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# Educator creates a lasting ag legacy

By JOSH FLINT

**W**HEN Jean Ayers was born in 1918, her parents described her as a “fragile little thing.”

Ninety years later, Jean's proven she's anything but fragile. A lifelong educator, she made a lasting contribution to the educational system when she spearheaded the creation of Illinois' Ag in the Classroom program. She remembers students' comments prompted her to pursue the program, which spread across the U.S. in 1981.

“There were some students who didn't want to admit they lived on a farm, and that's sad,” Jean recalls. “Not to mention, I kept getting what I thought were the silliest questions about farming.”

## Settling down, eventually

Jean was born June 10, 1918, in Bement, Ill. Her parents originally homesteaded in South Dakota, but came to Illinois to avoid the harsh winters. Initially, they planned to return to their South Dakota farm, but decided to begin farming in Illinois. “They said I was a fragile little thing, so they decided they better stay in Illinois,” Jean says.

When she was 10, her father died in a farming accident. After her mother remarried, Jean moved with the family to Hillsboro, where she got her first taste of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse.

Jean transferred to Wilmington's school district when World War II started. There, she taught English in fifth through eighth grade. Next, she decided to teach high school students, which required another teaching degree. Therefore, she enrolled at the University of Illinois.

After teaching a few years at Lakeview High School in Decatur, she decided to go back to U of I for her master's degree



**MASTER AT WORK:** Jean Ibendahl's teaching career has spanned every grade from first through 12th. She believes all Illinois students should understand the economics behind agriculture.

## Key Points

- Jean Ibendahl spent a lifetime educating children.
- She has spent the majority of her life living on the farm.
- Jean merged her two loves and created Ag in the Classroom.

in 1954. That year, she met her future husband, Calvin Ibendahl.

The fairy tale was put off a couple of years for Jean and Calvin. Jean was battling an infection of the esophagus. Her doctor recommended she move to a drier climate to heal. “We broke up and I went to Arizona for my health, but he pursued me,” Jean adds.

While Jean was resting up, Calvin purchased a farm in Tamaroa. Ready to begin his life as a farmer, he was missing one vital piece. “He called me up and told me how much he missed me,” Jean remembers. “I told him to come down and see me then. He got there on a Monday and married me on Wednesday.”

After marrying on Dec. 31, 1958, Jean moved back to Illinois with Calvin. “I went back to a house I'd never seen,” she adds. “He tried to describe it to me over the phone.” The house, which some call a mansion, was built by abolitionist B.G. Roots in the mid-1850s and served as a stop on the Underground Railroad in the 1860s.

That same year, Jean got back in the classroom, teaching biology at Du

Quoin High School. Around that time, she began to notice a change in how students viewed farming. “It dawned on me that my generation was long gone and no one farmed anymore,” Jean notes. “If you were a farmer, the other kids poked fun at you.”

## Retirement project

In 1974, Jean joined Illinois Agri-Women. When she became president in 1976, she remembered her frustration with students' waning interest in farming.

Jean found an opening for Ag in the Classroom in the late 1970s. The state legislature mandated students take nine hours of curriculum related to agriculture, business, industry, labor and economics as part of a new consumer education program. In the early '80s, Illinois Agri-Women conducted a survey and found half the teachers did not realize this was a requirement.

“I said to the women, ‘That's it, we've got to fill this gap.’”

Jean began calling area libraries to find materials for Ag in the Classroom. She hit pay dirt when she connected with USDA's archives in Washington. Jean remembers unloading a semi-truck full of USDA pamphlets and course materials in a one-room schoolhouse near their home in Tamaroa. Using the schoolhouse as a base of operations, Jean created a resource guide for teachers. This solved the program's biggest hurdle: getting materials in the teachers' hands.

In 1981, Ag Secretary John Block, Jean and other supporters pitched the program in Washington, which led to its adoption across the U.S.

In the 1984, Calvin retired and donated the farm to Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. For years, the two remained in their historic home, which sits on 4 acres.

Calvin and Jean moved into a Du Quoin retirement home in 2001. Calvin died in 2006. However, Jean is still going strong. In fact, she's still working on Ag in the Classroom. Currently, she's creating lesson plans on preserving potable water sources.



**THE BEGINNING:** Jean received and sorted ag materials in this one-room schoolhouse. It's named after B.G. Roots, whose estate was a stop on the Underground Railroad.