

FOLK STUDIES 276 : ANN K. FERRELL

The Wingers

Family Farming Practices

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The Winger family has lived and farmed in Kentucky for decades. They have plowed the land and fished the streams that roam through the hills of the Bluegrass state for as long as any of them can remember, and their ancestors probably farmed in Europe before the first British peoples traveled across the sea hoping to start a new life in new land. In fact, the name Winger is a variant of the German name 'Weinger' which translates to "wine" with the 'inger' suffix added. Most of the family believes that their ancestors started out as German vineyard owners, hence the name. But before I delve further on the Winger family, a little background on Kentucky is needed.

When Daniel Boone and his party made their way into Kentucky in 1775, they were amazed by what they saw. Felix Walker, a member of the group, recorded in his travel journals his reaction to first seeing the new land they had set out to find: "...and as the cane ceased, we began to discover the plains of Kentucky...so rich a soil we had never seen before; covered with clover in full bloom...It appeared that nature, in the profusion of her bounty, had spread a feast for all that lives, both for the animal and rational world." (as quoted in Clark 1). It goes without saying that the travelers were delighted with what they had discovered. This rich soil and the evenness of the land determined what type of society and economy Kentucky would have.

The part that I want to focus on, the part that the Winger family took advantage of was the "fertile, limestone-based Bluegrass lands... destined to sustain a prosperous agrarian economy and a way of life comparable to that of rural England or Tidewater Virginia."(Clark 2-3). The Wingers settled in what is now Glasgow, Kentucky, in Barren County. The news of Daniel Boone's newly discovered fertile land reached the ears of many people and appealed to them. They packed up their belongings, and made their way to the new promised land that would

assuredly bring them the prosperity for which they were looking for. Around a hundred years later, and the family still owns the farm.

When I wanted to know more about the Winingers and how they had farmed for years and years, I looked to my uncle, Ken Winger. You see, my mother grew up as a Winger, so all throughout my childhood I would go and visit the farm with her when she checked on her father. While she left to get her degree in college, her brother decided to stay and keep the farm running. I remember him taking us all over the farm when I was little to check up on the cows. It was exciting for me because at the time I had picked up the hobby of collecting cow bones. When a cow died, my uncle would make sure to remember the spot, and the next time we came up to Glasgow he would make sure to bring us by so I could continue my collection. I had everything from a skull to a pair of hooves, and I was so proud that I even used them for my show and tell in elementary school. What I didn't realize was that my parents were secretly getting rid of the bones behind my back, so the only thing I have left today is a vertebra on my computer desk.

The perfect opportunity for an interview came early in November, 2013. One of my cousins was having a birthday party, and the whole family was invited for cake and a hayride. Coincidentally, this also happened to be my uncle's birthday, making it a special occasion indeed. So after hotdogs and cake – not necessarily in that order – we were finally able to sit down in a quiet side office where we could talk. Forrest Gump was playing on the TV in the living room, and there were a couple of people in the kitchen fumbling about, but it was a very peaceful atmosphere overall.

The first thing I wanted to know was how long the Winger family had been farming. I had known that my grandfather had farmed in Glasgow, but I had no idea if any of the family before that had been farming, or if it was just something he had started after he got back from WWII. Uncle Ken was able to help fill in some of the gaps.

“Well, we’ve been farming since eighteen...no, down in east Tennessee, they were farming down there too,” he started.

“So, they’ve moved farms?” I asked curiously. This was something that I had never known.

“Well,” he started again. “I went down to the farm they moved from – I don’t know what they raised back then, probably some corn – and that was probably around 1800 to 1830 something. They came here in 1840, I think. The whole family, the Winger family, has probably farmed since 1800,” he nodded to himself, and to some lesser extent, me. That was over two hundred years of farming. Two hundred years of parents passing down traditions and knowledge to their children, things like when the best time to pick corn was, or what to look for when you’re buying a cow, and even things like not castrating a bull on the full moon. That was one thing my Uncle knew all too well.

“You’ve got to watch the signs. When the signs are in the heart I learned that when you castrate or wean a calf from a cow, that when you castrate they’ll sometimes bleed to death. When the signs are in the knees to the feet they don’t bleed hardly,” he said seriously. I had heard the story of the first time he had castrated a calf. It had just so happened that it was a full moon, and the poor thing bled to death before Uncle Ken was able to do anything. After that he made sure that he watched the signs. According to Everett Gillis:

“Deeply entrenched in the folkways of many American rural communities is the lore of the signs: planting and harvesting, weaning, butchering, canning, and the like, according to the signs of the zodiac – the latter always near at hand in the almanac hanging on its familiar nail behind the kitchen stove.” (Gillis 77)

“Uncle Ken won’t castrate a cow on a full moon,” I told Steven Wininger, my cousin and Uncle Ken’s son. I wondered if he believed in the same thing.

“We usually look at the signs,” he replied. “Because anytime I do anything I have Papa Ken come and help, we almost always look at the signs and make sure it’s not in the heart or anything so that supposedly it won’t bleed more.”

“But, you don’t really...”

“I’m sure there’s got to be a little bit to do with-,” he pauses. “I would think the moon phases – since obviously it affects the tides, it has some effect on gravity – so you might think that something would bleed a little bit more if the gravitational pull is heavier or something. But my thought is that, if people have been using it for thousands of years and it’s not inconvenient to use it, then I’m not losing anything.”

One thing that was lost, however, was part of the farm. The farm is two hundred and twelve acres, and since Uncle Ken is a beef cattle farmer, most of that space is used for either grazing or growing hay. That didn’t matter to the politicians that wanted to build a highway through it. This happened almost fifteen years ago, and while I remember it, I was still a child and didn’t fully realize what was happening. For Uncle Ken, who nowadays has about eighty cattle on the farm, this was a real problem. Not only did it cut through one of the pastures, it

decreased the number of cattle that he could raise on the farm, which in turn decreased his profits. Steven remembers how this all started, back in the 90's.

“I want to say that Papa Ken's was the last piece of the puzzle to be sold. I remember when they came and told him: ‘Alright, you've got to sell, and this is what we're gonna give you.’ And then he said, ‘No, this is *not* what you're going to give me.’ And they said, ‘Excuse me?’, and he said, ‘I've got all the records from the newspaper where you paid the other people, and you're offering me much less.’” In the end, they managed to settle on a somewhat balanced price, but that still didn't make up for the things that building the highway destroyed. Not only did it cut through that pasture, it went completely over the old house, the house in which Uncle Ken and my mother had been raised. The house that I used to go to when I was little and sit on the front porch watching my mother cut my grandfather's hair. Uncle Ken is having a small amount of trouble keeping the farm running because of this change. Paul W. Barkley describes the consequences of the clash between economics and agriculture:

“Power is clearly being concentrated within the agricultural industry...Bigness is emerging. This nation indulges in another of its fantasies when forced to ponder the effects of this concentration of power on the organization of agriculture and the remainder of the economic system.” (Barkley 817)

Uncle Ken gets by, though. Now, he has grandchildren to whom he likes to teach farming. Even though Steven has long since moved away from the farm in Glasgow and become a professor of psychology at Western Kentucky University, he still sticks to the things he learned growing up on a farm. He has four children, and he and his wife thought it would be a wonderful idea for them to experience some of the same things Steven had growing up on a farm.

“We were like: ‘Oh, wouldn’t it be neat to have some land ourselves, and we would at least have some chickens, maybe some cows so the kids could have that experience.’ So then we bought the small farm that we have now.” They have four cows, a garden, and have gone through several generations of chickens in the six years they’ve lived there. The kids – Matthew, Luke, Will, and Claire – are taught responsibility by helping take care of the animals, along with earning a little bit of money from selling eggs. “The good thing about growing up on a farm, you grew up learning how to get things done that needed to be done, whereas if you weren’t raised on a farm you wouldn’t have learned those things,” Uncle Ken told me when I asked him if he’d always lived on a farm. I believe this is one of the reasons that those kids are some of the most respectful and hardworking children I have ever met. They know not to take things for granted, and they know the feeling of something getting done because *they* were the ones to do it.

Knowing how young Steven’s kids were when they started helping with the garden made me wonder how old Uncle Ken was. Because the farm in Glasgow was the main source of income for the family, it must have been more important for him to learn the farming techniques and traditions so that he could help. Steven was able to leave the farm to pursue his college degrees shows how the times have changed. It used to be that growing up on a farm meant staying on the farm, and it was very hard to escape that life. Uncle Ken remembers being only six years old when he started helping out with small jobs.

“They raised a lot of corn, and my first job, when I was probably six years old, I remember riding on the old team wagon and daddy and another guy picking corn by hand, and they showed me how to pop the rings – showed me how to get the horses to move when they got ready to pick. They would pick in one area then have you pop the rings and move up when they were ready for another.” Of course the farm was a lot different back then, and has gone through many

changes since. Uncle Ken told me that people didn't have beef cattle like they do now, and maybe two to five cows on the whole farm, which were used for milk.

One thing that both Uncle Ken and Steven can agree on is that the time of year greatly affects how long they work on the farm. There's more work to do in the summer than in the winter, but it's also easier to get certain things done when all the plants are dead, like trimming the weeds around the fences. However, Uncle Ken still works longer hours than Steven does because the farm in Glasgow is bigger. He remembers working until twelve o'clock at night trying to mow all the hay and get it in. There's not as much to do in the winter for Steven and Ken, as they both told me.

"In the winter you do little odd jobs you can do inside or inside the barn, or trim the fence rows because the weeds die down in the winter, and cut the trees and cut fence posts," Uncle Ken told me. Steven only spends around twenty minutes a day outside during the winter. "Recently, with no garden, and the cattle not needing any work or anything, I mean, we may only spend around twenty minutes in terms of, by the time you feed the dogs, feed the chickens, replace their water, fill up the water for the cows, feed the cows, like I said, mainly it'd be twenty minutes."

The Wininger family has been farming for about two hundred years now, and I don't think they plan on stopping. Even though Steven has moved away, he's still teaching his kids how to farm, and the practice will be kept alive through them. Even so, I really don't think Uncle Ken will give up farming anytime soon. He once told me that when he was in school, all he would think about was being on the farm. He loves working on the farm, and I don't believe there is anything else he's rather be doing. As for Steven, just the other day I called to talk, and

his wife told me he was out working with the cows. If there's one thing that the Winger family loves, it's farming.

Bibliography

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