

Jack Fleming: 2012 Farmer of the Year

In 1918, a young mid-western couple laid down their roots in the Imperial Valley, and now, nearly one hundred years later, those roots are a mainstay of this community.

That pioneering couple, Herbert Andrew Fleming, Sr. born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888, and Edith Hearne Fleming born in Duquoin, Iowa in 1890, came west, met and married in Long Beach, California in 1914.

The young couple settled near Niland and Herbert began growing produce for a local company. Edith focused her skills on raising their new family as they welcomed their daughter, Hazel, in 1916. Four years later, on December 1, 1920 their first son, Jack Herbert Fleming was born. It was a good thing Jack was born in December since the small tent house they lived in had no electricity or running water. Two years later, when his brother Herbert was born in September, Edith traveled to Long Beach rather delivering a baby in the sweltering Imperial Valley heat.

Growing up in the country away from neighbors or other children, Jack and his siblings used each other as entertainment, finding plenty to keep themselves occupied on the ranch. Jack and his sister Hazel were especially close and she was instrumental in teaching him a variety of skills such as how to dress, how to waltz, how to cook and because she was a good piano player, which Jack was not, she taught him how to sing and carry a note, that in Jack's words "a lot of people can't do".

Over the years, the young Fleming Family lived at a few different ranch houses before they moved to J Street in Brawley in 1924. It was there that Jack became closer to a young boy who would become his lifelong best friend, Neal Jack. In fact, the Fleming and the Jack families had many good times together and developed a such a close bond they considered each other as family... little did

they know that two families would eventually become one.

The 300 Block of J Street where Jack spent his childhood became quite famous in Brawley. The children living in the neighborhood were from families represented primarily from the Ag industry -- growers, shippers, and seeds men. The group notoriously became known as the J STREET GANG. While researching Jack's life to write this biography, the staff was lucky to have available a DVD developed by Jack's granddaughter, in it, Jack tells stories of many activities the J Street Gang enjoyed and I can only imagine that Jack, even with his quiet ways, was one of the ring leaders. One story that just needs to be told involved a game called "Sardines". As Jack tells it, he was about in the 8th grade and the neighborhood boys AND GIRLS would hide together somewhere in the house, but it was the way they would hide, all squeezed tightly together like sardines... Let's just say Jack thought it was a nice game to play and it got him really thinking about girls.

Always the businessman, Jack learned early on how to make a buck. He figured out that the guys working at his dad's shed during melon season needed refreshments. Using chipped ice from free blocks he was able to get from the shed and he then bought a case of soda for 2 cents per bottle only to sell them for 5 cents...He had a pretty good thing going there for a young guy.

As early as 7th grade, Jack & Neal worked as sticker boys during melon season and it wasn't long before they were promoted to packers. Jack traveled with the season and worked in Phoenix, Somerton and Imperial Valley. Although he worked other odd jobs, packing cantaloupes was his main source of income and he made enough money to buy clothes to last the school year and have a good vacation.

High school years found Jack being Mr. Involved. He was a Freshman Yell Leader and his sophomore year was with the Varsity Yell Squad. He was Student Body Treasurer one year, Vice-President of his class and ultimately Student Body President his senior year. Not only was

he a politician, he was also an athlete playing tennis, basketball and softball which was a big deal in the Imperial Valley at the time and Jack would play 6 nights a week on various leagues. As for grades...quoting Jack he was “not good at grades because he was always goofing off. A “C” was a good grade for him.”

Jack worked hard as a young boy and was able to buy himself a 1929 Buick Roadster when he was in high school. Now, it wasn't a new car, it was about 7 or 8 years old when he got it, but it was his. He left the car in Imperial Valley when he went off to the Coast Guard only to return and find that his dad had cut off the back of the car and made it into a trap wagon. Completely broke his heart!

After his military service was complete, Jack returned to enroll in Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. It was that summer when he spent some time with his good friend Neal at the Jack's house in Santa Monica that he noticed that Neal's “skinny little” sister had grown up. He and Eunice went on their first date that summer, a double date with Neal and Virgene, who later became Mrs. Jack. From then on, the two couples Jack & Eunice and Neal & Virgene were always together.

Jack & Eunice were married on December 27, 1945 in Brawley. After the wedding, Jack returned to Cal Poly and Eunice went to work. Jack finished Cal Poly in 3 ½ years... (I guess your grades got a little better by then) and he graduated in 1950 with a degree in Vegetable Production.

The 1950s could be probably be considered the decade of Jack's finest accomplishments for it was during this time that his four children were born. First came Larry, who according to Jack came so fast that he almost had to deliver him. Next was Jaki, followed by Robert and then Caroline. Years later, after the kids were already grown, Jack & Eunice were invited to a 50s themed party at the Country Club where Eunice dressed up with a pillow underneath her dress because she was always pregnant in the 50s.

It was also during the 1950s that Jack's career in farming really took off. He started farming after college and became the first grower in Imperial Valley for the Admiral label. He later took a position with Jack Brothers & McBurney where he helped Mr. Jack with produce sales.

In 1955, Jack and his now brother-in-law/best friend Neal formed Fleming & Jack that Jack managed. At the same time, Jack worked for a gentleman named Robert Brown who he ultimately bought the property where his business office still sits. Jack's typical day was up at 4 a.m. and he usually didn't arrive back to the house until well after dark.

In 1985 Jack's sons Larry & Robert and son-in-law Roy Motter joined together to form Spruce Farms. Their company continues to operate a 3,000 acre diversified family farm growing a variety of products including wheat, alfalfa, sugar beets, lettuce and onions. Grandson Andrew, Robert's son recently joined the company bringing three generations of Fleming men working together. Jack continued working with his boys until his retirement in 1992, although, they can still count on his input working as a consultant for the company.

Retirement brought opportunities to travel the world with his wife and further explore his passion for art. Rather than taking a lot of photos during their travels, Jack would come home and paint a memory of their trip. His work has been exhibited in many different galleries. Tying his two loves of travel and art together, rather than photos of their trips, Jack would instead return home and paint a picture of his travels. His home is filled with dozens of memories painted by his own hand.

In 2011, Jack's wife, Eunice, who he was married to for 64 years passed away. Theirs was a story of true love and respect. Jack still resides in the house they built together in 1976 overlooking Cattle Call Bluff and I'm sure he sees pieces of Eunice in their 4 children,

11 grandchildren and 9 great grandchildren every day.

Jack's lifetime commitment to our community is nothing less than inspiring. He has served on the Brawley Elementary School District Board of Trustees, Brawley Little League, Imperial County March of Dimes, North County Coalition for the Arts, Brawley Boys & Girls Club and is not only active but extremely dedicated to the Pioneers Museum being an instrumental part of the Ag & Family History Exhibits.

Using his expertise as a successful farmer, Jack has served the farming community on the California Beet Growers Association for over 30 years, American Sugar Beet Growers Association, Agricultural Technical Advisory Committee for Fruits & Vegetables appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, President of the Produce Men's Club, Imperial Sweet Onion Commission, Imperial Valley Vegetable Growers Association, Curly Top Virus Control Board and the California Regional Water Quality Control Board.