

Bill DuBois, Sr.: 2008 Farmer of the Year

William Irving DuBois was born September 25, 1916 in Orcutt, one of the first oil towns in California. His father, John Lamont DuBois, came west from Tennessee in 1906 to work as an engineer in the oil fields. While working in the fields in 1913, John met a young school teacher, Isabelle Oakley, who was the new teacher in a one-room school house full of the children of oil workers. The eldest child of a pioneering Santa Maria family, Isabelle was quite taken by the serious young oil man. Isabelle's grandfather had also come from Tennessee and that helped promote John's acceptance by her family. John and Isabelle married and soon thereafter the Bill DuBois we have come to know and love here at Farm Bureau was born.

Bill is too young to remember the circumstances under which he moved to El Centro, but history shows that his maternal grandfather, William Calvin Oakley had been invited to purchase 240 acres of sandy desert between El Centro and the former Blue Lake. W.C. Oakley purchased the land in 1917 from Harold Bell Wright, a pioneer in the development of the Imperial Valley. Bill still has the original deed, signed by Harold Bell Wright, on the home piece of his ranch. They originally raised farm animals, operated a dairy, and leveled the sand dunes with horse drawn Fresno scrapers. A few years later the ranch was converted to citrus and field crops.

Life in the early 1920s was tough for the young family. When Bill and his parents first moved to the ranch, they lived in a tent under a Cottonwood tree with no electricity, no phone, and no running water. Bill still remembers "upgrading" to a better home when the tent got a wooden floor and wood sidewalls. A World War I surplus generator was obtained, a small home was built and a few years later Bill's family, now including brothers Jack and Andy, moved into the 2-story house that served as the ranch headquarters until it was paved over by Interstate 8 which split the ranch in two.

Bill was lucky growing up because his bedroom was outside the house in the water tower. Some relief was felt under the 500-gallon water tank while sleeping on hot summer nights with no breeze. Also, while very young, his mom would soak a bed sheet and cover the boys with it, hoping they'd fall asleep with the comfort of evaporative cooling before

the sheet would dry out.

Bill graduated from Central Union High School in the Class of 1934 and set out with his best friend, Temple Robinson, to get to know the world in a Chevy roadster. He went to various colleges off and on as his family could afford it, including Cal Poly, SLO and USC. One day he got a phone call from a girlfriend who was the secretary at the El Centro draft board which prompted him to drive all night to San Dimas, pay \$5 to enroll in Cal Poly, and enlist in the Navy's Officer Candidate School program. When his draft letter arrived in the mail a few days later, he "regretfully" informed the board he was already enlisted in the Navy. An unemployment program instituted during the Depression paid for him to attend Cal Poly and get degree in 1943 as promised to the Navy. Bill and another student, Ken Holmes, returned to the campus recently, now known as Cal Poly Pomona, to be honored as the oldest living graduates of that school!

Soon after graduation Bill reported to Midshipman School at Northwestern University in Chicago. After 2 months there his entire class of 25 was assigned to submarine engineering school in Raleigh, NC. After 2 months in Raleigh he was sent to Flint, Michigan to study smaller engines for landing craft infantry. Finally, in 1944 he and some buddies were sent to Texas where they finished outfitting a ship and then departed to support those fighting the war. Bill took command of this landing craft infantry and their job was to haul first aid and other supplies as well as troops to islands in the South Pacific such as New Guinea, Samar, Leyte and the Philippines.

Bill has many fond memories of his military service and has remained lifelong friends with the men on his ship. In fact, for the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the Philippines, he and his Executive Officer were honored guests of former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and they retraced the steps of their wartime ports of call. Bill stayed in the Navy following the war serving in the Ready Reserve for more than 24 years, retiring as a Lieutenant Commander with 28 years of service. After the war, Bill also sponsored a refugee Russian family he had met in Shanghai to come to the US.

1946 was a great year for Bill. All in a matter of about 6 months he was discharged from the war, started farming and met and married his wife, Mary Ellen, who was introduced to him on a blind date by friends Warren

and Jean Brock. Mary Ellen had been widowed at age 24 when her husband, Edward Burns, also a valley native and friend of Bill's since childhood, was shot down while piloting a B29.

After their wedding at the Cal Poly Chapel, the family grew quickly. Mary Ellen's daughter Katy, 2 years old when Bill and Mary Ellen were married, soon had a sister, Isabelle, born in 1947, and another sister, Lois, in 1949. Five years later, Bill Jr. was born, and the family was complete. Over the years Bill and his family farmed up to 2000 acres of safflower, soybeans, alfalfa, barley, cotton, flax, sugar beets, onions, onion seed, hemp, citrus and at one time was the largest hog rancher in the Valley with 4000 head in 1966. He has quite a myriad of experience with different commodities.

The citrus industry had reached its peak in about 1933 with orchards, primarily grapefruit, spread throughout the valley. Bill's father was the Imperial County representative on the Sunkist Board and Bill worked at the packing shed during high school. Unfortunately, knowledge of agricultural science was limited back then and without the drainage system we have today, after just a few years, the trees became water-logged. It was Bill's sad assignment when he came home from the war to pull out all the dead trees.

Throughout college Bill helped install and operate a mill for the California Central Fiber Corporation, which made cigarette wrappers out of flax straw. Imperial County couldn't produce enough flax to supply the entire world with cigarettes so the company made portable machines and it was Bill's job to monitor them throughout the San Joaquin Valley. The flax season was summer and citrus was winter so he was able to work year-round in the two industries.

Bill was also a part of the Holtville Cotton Products Company with Wes Bisgard and built 4 gins on the south side of the valley in the 1950's. He was the first to propose short-season cotton and mandatory cotton plow-down. He took a lot of heat for that.

He was quite innovative when it came to the hogs. Golden State Creamery was having a problem getting rid of their whey, the residue left over from making cottage cheese, because it was eating the iron pipes in the city's sewer system. So Bill got a huge air force surplus water tank and put in a

system that by the flip of a valve would switch from water for the hogs in the day, to whey at night. It was a great source of feed and best of all, it was free!

Bill was very involved with 4-H, which all four of his children were active in. One year the fair wouldn't let Lois' pig in for some reason. So he took her to the feedlot, they picked out a different pig and brought it to the fair. She slept with the pig all night in the stall and worked with it all the next day. She ended up winning showmanship! Bill also hosted many tours for the school kids, showing city kids where pork really came from, and he hosted many teachers on field trips to teach them about agriculture. He and Mary Ellen also hosted many foreign exchange college students at their home over the years and taught them about American farming methods and irrigation systems.

Bill's passion for the water issues probably came in part by influences from early in his life. While his father, John, was not much interested in politics, at one point he was very involved. The Imperial Valley received its water through Mexico because the original developers had to use gravity and carve the canal all the way from Algodones, around sand hills, through Mexico. When talks of the All American Canal began the IID Board did not totally support it. So John ran in a recall campaign and was elected to the IID Board and became President. He immediately went to Washington, D.C. to negotiate the contract and signed it. Bill was disappointed at the time because his father wouldn't let him quit high school to help the other farmers build the canal with the horses, mules and Fresno scrapers. Evan Hewes later replaced John DuBois on the IID Board and served as both Manager and President for 20 years.

In 1970 Bill stopped farming, leased out his ranch and moved to Sacramento to be the state Farm Bureau's new Director of Natural Resources and represented California's farmers before the legislative and executive branches of state government. After 20 years he "retired" but continued consulting in Sacramento until 2005. He is now known as the state's "water guru" and is still sought out for advice and history about the state's water laws. He worked on numerous issues of statewide importance such as the peripheral canal and state laws requiring EIRs and also for Imperial County such as the 160 acre limitation and Colorado River issues as a state liaison.

Bill has served on numerous Boards of Directors for community and industry groups during his lifetime. He has been the President of these organizations:

- Imperial County Farm Bureau
- CA Irrigation Institute
- Southwest Flax Association
- Imperial Fertilizer Cooperative
- First United Methodist Church Board of Trustees
- Imperial Valley Salvation Army
- El Centro Kiwanis Club

He has served on the Boards of these organizations:

- California Farm Bureau Federation (2 terms, with 50 years in between!)
- Imperial Hay Growers Association
- Imperial Valley Dairy Producers Coop
- Imperial Cotton Producers Association
- Imperial Beet Growers Association
- Californians Against Waste
- CA Agricultural Water Management Council
- CA Department of Water Resources Advisory Committee on the State Water Plan and also on the Salton Sea
- Elks Club
- Navy League
- Naval Reserve Association

Today, at 93, Bill has been a Farm Bureau member for more than 6 decades. He still takes the stairs instead of the elevator, drives from El Centro to Sacramento for meetings, serves on numerous Boards and Committees, actually reads full Environmental Impact Reports, and to top it off, has a great sense of humor. He is widely respected by agriculture leaders throughout California, the West and nationally for his encyclopedic knowledge of the water issues as well as his ability to find sensible approaches to solving them. His many contributions to agriculture have not gone unrecognized. He was presented the California Farm Bureau's Distinguished Service Award in 2004, the organization's highest honor. Bill and Mary Ellen still own farmland west of El Centro where they live across the pasture from their son, Bill Jr. and his family. They have 9 grandchildren ranging from age 40 to 9, and also 11 great-grandchildren. It is because of Bill's service to our community, the state and nation, his devotion to California agriculture, his dedication to the Farm Bureau, his

passion for the preservation of our water rights, and quite simply because we all love and respect this incredible man who we have been blessed to have with us for so, so, so, so many years, that the Imperial County Farm Bureau is proud to honor William Irving DuBois, the 4th Annual Jim Kuhn Memorial Farmer of the Year Award.

Congratulations Bill and Mary Ellen!