

Stephen Elmore: 2014 Farmer of the Year

About a century ago, Imperial Valley was nothing more than a wasteland. Then came the pioneers, men of vision, who believed that with the addition of water and hard work, this land could be made into the winter garden of the world.

Although not one of the earliest pioneers, John J. Elmore was a man that helped Imperial Valley become the success that it is today.

Mr. Elmore came to the Imperial Valley in 1908 and began to farm at the age of 16. When he was 18 he attended the University of Southern California studying law. He later joined the Army serving as an ambulance driver in WWI. After his military duty was over, he returned to the Imperial Valley with his wife, Hetty, in 1920; however, he assured his wife that the stay would only be “temporary”.

Mr. Elmore began his farming operation around Brawley and Calipatria, but one of his biggest and best farming ventures was what is now known as the Elmore Company Desert Ranch. In 1928 Mr. & Mrs. Elmore began purchasing land from the Southern Pacific Railway and others who owned or had homesteaded land in an area near the Salton Sea. He began farming under the name of Elmore – Jameson Company...Jameson was Mrs. Elmore’s maiden name and her inheritance was used to purchase the land.

With three kids in tow, Hetty Joy, Miriam and John Jr., John & Hetty balanced family and business when in 1929 they welcomed their last child, Stephen to the brood.

Stephen Henry Elmore was born on February 1, 1929 in Brawley.

Stephen lived with his family in Brawley and attended Brawley elementary schools. When he was in third grade, the family traveled to Europe, which was a big deal to everyone in Brawley at that time. His family was friends with the Brandt Family down the street and

one particular little Brandt girl would later catch his eye.

He attended Brawley Union High School receiving the Senior Class Outstanding Citizen award. Stephen was lucky enough to have a car while in high school but made it his own rule that only guy friends were allowed to ride in the front seat. By this time the little Brandt girl was still around but Stephen made her ride in the rumble seat if she was lucky enough to join them.

Stephen graduated from BUHS in 1947 and soon after took off to attend the University of Southern California. He was active in the Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity; however, he couldn't shake the call of Imperial Valley and quickly returned to his roots to farm.

Soon after returning, Stephen was reacquainted with that little Brandt girl from down the street. Janet Brandt had left & returned to Brawley after attending Stephen's College in Missouri. The couple dated and soon was married on September 26, 1953 in Brawley. Children quickly joined the young couple with Karen born in 1956 and Craig in 1957. The family enjoyed traveling to places such as New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii and many trips to Baja.

Stephen joined his brother John, Jr. running the day-to-day Elmore Company farming operation. Later with the passing of his father John, responsibilities were split with Stephen becoming the managing partner of the Desert Ranch. At this time, the ranch consisted of 5,200 tillable acres and was the largest single block of land farmed in Imperial County.

Under Stephen's guidance, the ranch continued to prosper and improve. He began to update farming methods and was always progressive and continued to improve the quality of the land. In 1976 a major disaster hit Imperial Valley and caused much destruction at the Desert Ranch. Flooding and desert runoff from Hurricane Kathleen caused damage to an estimated 2,500 acres of the Desert Ranch. This was more than 45% of the ranch. Floodwaters cut through at least six fields, carrying away farm

equipment, sprinkler pipes, hay stacks and destroying roads and cement irrigation ditches. One cotton field, only a month away from harvest, was virtually buried in silt. The dike that had been built under John Sr.'s direction to divert the water of the San Felipe Wash was destroyed and nature took its normal course back through the ranch. In the end, there was an estimated two million dollars in damages.

Little time was wasted in rebuilding the ranch. Large land leveling equipment was moved in and engineers were called to design a new dike. Once the dike was formed, 2,600 palm trees covering two and one half miles were planted. The dense root system of the palm trees was to help hold back the water in future floods. Restoration moved quickly and the ranch was almost back to 100% farming capacity within six months.

Hurricane Kathleen so devastated the Desert Ranch and many other parts of Imperial Valley that it was claimed as the "100 year flood". But that very next year in August of 1977 Hurricane Doreen hit the area carrying almost the same amount of rainfall. However, damage to the ranch was considerably less because of the hard work of Stephen and all those who put many, many hours of rebuilding.

By the late 1970's and early 1980's water conservation was beginning to become an issue. Although water was still cheap and plentiful, the ranch began taking steps to conserve water for years ahead. Laser leveling, building up checks at the tail ends of fields to recirculate water and eliminate tailwater, cutting runs from a mile to half-mile, to a quarter-mile and sometimes irrigating only areas of fields, were some of the things Stephen managed his crews to do. Not only did these measures help conserve water, they also increased crop yields.

Another issue that arose that could have been a possible disaster to the Desert Ranch was the announcement of the Department of Interior to enforce a 1902 Reclamation Law that would break up large land holdings and limit water delivery to farmers holding more

than 160 acres. Imperial Valley had been exempt from the limitations since 1933 because growers here had their own water system before the federal projects were built.

Local farmers, including Stephen Elmore and the entire Elmore Family, formed the Fairness Committee to fight this ruling. Fund raisers were held, demonstrations organized, rallies and trips to Washington DC were all part of the plan. Stephen's daughter Karen remembers her dad spending as much time in Washington DC as he did in Brawley and riding protest buses to Los Angeles and standing in protest groups surrounded by people from Imperial Valley.

On June 16, 1980 the United States Supreme Court handed down a 9-0 decision exempting Imperial Valley from terms of the 1902 Reclamation Law. It was a great victory for the future of the Desert Ranch and all of Imperial Valley.

Aside from his farming operation, Stephen Elmore served as a director at the Brawley Ag Research Station; he was the only grower to hold a director's position with Holly Sugar Corporation, served on the Council of California Growers and on the Western Growers Association Retirement Board of Trustees.

Not only was Stephen an exceptional steward of his land, he was also extremely committed to his community. He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church, Imperial County Historical Society, Brawley Chamber of Commerce, Brawley Economic Development Board, Imperial Valley Stockmen's Club, Brawley Rotary, Brawley Elks Club, Brawley Boys and Girls Club, Newport Harbor Nautical Museum and was instrumental in the development of the BUHS Hydroponics Green House. And he was a major supporter of Pioneers Memorial Hospital.

Stephen was named the Western Growers Man of the Year and in 1978 he was honored to receive the Brawley Chamber of Commerce Branding Iron Award.

Stephen Elmore passed away on April 9, 1999 at the age of 70. His philosophy of thoroughly planning for a crop, anticipating any problems and then allowing for innovation was a methodology that served him well and provided for a great legacy for his family and company.

It is with great honor that we honor Mr. Stephen Elmore as the 2014 Farmer of the Year.