



## Evermore | Record Breaker, Legacy Maker

Allison Hirth, Narrator: This is Record Breaker, Legacy Maker, by Glenys Young.

(Music)

Hirth: In many ways, Francis Wuensche was a normal girl who did the best she could under a tough set of circumstances. In other ways, this smart woman took advantage of the few moments when life offered her a hand up.

Perhaps on the surface her story isn't so different from many other women of her generation, the so-called Greatest Generation. But the downstream effects of Francis' story set it apart. You see, out of this one woman's self-sacrifice, grit and drive to succeed has come a family legacy unlike any other.

Francis Wuensche was a trailblazer. The path she forged led more than 100 of her relatives to Texas Tech, which gave her the opportunity to grow beyond the cotton fields of her early life. Her footsteps resulted in the Wuensche family's Guinness World Record for the most graduates from the same university.

But this isn't just Francis' story. It's also the story of a man from equally tough circumstances who had begun to thrive in his own right – a man who then reached back to help someone else do the same.

His name was Rayburn Hahn. And without him, there would be no Wuensche legacy.

The Wuensches of Wilson

The connection between Francis and Rayburn was forged before they were even born. Their mothers were sisters who became pregnant at nearly the same time. Rayburn entered the world on Aug. 9, 1925, and his cousin Francis 26 days later, on Sept. 4.

Rayburn would tell you he grew up on the poor side of a poor town. Job opportunities were scarce for his father, but in Wilson, a community of German cotton farmers that had been founded only 13 years earlier, nearly everyone was in the same boat. And thanks to intermarriage, many were in the same family.

Rayburn grew up surrounded by cousins of varying degrees, but one of the closest was Francis. Because they were the same age, and in a small school, they were in the same class year after year. Outside of school, they played together and helped pick cotton on the farm.

But in the Depression, the carefree days of youth were short-lived.

At age 14, Francis dropped out of Wilson High School in 1939, having finished only her first year. She had just four courses on her transcript: English, algebra, ancient history and homemaking.

In those days, it was not at all unusual for children from farming families to drop out of school early and take on a larger role in the family business. Nor was it unusual for women to drop out of school to get married and start a family. Despite evolving attitudes, education was still perceived as the realm of men.

Accordingly, Rayburn continued on and earned his diploma in 1942, and then he, too, went back to work on the farm. The cousins were doing exactly what their small-town upbringing had trained them to do.

Then, in 1943, their small world imploded.

#### Going Their Separate Ways

World War II had been raging in Europe for four years already, so on Rayburn's 18th birthday, he registered for the draft. In short order, he found himself in the U.S. Navy, serving on a supply ship based in Hawaii. His 3,400 miles from Wilson might as well have been light-years.

"I don't believe he ever saw any action – though it was always a possibility – but he was able to visit many U.S. and foreign cities during his service," says his son, Rayburn Hahn Jr. "In addition, he had many shipmates who were probably all from much larger hometowns, so I'm sure he was able to find out about their lives and plans. I think those experiences opened his eyes to the possibilities that lay beyond his small hometown."

Back on the farm, Francis' world was also being turned upside down. On Oct. 27, 1943, her mother died of breast cancer at age 48. Francis' three older siblings had already left home. Her brother, Martin, was 13 and her sister, Darlene, was 9. Still farming just to keep the family afloat, their father could neither care for them himself nor hire someone to do it. So, at 18 years old, Francis found herself picking cotton and running the household.

Her situation went unchanged for the next six years.

#### A Fresh Start

After the war ended, Rayburn was discharged from the Navy and returned home to Wilson. But having seen so much of the world, he found it hard to go back to a life of farming.

Luckily, he had another option. Thanks to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, Rayburn had the opportunity to go to college, all expenses paid. He had probably never even considered college before that, because it was so far out of reach.

Rayburn enrolled at Texas Technological College, which was only 26 miles away, and arrived for the first time in the fall of 1946. He got involved with student groups on campus, becoming the treasurer for the Lutheran service organization Gamma Delta and joining the International Relations Club, a German language and culture club called Liederkrantz, the Pre-Law Club and the Tech Accounting Society. He was also an avid student, double majoring in government and accounting on his way to two bachelor's degrees in three and a half years, followed by a master's degree.

Some young men might have broken away from the family at that point. Some would have seen their upbringing as a hindrance or perceived their relatives as pulling them back into the world they were trying to escape.

That wasn't Rayburn.

Instead of brushing the dust off his boots and moving on, he offered his favorite cousin a chance to do the same. Actually, "offer" is a bit of a stretch – he told Francis she didn't have a choice in the matter; she was going to college.

With her ongoing duties at home, she wasn't able to drop everything and go immediately. But by the fall of 1949, her younger siblings were six years older, too. Now 19 and 15, they were old enough to take care of themselves, or at least not need as much of Francis' time. So at age 24, she took a leap.

“It may have been as simple as Rayburn saying, ‘I am going to Texas Tech and I will give you a ride if you want,’ but somehow, he convinced her,” explains Francis’ son, Derek Holden.

It’s unclear how Francis was able to enroll since she didn’t finish high school. It’s also unclear how she was able to pay for her education. But somehow, Francis overcame both obstacles. She enrolled at Texas Tech, and Rayburn, adamant to keep her enrolled, drove her back and forth to campus, 26 miles each way, every day.

“I talked with Aunt Francis sometime around 2010 about her experiences with Daddy and Texas Tech, and I recall her saying that Daddy told her it wasn’t optional – she had to go,” Hahn Jr. recalls. “And though I never had the chance to talk with him about it before he died, I’m pretty sure I know why.

“Once the war was over and he was back home, I believe he viewed Texas Tech as his portal to a potentially bigger life than he could’ve ever had in Wilson. And he apparently wanted his cousin Francis, who had always been with him in school, to not miss out on those chances as well.”

### New Opportunities

College life presented Francis a wealth of social opportunities she hadn’t previously enjoyed – and with her cousin’s presence, she was able to enjoy them even more. In her first year on campus, she joined Gamma Delta with Rayburn, becoming the chapter’s secretary.

“I heard many times over the years that Daddy and Aunt Francis were able to use each other as companions to go to social functions,” Hahn Jr. recalls. “It’s so much better to attend things with a friend – or in this case, a cousin – than going by yourself.

“And it probably helped my dad’s reputation to be seen with Francis, who was – by any measure – an awe-inspiring beauty.”

Indeed, college changed nearly everything for Francis and Rayburn.

Francis graduated in May 1953 with her bachelor’s degree in zoology. She later met and married Douglas Holden, and they went on to own a cattle farm in Arkansas. After Francis’ sister, Darlene, died of breast cancer, the Holdens moved to Colleyville to raise her children alongside theirs.

There, Francis turned her lifelong passion for gardening into a career. She opened a plant maintenance service, Designer Greens by Francis, where she thrived until her retirement at age 82. Francis passed away in February 2019 at the age of 93.

Rayburn earned his bachelor’s degrees in 1949 and his master’s degree in accounting in 1951. Then the WWII sailor entered the U.S. Air Force to serve in the Korean War as a 2nd Lieutenant. When the Air Force found out about his accounting degree, he was given a desk job at the Auditor General’s Office in Tokyo. There, he met Elizabeth Anne Valhala, a comptometer operator from Detroit who was in Tokyo with the Army Civilian Group. They were married in November 1953.

After the war, Rayburn returned to Texas Tech to earn a master’s degree in business administration in 1955 and then his CPA certificate. He and Elizabeth settled in Dallas, where he became a partner in an accounting firm and was listed in four separate editions of Who’s Who in the South and Southwest. Rayburn passed away in March 1979 at the age of 53.

“If World War II hadn’t happened, my dad might not have had the chance to see the world beyond Wilson,” Hahn Jr. reflects, “which means he probably wouldn’t have been so driven to do everything else.”

The Wuensches of Texas Tech

Counting all those in the direct Wuensche bloodline and their spouses, there are now 109 family members who have attended Texas Tech. Three are currently enrolled and six more are planning to attend within the next three years.

“I believe that Francis going to Texas Tech ended up being a huge influence on the Wuensche side of the family,” Hahn Jr. says. “Not only did she help inspire the next generation of Wuensches and Holdens to go to college, but she also showed that going to college wasn’t just for men, which was an important step back in those days.”

In 2022, the Wuensches were named the Guinness World Record holders for the family with the greatest number of graduates from one university. While solidifying Francis’ place in history, the world record is nevertheless incomplete. You see, it omits one of the key players.

Because Francis and Rayburn were related through their mothers, Rayburn is not a Wuensche. As such, his name does not appear on that list – but now you know the story of how the family legacy began and the vital role he played in it.

It started with one young man who left home, saw the world and returned wanting new opportunities. It started with one young woman who seized the chance she was offered. It started with Rayburn and Francis.

But it didn’t end with them.

“World War II wasn’t a good thing,” Hahn Jr. notes. “But a major side effect of it was that many Hahns, Wuensches and Holdens were able to forge much better lives for themselves. And Texas Tech University was the portal that allowed it all to happen.”

Taylor Peters, Host: THANKS FOR LISTENING TO THIS READING OF RECORD BREAKER, LEGACY MAKER. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT EVERMORE, YOU CAN VISIT [TODAY.TTU.EDU/EVERMORE](http://TODAY.TTU.EDU/EVERMORE).