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A rare breed Morgan County woman inducted into Indiana Livestock Breeders Hall of Fame

By Andrew Crowley | acrowley@reporter-times.com Aug 15, 2018



Ruth Watson (center) is surrounded by family last Sunday following the official ceremony honoring her as an inductee the Indiana Livestock Breeders Association Hall of Fame. Four generations of family were on hand for the festivities, including (from left) Steve, Grant, Dawn and Stu Watson, Nick and Carter Pruet, Mike Watson, Ruth, Julia Wayman, and Riggin, Amanda, Royston, Clay and Ron Pruet. Not present were Desirea and Olivia Watson and Reeves Pruet. Photo courtesy of Hoosier Hampshires.

MOORESVILLE

Most drivers passing by on West Greencastle Road west of Mooresville won't pay it any mind. Their eyes might drift from the road in front of them to the black and gold sign with the name Watson on it, which includes a black and white pig seeming to grow out of the left side of the "W."

To the lay person, Watson farms might seem ordinary, a disservice to a place that is the birthplace of champions and the home of Ruth Watson, who, along with her late husband George, has raised champion Hampshire hogs for decades.

The breed, known for its erect ears and black bodies with white bands, is thought to originate in England, and the Watsons' work with the breed is well documented throughout the state and the country. In fact, the family's success with Hampshires is so well known, Ruth — the 87-year-old matriarch of the family — was recently honored for her dedication to the breeding industry.

On Sunday, Aug. 5, Ruth was inducted in the Indiana Livestock Breeders Hall of Fame at the 2018 Indiana State Fair. She is the first woman ever singled out for the honor, and her portrait will now hang alongside other honorees at Purdue University's College of Agriculture.

The daughter of a farmer, born and raised in rural Morgan County, Ruth has spent her whole life involved in agriculture. Ruth graduated Monrovia High School in 1949 and married George — who passed away in 2004 — in 1950. She has lived on the farm for 68 years. She served as coordinator of the Monroe-Gregg 4-H Club for 25 years. She herself was a 10-year member of 4-H, as were her children and grandchildren.

"My oldest great-grandson is in 4-H now, and of course, there's four more to come," Ruth said.

Her sons show hogs at breeding shows, and her grandsons have earned accolades at the Indiana State Fair.

"She's enjoyed some success in the family," said her son Steve Watson, wryly understating the magnitude of her work.

Ruth has been involved in a number of organizations related to swine, and it was at an industry conference in Louisville that she learned she was going to be inducted in the hall of fame.

"I about fell off of the bleachers," Ruth said. "I think a young lady from West Lafayette, she got ahold of my kids, and they kept it a secret. I guess they knew I wouldn't be too cooperative. I'm getting to that age where I'm getting kind of contrary."

Her family didn't let the cat out of the bag until recently that she was being inducted into the hall of fame.

"Obviously, we were very proud and excited, and we knew that it would really be kind of a good one to pull over on her," Steve said. "We were looking forward to it, being able to let her know."

Steve said his mother has two qualities that make her an excellent hog breeder.

"First of all, she's relentless and patient. ... You have to be patient to be able to deal with difficulties — and keep trying," Steve said.

Hampshire hogs are known as difficult to breed.

"People think they're hard to breed; they don't do a good job of farrowing," Steve said. "They sometimes have structural problems, but we got along just fine, despite all the difficulties."

Steve compares the family's love of the breed to the loyalty others have for Chevys or Fords.

Ruth continues to raise show hogs on the family farm along the northern edge of Morgan County, and though she lives alone at the farm, her sons and grandsons assist with the process.

"I get to take care of the farrowing house, which is where the babies are born. Sometimes it can be a 24-hour-a-day job," Ruth said. "In fact, during the county fair, I had one night where I ate my supper at 12:30 (a.m.) Sometimes, you don't have any hitches in the operation, sometimes you do. You have to take the bitter with the sweet."

During farrowing season, when sows give birth, Ruth has a monitor set up in her living room to keep an eye on the animals, which includes a camera that's trained on a sow that is close to giving birth.

"Rarely do they have them on the date they're supposed to, but they'll be within two to three days," Ruth said.

She describes her role as the troubleshooter and caretaker of the baby pigs. If it's something she can't handle, she'll let her sons know when they stop by after their day jobs. After all, Hampshires are a part of who they are.

"I took a different path for a while. When I had my boys, they wanted to show in 4-H and that's when I got back involved and have been pretty much ever since. And especially after my father's passing, I've been much heavier involved," Steve said. "My boys have both helped, and one son in particular is really involved, and so it just kind of gets in your blood. You enjoy the challenge and quite honestly, the competition. It's fun to compete."

Armed with a flashlight and a pistol, she sometimes she has to go out to the farrowing house in the middle of the night to take a look at the animals or give them attention. And oftentimes, she's there a while.

"The boys insist I carry a cell phone in my pocket all the time in case I get down in the snow. When I go out in the middle of the night, I've got my pistol and my flashlight, and the farrowing house is heated," Ruth said. "I have a room, I have a bathroom in there, and I have a refrigerator. That part's nice, and I can spend time there, sometimes I spend hours. In the January farrowing, I'm there more than the house."

These days, the Watson farm raises pigs for competition, and their animals clean up at shows. The farm's office is filled with awards from around the state and around the country. That's something in which Ruth takes pride.

"You couldn't be happier, especially when they've bought a pig and they've had high hopes. It's very rewarding when that happens," Ruth said. "But you've got to get them in good hands, someone who feeds well, takes care of them well and knows what they're doing."

Ruth and the rest of the Watson clan clearly know what they're doing, and Ruth's portrait, now hanging at Purdue, will forever serve as testimony to the family's legacy.

To see the list of Indiana Livestock Breeders Association Hall of Fame honorees, see ag.purdue.edu/ansc/ilba/Pages/default.aspx.

For more information about Watson farm, call 317-372-2725 or visit [facebook.com/watsonhampshires/](https://www.facebook.com/watsonhampshires/).

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