

Wilmot farmer's granddaughter adapts to field

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Bicoastal internet marketer returned to preserve legacy

By [Stephen Steed](#)



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Mary Blackmon took control of the family farm at Wilmot in 2008, adding agriculture to a successful internet marketing career, in a town with no internet access.



Mary Blackmon confers with her father, Charles (left), and farm manager Larry Williams at a stand of corn on Green Delta Farms at Wilmot.

WILMOT -- Given a second and, likely, last chance at keeping her grandfather's farm in the family, Mary Blackmon took a leap of faith.

"It's the most daunting thing I'd ever done, by far," Blackmon, 49, said recently from a comfortable home just south of Wilmot (Ashley County), where her maternal grandfather, Garrard Mountjoy, started one of the first large-scale rice operations in the area in the 1950s.

It's a homestead far removed from the jet-set sort of life Blackmon lived for some 20 years, with frequent flights between New York and Los Angeles, and occasional trips to Atlanta, as part of a marketing career that took off in the early days of the internet.

While living in New York, in 2002, she founded spa-addicts.com, a marketing website devoted to spas across the nation. In 2005, she moved the operation to Los Angeles, where she also worked for *Wired* magazine and other internet efforts, including those at Walt Disney Co.

Garrard Mountjoy died in 1996, at 90, leaving some 3,500 acres of farmland, a fraction of what he'd amassed over a lifetime. His brother, Kimball, ran that farm and another 3,500 acres of his own. Mary's mother, Mary Ann Blackmon, did the books for both farming operations.

Mary Blackmon declined an opportunity then to take over the farm. "I just wasn't ready to do it," she said. "It was the 'wild, wild west' days of the internet, and I rode that wave until after Mom passed in 2002."

Some six years later, in 2008, Kimball Mountjoy was ready to retire.

Without a family member stepping in, the last of the farmland owned by three generations of Mountjoys would be sold.

This time, the farmer's granddaughter came home to a farm she'd visited often while growing up.

"Dad gave me a tour of the farm, pointing out all the things that had to be fixed, things that had to be done," Blackmon said. "I decided for sure I wanted to keep it, but there was really no one to run it."

Blackmon packed up her bags and moved from Beverly Hills, determined to be the one to run, and improve, the farm. Her brother, Doug, now a physician with the Department of Veterans Affairs in Atlanta, also helps with the farm's bookkeeping.

"I had a very interesting five years, trying to put everything together again," she said. "I was 45 minutes away from a fresh piece of fruit. Strange sounds came at night. There was always a beaver dam to break up, a machine that would break down or the weather to deal with."

And, ironically, for someone so tied to the internet, there was no internet service in Wilmot.

She sought advice from farmers throughout an area where the Mountjoy name was still remembered -- even revered -- or she had those farmers visit her place. She also worked with county agriculture agents from Arkansas and Louisiana, because her farm spans both states.

With rare exception, she was dealt with cordially and fairly, she said.

"I had to humble myself," she said. "And it wasn't a false humility. As you might guess, I really didn't know a thing about what I was getting into."

EFFORT = OPPORTUNITY

Blackmon was born in Little Rock and raised in Lake Village, where her father, Charles Blackmon, was a doctor in family practice. After seven years, the Blackmons moved to Monroe, La., where she graduated from the private River Oaks School in 1985. Blackmon studied English literature at Tulane University before embarking on her bicoastal marketing career.

Her old high school invited her to speak at commencement ceremonies earlier this month. Her basic message: "Effort brings opportunity."

Her first challenge was to make livable a house that had been vacant for a few years. "It was a massive cleanup," Blackmon said. "The original floors had to be replaced, and we leveled it as best we could."

A few hundred yards from the banks of Bayou Bartholomew, the house was built on land Garrard Mountjoy had cleared of timber for the cultivation of rice.

By 1952, Mountjoy, with a degree in electrical engineering from Washington University in St. Louis, had already had a legendary career in the early days of radio and television. He had some 150 patents under his name, primarily while working in New York for the forerunners of Baldwin Electronics and for the Radio Corporation of America, better known as RCA.

In Little Rock, he was Baldwin's chief scientist. His wife, Mary Kimball Mountjoy, was president of the Fine Arts Society in the 1950s and a leader in the establishment of the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock.

She, too, came from an Arkansas version of the landed gentry: her father, Phineas Kimball, and his brother, Adolphus, owned some 17,000 acres of timberland in southeast Arkansas and worked together on the railroad in Arkansas City (Desha County). In 1894, the Kimball brothers were awarded a patent for a kiln to dry timber.

Garrard Mountjoy, in his 70s, built a foundry behind his home and began sculpting bronze works of art, using a 5,700-year-old process called "lost-wax casting." His works centered on the cowboy life of the Old West and were exhibited in galleries across the nation.

"He really was a Renaissance man," Blackmon said. "There wasn't anything he couldn't do."

Mary Kimball Mountjoy, meanwhile, held art classes in the home for children in the area.

Blackmon found some of those children's paintings -- and original maps of the area dating to the 1800s -- in the home's attic. "The attic, and the attic's attic, were these great repositories of my grandparents' lives here," Blackmon said.

GREEN DELTA FARMS

When Blackmon arrived on the Mountjoy farm in 2009, the land had been leased out to several farmers, some better at the vocation than others, she said. She began reworking the leases.

"This is when I really developed a respect for farmers," she said. "They're taken for granted. Agriculture is taken for granted. Farmers have to be educated, if not formally, in so many facets of life."

She found a farm manager to oversee the operations.

That farm manager, Larry Williams, a Brinkley native, is still on the job after seven years.

He primarily grows field corn, rice and soybeans on the Mountjoy-Blackmon farm, now officially called Green Delta Farms. Wheat sometimes is planted as a cover crop.

While giving a tour of the farm, Williams pointed to piles of trash, some 10 feet high and many yards wide, left behind by floods in early 2016. Debris is still being collected.

"We had trash cans floating down here from Wilmot, five miles away," he said.

'ALWAYS UP TO THE WEATHER'

Roads were washed out, and some 400 acres of crops were lost for the entire growing season, Williams said. "It doesn't matter how good a job you do, it's always up to the weather and the good Lord," he said. "I've quit worrying about things I can't control."

He credited Blackmon for bringing a more environmentally friendly approach to the farm.

"She has invested heavily in the operation," he said. "Had she not done that, you and I wouldn't be sitting here today, talking about this farm."

Williams said Blackmon paid to put in new wells and more drainage pipes. She also paid, at a cost of \$200 to \$500 an acre, for the precision-leveling of almost every field.

"We can irrigate everything on the farm now but for a couple hundred acres," he said. "The leveling is going to help with better draining. These fields are going to be more productive now, for the benefit of all of us."

There will be a move eventually, he said, to grow more crops that can be certified organic.

After stabilizing the farm, Blackmon in 2011 moved back to Atlanta, where she developed a new website, farmstarliving.com.

A portion of the site includes profiles of farmers such as Williams.

Blackmon said Williams was the inspiration behind the written tributes. Other aspects of the website are devoted to the farm-to-table movement, featuring restaurants that focus on food from local farmers, and to agri-tourism.

"Taking over the farm and trying to make it a success has been the most gratifying, most heartfelt, most heart-expanding experience I could ever have," she said. "Everything I've done is to honor their [her grandparents'] memory, to preserve it."