

William Brandt 2015 Farmer of the Year

In 1936, two brothers from Iowa joined together on an agricultural venture in the Imperial Valley growing field crops including wheat, flax and alfalfa. As the business grew, so too did their opportunities. Utilizing their field crops, the brothers subsidized their business by running other people's cattle on their land. This was the single spark that ignited their entry into the cattle business that ultimately grew into the largest such operation in Imperial County.

William, or as he is more commonly referred to as Bill, grew up in Brawley attending Myron D. Witter School, Barbara Worth Jr. High and Brawley Union High School. Throughout his youth, Bill was a mediocre student easily following his mother's advice as she would say "Give me a C student who tries to get a B any day over an A student who doesn't try." Later it was his own kids who enjoyed reminding Bill of his mother's advice and his average grades around time their own report cards were released.

As a student at Brawley High, Bill was a proud Wildcat on the varsity football team and was honored to be a part of the Imperial Ballet Champions who were undefeated until the 2nd round of CIF his senior year in 1962. An unsuccessful bid at ASB Vice President, losing to Alan Kilborn, proved politics wasn't in his arena. After graduating from BUHS in 1963, Bill soon found himself on the road to Tucson to attend the University of Arizona. While studying Agriculture, Bill enjoyed being part of the Delta Chi Fraternity where he was a regular at let's just say many "extra curricular activities" along Fraternity Row.

It was clear to Bill that upon graduation he would return to Brawley to join his father and uncle in the family business and did just that after graduating from U of A in 1968 with a Bachelors Degree in Agriculture in his hands.

Bill soon settled in Brawley and began to develop his position within the family farm. Upon returning, Bill's sister Carol and her husband Bob Wilson, who were very good friends and farming neighbors with John and Joanne Osterkamp suggested that he take out one of the Osterkamp

girls. Years later Bill admitted he wasn't sure who was who but he felt he got lucky when one sister answered the door and said "Sue will be ready in just a minute."

On Easter Sunday, March 29, 1970, they set out for a picnic in the desert in Sue's dad's Jeep. With wildflowers blooming around them, Bill popped the question and Sue returned back to Brawley with a ring.

Bill and Sue didn't waste any time growing their family and welcomed their first born son, Mark, to the family on April 24, 1971. Sister Kelly, brothers Eric and Ryan and sister Amy joined Mark in a period of 10 years. One could say that with all their activities over the yearsthat family life at home seemed more like loosely organized chaos. To allow a little more space for the growing brood, the family moved to the outskirts of Brawley.

Learning the family business and strong work ethic began early on in the Brandt household. The boys started off young at the feedlot by cleaning drinkers and the girls in the office. It wasn't always rosy; no mercy was ever given if, when in high school, they had been partying the night before. Work was priority.

The discipline and strong example set by Bill is probably the reason why after obtaining their college degrees, all have become involved in the business.

As Bill's family grew, so did his opportunities in the business world.

Soon after Bill and Sue were married, Bill's father Leon and Uncle Harold realized the family was getting too big for the business so the decision was made to divide their assets so their children could expand more rapidly on their own.

It was under Bill's leadership that the feedlot really began to grow. In the mid 1970s the feedlot got very good at processing cattle for other cattlemen then turning the calves out on pasture or sending them off to other feed yards. However, Bill felt that being good at just one facet of the cattle feeding cycle was not enough so in the early 1980s he began to expand his base. Brandt Feedyard went from feeding just their own cattle to developing a custom feeding operation.

The feedyard gradually expanded and Bill had the opportunity to buy out a packing plant in Arizona that was shutting down. In 1983-84 he purchased their shares and opened the plant as Sunland Packing.

Bill and the new co-op partners took the daily kill up to 1,800 head per day. The packinghouse was eventually sold to Packerland, a Wisconsin based operation.

It was during this time that Bill also expanded the Brawley based feedyard to 60,000 head of cattle and found success feeding cattle with a specific market in mind; using 80% Holstein calves and the balance in crossbred calves.

In 2001, Bill, along with a handful of local cattlemen teamed together to enhance the Imperial Valley cattle industry. Recognizing there were so few slaughterhouses in the West, the group established Brawley Beef in his hometown. The processing plant would mark a significant contribution to the Valley's economy creating hundreds of jobs both at the plant and as other feedyards also expanded. The plant has had its ups and downs and there are great possibilities for a brighter future on the horizon.

Through his own illness, Bill became acutely aware of what such substances used on cattle do to people. Through this dark cloud in his life, Bill found the rainbow with the development of Brandt Beef - The True Natural brand. Going against industry standards, in the early 1990s Bill began listening to consumer concerns regarding hormones and antibiotics and made the decision to raise their animals naturally.

In 2006, Brandt Beef became the pioneer in utilizing a global tracking system from birth to consumption. Using a bar-code system, Brandt Beef could trace beef directly back from a retail site, such as a supermarket or restaurant, to the specific animal and its origin. One could say Bill loves his cattle almost as much as he loves his family.

When Bill Brandt took over the Brandt Feedlot operation, he started with 1,500 head of cattle; in 1972 he developed a new yard and over 40 years later, pen by pen, has grown his business to include 100,000 head of cattle...and still growing. Brandt Beef, featured in international fine restaurants and grocery stores, has earned many accolades and awards.

Over the years, Bill has been a generous contributor to our community. He continually provides scholarships for his employees' children and many other students attending Sacred Heart School and continuing into their university studies. His generous contributions of money, resources and time to Catholic Charities events have benefited the entire valley for many years.

Bill and Sue Brandt were instrumental in the development of the San Diego State University North Campus. In addition, Bill was an original sponsor of the Imperial Valley Cattlemen's Gallery at the IV Pioneer Museum and a major supporter of the Pioneer Memorial Hospital Emergency Room renovations.

Bill was all instrumental in forming the Coalition for a Fair Water Policy along with Louise Willey and Matt LaBrucherie to ensure ongoing protection of water rights for Imperial Valley. He has served as a member of the California and National Cattlemen's Associations Tax & Credit Committees.

Bill Brandt has clearly established his legacy in Imperial Valley. Often seen proudly displaying his I LOVE BRAWLEY t-shirt, Bill has a clear love and admiration for his family, industry and community.