

Robert B. Wilson, Jr.  
2018 Farmer of the Year

Robert B. Wilson, Jr., whom we all know as “Bob” is the second born child and only son of Esther and Robert B Wilson, Sr. One cannot tell the story of Bob Jr. without acknowledging the life of his father. Bob Sr.

Bob Sr. was born, Robert Meade Wilson in Rocky Ford, Colorado on October 15, 1899. He was not fond of the middle name Meade, and took it upon himself to change it to “Benton” after walking past a Benton Railroad Crossing on his way to school. Thus, he became Robert Benton Wilson and started a legacy of Bentons within the Wilson Family. His son, two grandsons, three great-grandsons and a great-great grandson share the Benton name.

Bob Sr. first arrived in the Imperial valley in 1918 and then returned to Rocky Ford three years later. On January 1, 1923 he married Esther Stuntz Wilson, the daughter of a Methodist minister of whom Bob Jr. has said brought some class into Bob Sr.’s life.

After their marriage, the newlyweds briefly returned to the Imperial Valley before moving to Los Angeles where Bob Sr. worked for Knudsen Creamery Company. Unable to curb his desire to farm, they and their one-year old daughter Kathryn returned to Brawley in 1925 and Bob Sr. worked as a field manager for Farmer’s Produce Company.

On December 26, 1931 Esther and Bob Sr. welcomed their second child, Robert Benton Wilson, Jr. Bob and his older sister Kathryn (Kay) formed a special relationship based on their love and mutual respect for one another. Kay often asserts that because of the nine-year age difference she practically raised Bob and quickly adds, “Look how good he turned out!” Kay went on to attend the University of Redlands where she met husband Donald Farquhar and settled in Burbank. Through the years the siblings have formed a business partnership and have continued to remain close despite the distance separating them.

Bob attended Brawley Elementary Schools, however, school was not a high priority for young Bob, Jr., especially if the fish were biting. When he wasn’t fishing, Bob followed the produce season to work alongside his father, often missing school for weeks at a time. These times with his dad are some of Bob Jr.’s favorite memories. Having to repeat 5<sup>th</sup> grade as the cost for these adventures was a small sacrifice he gladly paid.

In 1940 Bob Sr. formed R.B. Wilson Company in Brawley growing lettuce, cotton, winter vegetables and sugar beets. Sugar beet farming was nothing new to Bob Sr., as his father, Robert Tilton Wilson, was a sugar beet grower back in Rocky Ford, shown here delivering a load of beets in 1905. It is fitting that Bob Sr., delivered the first load of sugar beets to the newly opened Holly Sugar Company’s Imperial Valley processing plant in 1948.

Upon graduation from Brawley Union High School in 1950, Bob enrolled at the University of Arizona. While at U of A, Bob majored in Entomology and roomed with Brawley Boys

Tom Garguilo, Jack Hannon and Harold Brandt. Active on campus, Bob was a member of the Theta Chi Fraternity, and the Air Force ROTC. He also hashed tables for a sorority. It wasn't his favorite job but he's commented that, "it was either hash tables or starve."

Bob completed his degree in 1954 and was commissioned into the United States Air Force as a Second Lieutenant serving at George Air Force Base. While serving, Bob would spend his leave back home in Brawley farming together with his dad until his honorable discharge and Bob Sr.'s death in 1956.

Soon after, Bob met a Brawley girl named Carol Brandt on a double date with one of his best friends. The kicker is, Carol was actually Bob's friend's date. A romance ensued and, Bob proposed to Carol in a parking lot on Balboa Island. Not the most romantic of proposal's, but sometimes, great things happen with rough beginnings!

Bob and Carol's wedding was held on May 10, 1958 at the home of Carol's parents, Leon and Dorothy Brandt. A full day of intense rain, wet chairs and a muddy aisle would not deter the young couple from their outdoor ceremony.

Bob and Carol made their home in Brawley where they raised three daughters, Dana, Shannon and Laura and a son, Ben. They enjoy having family in close proximity and have been blessed with nine grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

In the late 60's, Bob developed a love of flying and obtained a private pilot's license. Often family trips involved Bob piloting the family to Palmilla, Guaymas and Cabo San Lucas. For years, the family of six flew in a four-seat plane; the 3 girls sharing the two back seats and Ben riding on Carol's lap. Bob also made use of his pilot license by frequently checking fields from the air. Many crop rotation schedules have been changed after Bob "went up" for a look.

Traveling and Family vacations were, and are, treasured times for Bob and the rest of his crew. Hunting and fishing trips were favorites of Bob's, but his passion for the water developed as a boy boating between Newport Beach and Catalina Island with his parents. It was important to Bob to share this passion for the water with his children. Vacations at the family beach home on Mission Bay were spent teaching the kids to sail, water ski and motor a boat. There were also frequent fishing trips and the kids quickly learned that when fishing with Dad, you'd be on the water ALL DAY, no matter if the fish were biting or not. If the swells were high the boat would not turn back and seasickness resulted only in a pass to go below and nap! It's true that Bob lost a few first mates due to his intensity on the sea, but the stories are priceless. Today, the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of Wilson's continue to enjoy the beloved "Beach House" and love of the water instilled by Bob.

Bob would probably say his most memorable vacations were on the water, including when he and Carol were invited to cruise the Puget Sound with Stephen and Janet Elmore and the "men's trip" yachting from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas.

When not at the beach or on the water, vacations often included the Tom Garguilo Family. Together they traveled to Hawaii, Sun Valley and Yellowstone. One unforgettable vacation was a motor home trip with Alaska as the destination and sightseeing stops along the way. Five days later. . . the Wilson's pulled back into Brawley. It seems the motorhome provided a little *too* much togetherness.

Bob and Carol also enjoyed many trips with Bob's sister Kay and husband Don. Visiting Pennsylvania, Washington DC, the Amish Country and a special trip to Bob Sr.'s boyhood hometown in Rocky Ford, Colorado were among the favorites. In Rocky Ford the group visited the Wilson homestead and the school Bob Sr. attended.

Bob and Carol have lived as examples to their children and grandchildren. They have consistently stressed the value of hard work, education, health, unity and giving back. Bob's words resonate, "A good objective for everyone is to share what you have and what you can. Do something to better the lives of future generations. It's why we're here."

It's this philosophy that has driven Bob's involvement with the Navy League, Rotary International and his service as an Elder of the First Presbyterian Church (which he has consistently attended since birth). In the 1970s Bob served on the Board of Trustees of the Brawley Elementary School District and also traveled to Washington DC to advocate against the 160 acres proposition. He also served on the board of Rockwood Chemical from 1983-2014 and in 2016 Bob and Carol were awarded the Imperial Valley Foundation's Philanthropists of the Year as a result of many years of quietly donating to numerous Imperial Valley organizations.

For several years, Bob was an active and influential member of the California Beet Growers Association Board, eventually serving as President of District 9. In this capacity, Bob and Carol were able to combine their love of travel with their commitment to service. Much to their delight, CBGA annual meetings usually took place in San Luis Obispo, Napa Valley, San Francisco or Shell Beach. Memories of good food, antique shops, and forged friendships during these times are priceless. As a result, a lifelong friendship with Ben and Bonnie Goodwin was formed.

From the time Bob Jr., began farming with his father in 1954, R.B. Wilson Company has grown countless acres of cotton, wheat, alfalfa and sugar beets, including a world record sugar beet yield in 1998. Bob's farming practices are conservative with great diligence placed on rotation, drainage and respect of the ground and his crew. Bob Wilson is known as a fair and honest businessman and employer.

Not only is Bob Wilson honest and smart, but also he is humble and he would tell you himself that it would be remiss to mention the livelihood of R.B. Wilson Company without mentioning Art Mamer and Stan Wagner. Stan handled the accounting for Bob Sr., in the 1950s and continued for the next five decades until his retirement in 2000. Art began

working for Bob Jr., in 1964 and skillfully handled the irrigation and tractor work practices until his last paycheck in 2002. Honestly, we all know Art only really retired on paper. Stan and Art had only one way of doing things and that was the right way, “no corners cut.” The duo became extended members of the family and patiently engrained their work ethic and techniques into the practices of the third generation of Wilson farmers.

Now, there are two subjects of importance we must address when discussing Bob Wilson: his 1980 6.2 Chevy Diesel truck and, his dogs.

The grandkids lovingly referred to that Chevy truck, with the “in and out” sticker on the bumper, as “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.” Bob meticulously cared for that truck and drove it until the year 2000 putting on some 400,000 miles. In the later years, should you have had the pleasure of finding yourself behind Chitty on Highway 78 heading east in the morning or west in the afternoon, you may have experienced the dilemma of, “do I pass him or relax and ride it out?” Quite often various, local mechanics would approach family members and ask (more in the form of a plea), “When is Bob going to get rid of that truck?” The three vehicles he’s owned since have failed to live up to Chitty’s reputation.

Bob’s dogs. Bob’s love of dogs began with his childhood dog, a Boston Terrier, named Mr. Smith. Countless other canine best friends have followed but the favorites have been Alice, Fergie and Annie. Each of these dogs had their own special spot in Bob’s vehicles and in his office, sometimes taking precedence over human companions. Much to Carol’s dislike, white dog hair is prevalent in the house, in the office and in Bob’s vehicle. **But**, Bob without a dog by his side would be like his oatmeal without any raisins. The family understands this.

As an individual who was once a very strict father, Bob has softened into an almost comical and sassy grandfather. His “one-liners” are texted from one family member to the next and laughed about for days. Most of his grandchildren received driving lessons from Grandpa Bob, sadly post Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. These lessons may mostly have to do with driving but more often than not, they are lectures on life or as Grandpa calls it, “free counseling.”

As Bob so often says, “life is good.” He never takes for granted his or his family’s health or the gifts bestowed to him by his parents. He regularly reminds his children, “When you go to bed tonight, thank your grandparents.” His faith in God is strong and quiet, but is always the foremost thought in his words and actions. He is a man of deep-rooted convictions and loyalty. He sincerely knows and appreciates the blessings that life have given him. Bob Wilson can be labeled a farmer, a veteran, a fisherman, a pilot and a philanthropist, but the labels that matter most to him are HUSBAND, DAD and GRANDPA BOB. It is his family’s growth and well-being is always his primary love and concern.

