

# A Down to Earth Farm and Ranch Research Guide

Every ranch and farm has its unique history that can be researched and written from many different perspectives. However, finding that history can be a challenge. These are the types of questions and sources of information that researchers can use to help write the history of their farm or ranch. These questions can also be used when you make oral history interviews with family members.



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## The Land

- What soil conservation programs has the family participated in? When? Why? Where?
- When did the family begin using no-till farming methods? Who made the decision? Why? When?
- When did the family begin using GPS-based precision farming methods? Why? Where?
- What land has the family

purchased? When? Why?

- What land has the family leased? When? Why?

## The Crops

- What crop rotations have been used over the years in different fields? Why would rotations be changed?
- How many acres of each crop have been raised annually? What changes in crops have been made? Why?
- When did the family begin using chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides? Why? Where were they purchased? Where were they used?
- When did the farm begin using bio-engineered seeds? Why? Where?
- Has there been a kitchen garden? What was grown in it? Who has been responsible for it?



Photo courtesy of Cultural Images

## The Animals

- What kinds of animals have been raised on the farm? When?
- What milk products were made on the farm? Who made them, how did they make them, and when did they make them?
- What feed supplements have been used and when?
- Where have animals been bought and sold?
- Who are the veterinarians used by the family? When are they typically called?
- What animals have been slaughtered on the farm? By whom? What was done with the meat?

## The Machinery

- What machinery has the family purchased? Was it new or used? What was it used for and where?
- What machinery or equipment has the family rented? Why? What was it used for and where?
- When was the first combine and other harvesters purchased?



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- Which pieces of equipment used animals for power?
- What steam-powered equipment did the family use? Why? What was it used for?
- What equipment has the family jointly purchased with neighbors?
- When did the farm begin using gasoline-powered equipment? Who made the decision to begin using it? Why?
- What types and brands of trucks have been used? Why?
- Who has maintained the equipment? Who has repaired it?
- When was the first milking machine acquired? Who made the decision to get it? Why? Was the number of animals increased to make better use of it?

### The Home

- When was the main house built? How many bedrooms did it have?
- What were other rooms in the house originally used for? Are they used for the same purpose today?
- Where has the room used for conducting farm business been located? Why?
- What kinds of fuel have been used to heat the house?
- When did the house get electricity?
- When did the house get a telephone? Who else was on the party line?
- Has the family canned food in the kitchen?
- How have meals at harvest been different than the rest of the year?
- Who has done the laundry?

### The Buildings

- How have the location of buildings on the farm been decided?
- Who has built the buildings? Family members? Contractors?
- When was each building built? Where were the materials purchased or obtained?
- Has the family always waited until it had cash to pay for a building, or has it borrowed money?
- What have each of the buildings been used for?

### The Business

- What federal price support and marketing programs has the family participated in? When? Why?
- What federal production control programs has the family participated in? When? Why?
- When did the farm begin using a computer for record-keeping? Why? Who first learned how to use the computer?
- When did the farm or ranch begin using the Internet? How?
- When have crops been sold? How? Why? Where have they been sold?
- What cooperatives has the family participated in? Why?
- What have been the best financial years? Why?
- What have been the worst financial years? Why?
- Has the farm or ranch ever been threatened with foreclosure?
- What types of cooperative extension programs has the family participated in?

- What agricultural newspapers or publications have been subscribed to?



*Photo courtesy of Cultural Images*

### The Family, Friends and Neighbors

- Who has been the primary cook?
- Who has held off-farm or off-ranch jobs? Why? When?
- What agricultural organizations have family members joined? Who has been active in these groups?
- Who has participated in 4-H or FFA programs? When?
- How has it been decided who lives on the farm or ranch?
- Who have been the family's hired help?
- How have friends and neighbors helped with farm and ranch work?
- How have off-farm relatives helped with farm and ranch work?
- What disputes have there been with friends or neighbors? How were they resolved?
- Has the family jointly farmed or ranched with neighbors?



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- Have family ever dated or married neighbors?
- How have children helped with work?

### The Community

- Where has the family purchased groceries, clothes and vehicles?
- What schools have family members attended? How have the school locations changed over the years?
- What churches has the family attended? What activities have they been involved with? Have these activities affected farm activity?
- Have family members ever held public office? What issues did they run on?

### Tools for Research

There are probably as many tools to research agricultural history as there are tools on a farm or ranch. Some of these may be found on your farm or ranch. Others may be in the county courthouse or with the county historical society. Some might even be found in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.



### ORAL INTERVIEWS

These planned interviews with family members, longtime friends and neighbors will give you a wealth of information. For questions that you might use during an interview,

the history research questions in this first part of this bulletin.

### NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Look at your community newspapers, as well as agricultural publications such as the Capital Press. If they are not available in your community, you may find them on microfilm at the University of Oregon's Library. (Unfortunately, most newspapers and publications have not been indexed.) A web listing of the UO's collection is at: <https://library.uoregon.edu/knight/microforms-services>. You will find some online in a searchable format at the Historic Oregon Newspapers site: [oregonnews.uoregon.edu](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu).

### BUSINESS RECORDS

These are the purchases, sales and other records you've been keeping in file cabinets or boxes for years. These often have a wealth of information about the ebb and flow of life on the farm.

### EQUIPMENT, TOOLS AND VEHICLES

Identification numbers and patent numbers may help identify when an item was made, and give a clue to when your family acquired it.

### PHOTOGRAPHS

Your family may have taken many photos of your farm. Your neighbors may have taken photos, too. In addition, photos may have been taken by government agencies whose programs your family participated in. Your local historical society and the Oregon Historical Society may also have photographs of your farm or ranch.

### CENSUS RECORDS

In addition to U.S. population and agriculture census records, state and county censuses have been conducted. These will list every one living at a location, including hired help.

### JOURNALS

If you or your ancestors kept any kind of diary or journal while living on the farm and ranch, it may provide a mine of information on day-to-day life and other challenges. Some early journal keepers kept a daily record of farm-work and the weather.

### ORGANIZATIONAL RECORDS

Some of the organizations that members of your family members have been involved in may keep historic records. Minutes and scrapbooks may give glimpses of family activities.

### COUNTY RECORDS

All land transactions are recorded by the county clerk, including full sale agreements. Some marriage, birth and death records may also be recorded by the county. For a detailed listing of your county's records, go to State Archives website at <https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/records/county/Pages/county-inventories.aspx>.

### STATE RECORDS

The state's Department of Agriculture has kept records on the work of its many commissions and programs. You can find a listing of these records at <https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/records/agency/Pages/agriculture.aspx>.



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## FEDERAL GOVERNMENT RECORDS

Many of the agricultural and conservation agency records are kept by the National Archives. This includes records at the national records center in Suitland, Maryland., and the regional archives in Seattle, Washington.

## Your Farm and Ranch History Products

There are many ways to share what you know of your farm or ranch's history. Exchanging photographs at picnics and sharing stories while repairing equipment or branding are two ways. Other ways you can consider are:

### WRITING

You don't have to create a book to tell your family history. You can write shorter articles on limited topics and give them to family members as holiday gifts.

### VIDEO

You could put together videos of your photographs and oral history interviews and provide access to friends and family. Online video hosting services allow for easy storage, preservation, and sharing.

### DIGITAL STORAGE

Putting images of maps, photographs, journals, your written stories, and important family documents together is easily done now with digital storage media. Whether in a cloud-based service, external solid-state hard drive, USB drive, SD card, or other portable storage method, it is easy to both share and preserve your collection. Be sure to research the best option for your specific purpos-

es before investing in storage devices or services.

### DISPLAYS

For your next family gathering, put together a display of photographs, important family objects, and written stories. It may stimulate people to tell you more stories, or create more questions you can research.



### CREATING AN ARCHIVES

Don't forget that creating an archives of all the information you found about the farm and ranch will provide a gold mine for future family historians to easily find information.



The Oregon Century Farm and Ranch Program honors

farms and ranch families with century-long connections to the land. This nonprofit program is administered by:

Oregon Agricultural Education Foundation  
3415 Commercial St. SE  
Salem, OR 97301.

For further information call: (541) 408-5060 email [cfr@oregonfb.org](mailto:cfr@oregonfb.org) or visit <https://centuryfarm.oregonfb.org/>.



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