

Waverly FFA Chapter Founding Member

Francis Vannoy

On December 3, 1929, twenty-nine students of the Waverly High School Smith-Hughes Vocational Agriculture Class gathered to sign a charter that organized the Waverly Chapter, Nebraska Association of the Future Farmers of America. The Waverly Chapter became one of the first chapters in the state. Additionally, the charter was signed by the first National FFA President, Leslie N. Applegate (New Jersey) and Secretary, Don Godsey (Colorado) as well as the first Nebraska President, Justin Hearne and Secretary, Irving Wilkens.

This group of boys grew up during the 1920's, a time of a severely depressed agricultural economy. They had just witnessed "Black Friday" the day that the Stock Market crashed and all of America fell into The Great Depression. Little did they know that during the next few years, the rains would stop, the winds would blow and the Great Plains would wither in the Dust Bowl. Yet during these difficult times, these young men would dedicate themselves to an organization that would better themselves, agriculture and the country.



Patches that were presented to Francis Vannoy as a Waverly Student and FFA member.

Francis Vannoy's daughters Patti and Feya tell his story

“Francis Vannoy was born into a farming family in 1915 near Prairie Home, NE. He was the oldest son, followed by 4 daughters and then 2 more sons. He completed his primary education at country school in May of 1929. Like other farm boys across the country, he was attracted to attend Waverly High School because the school offered Smith-Hughes Vocational Agriculture.” The Smith-Hughes program was the result of legislation in 1917 that provided federal funds for local school districts to attract rural students to attend and achieve a high school education.



Francis growing up on the family farm near Prairie Home, NE

“My dad quickly demonstrated his leadership in school. He achieved the Nebraska State Farmer Degree in 1932 and won second place in the State FFA Speaking Contest. He was elected chapter FFA president, Class of 1933 president and was named class Valedictorian. He graduated from Waverly High in 1933 and he was headed to college with a scholarship. However, his father became ill and was unable to operate the farm. As the oldest child in the family, Dad took the reins and managed the daily running of the family farm for the next few years.”



Francis was president of the Waverly Class of 1933

“Times were tough, so he ‘rode the rails’ for a while (kind of like a hobo) to try to make extra money. The young men would go from town to town and line up in the early morning and hope to be chosen to unload coal from railroad cars, by hand, with a shovel. They got paid by the ton (a pittance).”

“In 1938 he married Clara Welsh, who was born in Westerville, NE, and was living in Sargent, NE at the time. Clara just happened to be best friends with one of his sisters. The young couple moved to Burchard, NE, where

they farmed for a few years. In 1941 they moved to Buttonwillow, CA (near Bakersfield) in hopes of becoming more prosperous.”

“Their first daughter, Freya was born in 1943. The baby was just a few weeks old when they were called back to Nebraska. His father was kicked in the chest by a horse and was seriously injured. His mother was on the farm with his two young brothers and needed help. His mother and father eventually gave up farming because of his father’s health and moved into Lincoln.”



Francis as a farmer during the 1940’s

“The family then moved to Adams, NE, where they operated a dairy farm and also raised corn and sorghum. Mom recalled the time on the dairy farm many years later: ‘That was when I learned what hard work was. I had to wash the milking machines every morning and sterilize big milk cans every day. I drove the tractor and helped load big bales of hay and did anything else that needed to be done, besides raising chickens, planting a big garden and taking care of a baby.’”

“During WW II Dad was granted a farmer’s deferment because the nation needed farmers to produce food for the war effort. He probably wouldn’t have been accepted into military service because he had scoliosis as a child and spent one complete year in a full body cast.”

“I was born in Lincoln, NE in 1947 and spent the first 5 years of my life at the dairy farm. As a kid, the thing I remember most about the dairy farm was that the barn had electricity to run the milking machines and the house where we lived in did not (nor indoor plumbing).”

“Our family then moved into the city of Lincoln, NE for about 5 years. Mom worked hard with her husband and sacrificed for the benefit of the family.”

“In 1958, our family moved to Lancaster, CA, where Dad was employed by the US Post Office until 1974 when he had a heart attack and was forced to retire on disability. The family spent every summer vacation traveling back to Nebraska to visit his family and friends and for family reunion picnics. After us girls were grown, they actually moved back to Nebraska twice, to be near family, but Mom wanted to be near their daughters, so they moved back to California.”



Francis and Clara Vannoy in retirement

“Dad always had a large vegetable garden and lots of flowers in his yard. He died in the spring of 1999, at age 83, in Lancaster, while working in his garden. Mom died in 2014 at the age of 94. They are both buried at Rosehill Cemetery in Waverly, NE.”

