

## **Neal Jack: 2011 Farmer of the Year**

In 1911, a quiet, yet industrious young man left Texas to make a life for himself in the underdeveloped Imperial Valley selling produce. For nine years his route to Los Angeles and back kept coin in his pocket and allowed him to begin farming. He was an honest man, full of integrity and ingenuity. When hard times hit, meeting payroll meant convincing east coast buyers to front him money for the rail car of melons they had ordered. He always made payroll and at the end of the month he made sure his bills were paid.

Produce buyers were plentiful in the 1920's, but single teachers were rare and highly prized. One teacher in particular caught his eye, she was a city girl, born and raised in Los Angeles, not far from USC where she walked to college each day until graduation.

Carol agreed to the earnest proposal of Earl Jack, and they married in 1920. Together, Earl and Carol, along with his brothers, Alvin and Clyde, and Alex McBurney started Jack Bros. & McBurney. They joined with other farmers at the Planter's Hotel on Main Street and formed Western Growers Association. Jack Brothers is the only member of that founding group of farmers still involved with Western Growers.

In 1923, the Jacks had their first child, a son, Neal. Soon a younger daughter, Eunice, completed their family. They lived on the bustling J Street neighborhood in Brawley that was filled with enough boys to man two opposing football teams. And play they did. Neighbors such as Jack and Herb Fleming, George Jones, Sherm Smith and many others filled many years of a happy, carefree childhood.

Neal wasn't gifted at many sports, but he could play football. Ol' knothead, an endearing name written across Neal Jack's football helmet for a concussion he took for the team, made all conference in high school. On campus, he and Marvin Lewis traded years being class president in BUHS, first Neal, than Marvin, then Neal again.

His high school summers were spent in Griggs, Idaho, in the fields picking peas and later in his dad's packing sheds. Hours were long, but it always felt like a vacation in the beautiful Idaho valley, especially as his parents allowed him to take his buddy, Herb Fleming. When not working, it was trout fishing followed by more football.

The summer he graduated from high school, he became a fruit tramp, following the melons to Mendota, Firebaugh and points north. "Money was good in the melons back then. If you were good, you could make a lot of money packing melons. Of course, I had been packing for my dad since I was in the 6th grade, so I made enough money that summer to pay for my first year at college."

It was his mother's alma mater, USC, that he attended. But before the first semester was up, on December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese. He remembers sitting in his fraternity with his friends. They all knew they were going to war; it was just a matter of which service to join.

Bad eyesight kept the choice out of his hands; the government put Neal in the Army. His eyes were good enough for them. His basic training with the 6th Army field battalion meant training with mules on Pikes Peak, Colorado. They spent months hiking all over the Rocky Mountains. Eventually, the Army decided the mules weren't a great idea and disbanded the pack. His unit was retrained and then shipped to France.

There he served under General George Patton who did not follow any of the army rule books on how to win and stay alive. Patton's idea to win and stay alive was to continue advancing. It worked. They marched through France, Germany and Austria. Once, during combat, his commanding officer refused to take an island full of Germans. After they arrested him, they asked this Brawleyite if he would go. He said yes and received a field commission. With that, he went from an enlisted man to an officer and eventually became a

2nd lieutenant.

“I didn’t read the fine print on that commission,” he later recalled. “When they sent everyone else home, I still had another year in Europe. I ended up being a guard during the Nuremburg trials. We weren’t to let Goebbels and the other Nazi leaders commit suicide. It also meant that I was recalled for the Korean War. I spent that time in Alaska, with my wife and one year old daughter. We were charged with watching China and Russia for any signs of invasion. We had freezing temperatures. I remember it being 43 degrees below zero. Virgene wouldn’t let our daughter, Barbara, play outside if it got down to zero. I sometimes wondered about the Army’s intelligence. I lived below sea level my whole life and they train me atop the Rockies. Then they take me, who’s acclimated to scorching hot summers, and put me in one of the coldest bases they have.” Between his two army calls, he married Virgene Sims and enrolled at U.C. Davis where he graduated in 1949 with degrees in agriculture and genetics. He graduated summa cum laude and belonged to the academic fraternity Phi Beta Kappa.

After Alaska, they moved permanently back to Brawley and farming. They bought a starter house on Sunset Drive and added a son, Steve, then a daughter, Betty. Neal continued farming with his father, Earl, for Jack Bros. & McBurney. His father remained the sales force, while Neal learned farming under Alex McBurney.

Tragedy struck the family in November of 1955. Virgene Jack was stricken with polio. She said the last time she walked was when she walked into the examining room and laid down on the gurney. Heroic measures were taken by many nurses, doctors and hospital staff to keep her alive. Perhaps the most valiant, though, was Don Currier, the train agent in Niland. He personally spent hours rerouting a train and ensuring a rail car would be empty to take a dying woman to Los Angeles where there was a chance that the polio hospital could save her.

Much can be said about hardworking entrepreneurs who are

successful, but more should be said about a man who, through true grit, love and a supportive community kept his family together in very tough times. Virgene spent 18 months in the LA County hospital. Neal and his two older children moved into his parent's house and the 6-month-old baby was taken to Redlands to live with her maternal grandparents where she could be in close proximity to her mother.

Alex was born three years later, in that very hospital, delivered by a young intern, breech and in the elevator. The polio obstetrician specialists didn't believe Virgene when she insisted she was in labor and all three of her other children had come fast and easy. He patted her iron lung and said he would see her Monday. That he did, with a new baby in the crib next to her. Virgene brags that the chief of medicine at LA County hospital owes everything to her for teaching him how to deliver a breech baby in a moving elevator while she held her breathing machine in place.

Neal farmed during the turbulent '70's with the threat of 160-acre limitation hanging over all farming enterprises and labor strikes shutting production down. He served on Western Growers Board of Directors and Water Committee for four years, on the Imperial Irrigation Board from 1973-1981, and on the Water Resources Control Board in California under George Deukmejian, but resigned in protest when the sole focus was the San Joaquin Valley. He also served on the United States Department of Agriculture Board at the Agriculture Research Station.

He partnered during his career with CalTom packing shed, Skiles Cattle, Fleming & Jack, Wheat Grass Bench Farming, Pocatello Potato Packing Shed and Golden Gem-Packing.

Neal said that many innovations brought about by WWII were implemented in farming by the returning GI's, thus farming modernized radically during the late 1940's. Neal brought in one of the first drivable service trucks used to service equipment in the field, and Jack Bros was one of the first farming companies in

Imperial Valley to have car-to-car radios to communicate with employees in the field.

Neal loved talking soils with Malek Kaddah, or any soil scientist who might have solutions for our salty water and soils. In the mid 1970's, Neal tried wheel line sprinklers, then a few years later put in 35 acres of buried drip. He was trying to see if the Israeli way of farming might be the wave of the future.

Neal's passion in farming was quite simple: your land is your base. Whether he owned or rented a piece of property, his goal was to make that base as strong as possible, from tiling all of his ground to 75-foot spacing, or sprinkle-leaching as much ground as possible each year. His quest was to lower the "ec's" of each field to its lowest potential, thus growing the maximum yield possible for that crop on that particular field.

Neal's wife Virgene was the longest living polio survivor known from the Rancho Los Amigos Hospital when she lost her battle in June, 1995. He and Virgene set a wonderful example of love and support through even the worst of times. Those who know Mr. Jack and grew up in Brawley know firsthand of his commitment, and remember watching him and Virgene take their evening strolls in the cool season, with him behind and her guiding the way around numerous blocks. In 1998, Neal married his current wife Shirley, and they enjoy spending time with their children and grandchildren.

Through many decades of farming, Neal Jack set a shining example, in both his personal and professional life, of honesty, integrity, commitment and perseverance. He epitomizes the spirit of innovation and dedication to industry, family and community that Mr. Jim Kuhn embodied.