

Sarah S. Benson Farm (Lillian Ayres Cox Farm)

By Richard Engeman

The Lane County farm of Sarah Scott Benson was one of 354 properties inducted into the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program in 1958, its first year. Sarah “Sally” Benson (1819–1899) arrived in Oregon Territory in June 1851. A widow with four young daughters, she soon established a farmstead in the upper Willamette Valley near the confluence of the Willamette and McKenzie Rivers. In 1958, Lillian Ayres Cox was still farming forty acres of the land that her grandmother had claimed in 1851.

Sarah Scott Tandy was born in Kentucky on August 27, 1819, the daughter of Jackson and Sarah Tandy. She married Edward S. Benson in about 1838, and their first daughter, Rebecca Ann, was born in 1839. Three more girls followed: Margaret Frances in 1842, Damaris Tandy in 1846, and Mary Elizabeth in 1848, all born after the family moved to Grundy County, Missouri. Their father, Edward Benson, died in 1849 at the age of thirty-four as the family was preparing to emigrate to Oregon.

Sarah Benson and her children left Missouri on May 16, 1850, traveling on the Oregon Trail with several members of the Tandy family. They arrived in Oregon Territory after a grueling journey that had been interrupted by an aborted effort to winter-over in Mormon Utah. After reaching the Willamette Valley, members of the Tandy family began a search for suitable land, which culminated in October when they purchased or claimed land about two and a half miles north of present-day Eugene.

The farm that Sarah Benson established was in an area described by government surveyors in 1853 as “level prairie and bottom land. Soil 1st rate.” In this delta, a district that became known as Willakenzie, the channels of the nearby Willamette and McKenzie Rivers were often altered by seasonal flooding, and there were numerous sloughs, ponds, and side channels. To the south, Gillespie Butte rises a modest 200 feet above the valley floor.

The Kalapuya people had long managed the Willamette Valley’s open prairies with fire, but few of them remained in the area following the waves of malaria and other introduced diseases that had decimated the population during the 1830s. The prairie lands were a lure to emigrants, especially after the U.S. Congress passed the Oregon Donation Land Law in 1850. After the law was amended in 1853 to legitimize claims by widows, Sarah Benson legalized her farmstead of 159.94 acres at the Government Land Office in Roseburg.

Benson established the farm with her four girls, who were between about three and twelve years old, with help from neighboring settlers, including her mother and brother. One neighbor, Vincent S. McClure (1815–1893), had moved to Lane County in 1853 with his wife and four children. Following the death of his wife in 1858, he married Sarah Benson in 1859; the couple had one child, who died shortly after birth in about 1860. Two of Sarah’s children also died young: Rebecca Ann in 1856 and Margaret Frances in 1858. Her new husband served one term in the Oregon legislature in 1862.

Benson’s remaining children also married into neighboring families. In 1869, Mary Elizabeth married Palmer H. Ayres (1848–1919), who had arrived in Oregon with his parents in 1864. In 1874, Damaris Tandy married Marcellus Gillespie, son of a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Jacob Gillespie.

One of the nine children of Mary and Palmer Ayres was Lillian “Lily” Damaris (1889–1983), who married Harve S. Cox in 1913; they had no children. Harve died in 1953, and Lily continued to farm on 40 acres of her grandmother’s farmstead. In 1958, she applied for the new Oregon Century Farm designation.

When Lily Damaris died in 1983, her obituary noted that she had “lived out her life as a farmer’s wife on her parent’s 40-acre land grant.” The farmland, north of Ayres Road, is now a suburban residential area of Eugene.

Sources

Lillian Ayres Cox Farm. Oregon Century Farm and Ranch Application. Oregon Century Farm and Ranch Program, Oregon State University. "CFR0154" Oregon Digital.

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