here and farmed simply to keep the family alive, not to profit. Oldon married twice, fathering a total of 16 children, and when he died, the land was divided among them. One son, Arthus Guillotte with his wife Estella Sonnier farmed their piece for a time until Arthus went to work for the Canal Company. The Canal Company controlled all the irritation for the area farms. It was at this time that Guillotte was changed to Guillot.

Arthus went to school one day and was corrected by his teacher for spelling his name wrong. The birth certificate was located and sure enough, the teacher was right. Arthus' parents, not being able to read and write were not aware of the discrepancy. (However, one side of the family still spells it the old way.) Arthus and Estella's son Cleveland, after finishing the eighth grade, tried working for the Canal Company and at Jack Lawrence's Feed Store, but in a few years, headed back out to the farm.

Cleveland started farming as a livelihood in the 1950s. He started with the piece of land his father had received when his grandfather had passed. In the years to follow, Cleveland would re-acquire every acre his grandfather had originally purchased. Arthus would also return to farming when his son got into it. Those two generations of men worked together to carve out a home for their families and the generations to come.

For many years, Cleveland farmed rice, and he took the time to explain how rice, back then, was harvested. It was cut by hand with a sickle—back-breaking work, then loaded onto a wagon where it could be transported to a central location for threshing, which separates the stalk from the seed. Then, the seed could
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betakentotownforstorage
untilitcouldbemilled. This
wouldallbedonebyhand,
transporting everything bycart
and mule. Back then, the rice
was dried in the fields before it
was stored. Later, a threshing
machine helped ease the
workload, and tractors made
the work easier too. At first I
found it odd that Mr. Cleveland
had taken two pictures of his
first combine, but as I learned
his story, I quickly grew to
appreciate how one purchase
can change how you work.

In Reece’s lifetime, the
Guillots built their own bins
to store their rice, which saved
them money, made them
money because they could
store rice for other farmers,
and it enabled them to cut
the rice green. The rice can
then be harvested and dried at
different times and, therefore,
sold at different times of the
year. The price to sell will be
lowest at harvest time; so if
a farmer can manipulate the
timing of his selling, he may
make a little profit for the year.

Now, if you readers got that
bumbling and probably error-
ridden explanation, you will
also get how smart a farmer
has to be to make it (and how
ignorant of farming your writer
was when she first sat down at
that table!) And, I won’t even
get into the diversification of
crops.

When I grew up, I followed
my father to town sometimes
to the general store where there
were always a few farmers
around, especially in the
morning. And, while I perused
the candy aisle, I heard a
lot. I grew up not knowing
how to farm but knowing that
farming was hard. I learned
that, unlike many professions
with vacations, insurance, and
pension plans, a farmer’s job
was more like
pushing that
cart up the
hill without
the summit
in sight. I
remembered
those times
while I was
sitting at the
Guillot table
and I had to
ask them all
why, why do it
if it is so hard?

Benji was the
first to laugh
and offer,
“Farmers are
complainers!
We can
always find
something
to complain
about.” It was
his father Reece who added,
“It’s a lot of work with long
hours, but it is a good living
You are home every night,
and it’s a good place to raise a
family.” They all spent time
talking about the difficulty of
farming, how dependent it is
on the weather, how you really
work seven days a week, how
long a day can be, the pitfalls
of maintaining equipment, the
high cost of diesel, and many
other things.

Reece grew up farming with
his father. When he was
young, he would ride on the
floor of his father’s tractor and
usually fall asleep. Once, he
fell off! His worried Daddy
was so thankful that the plow
had not been down. Another
time, when he was about 12,
Reece was driving the truck
with a load of rice and broke
an axle. He was able to keep
control and not let the truck
turn over, losing the rice and
maybe hurting himself in the
process. Another time his
Daddy heaved a sigh of relief! In thinking about why, Reece reflects, “I’ve ridden into town after 5:00 p.m. and saw people home from their jobs, working in their yards, being done for the day, and knowing that I still had work to do before my day was done. I’ve been envious of that sometimes, but not enough to exchange that life for mine.”

Reece continues, “I tried college for a semester, then I came back to farming. I have never wanted to do anything else.” Being in the middle of the three generations at the table, Reece offers a unique perspective. As a child he experienced farming when it was more seasonal.

“There used to be more family time in the winter. Today, because we have to diversify, there is less down time on a farm.” The farmer that Reece has to be today works harder, works longer, and has more pots on the stove than ever before. And this is the life his son Benji has chosen to put his heart into.

Both Benji and Reece are quick to point out that neither of them was pushed into this life. For self-professed complainers, these two are also quick to say that you can make a living farming. Mr. Cleveland has helped his son Reece to farm, his daughter Jackie, and Benji’s brother T.J. college educations as well as helping Benji get into farming. When Benji takes me outside to take some pictures, it is easy to see why someone would want to farm. It’s a cool, crisp morning as we walk out to the first tractor Mr. Cleveland ever bought, the old buggy they used, and the 12 foot water well Mr. Cleveland dug by hand. In
To my “Why” question, Mr. Cleveland probably said it best, “We’ve got so much invested.... from horse to tractor to combine.”

Well put. If your work requires investment, then you had better be willing to give it all. That’s when Reece brought up a good point. “I see a lot of young men who would love to get into farming, but it is so difficult and expensive to get started that they just can’t do it. The average age of a farmer is 53-54.” Listening to Reece helped me to see that farming is an all-or-nothing deal. “The family life that you get from it is good,” he adds. Benji agrees and tells me, “At lunch, my wife brings my daughter out and I get to see my family in the middle of my day. My mother did the same for my Dad. And my Grandmother ran it all; the books, the daily life, she kept us all in line!”

All three men spend a great deal of time talking about their families and how they could not do it without those families. Reece offers his wisdom, “Behind every successful farmer is a good woman.”

Five generations of farmers is a tough hand to beat. It teaches us all that there are things in life that we must pick up where someone else left off and that those same things we
must care for so that they can be worked on after we are gone. In this quick-fix, fast-lane, flash-by world, the days of the family farm seem to be long gone. It is a comfort to know that the family farm can still be found. And it is refreshing to find the younger generation willing to work very hard to keep those traditions alive. My morning at the Guillot family table reminded me of the definition of honorable work and the strength of this family showed itself bright and clear.

"It’s not work, it’s home."

Benji says quite simply, and that is quite enough for five generations of Guillots.

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