

MEMBER FEATURE: DWAYNE DOBSON

BY JANICE BRYSON

The Arizona Farming and Ranching Hall of Fame was established in 2007 to honor and preserve the legacy of the pioneers of Arizona agriculture. Dwayne Dobson, one of the 2013 honorees, has followed in the footsteps of the agricultural legacy of his grandfather John Dobson and his father Earl.



Dobson Family L-R (back row): Carey, Candi. Front row: Carol, Chris, Dwayne and Dawn.

The first Dobson to arrive in Arizona was Wesley Dobson who emigrated from Ontario, Canada in 1886. He homesteaded on the base line living in an 8 by 10 shack. On a return visit to Canada in 1892, Wesley told his seventeen year old brother, John Henry, that Arizona soil would grow anything if they could get water there. Family history has it that when Wesley was preparing to return to Arizona, John grabbed his suitcase, and without telling his parents, traveled with his brother back to Arizona. The Mesa Tribune noted that at a family party in 1920, Wesley reminisced that he was responsible for bringing his brothers to Arizona and as he saw the fine automobiles parked in the yard, it was quite different from the view he used to see from his shack and the difficulties encountered in clearing away some brush to put in a little bit of wheat. He was quoted as saying he was quite positive that at last his dream had come true.

Working hard on his brother's farm for one dollar a day plus board, John saved enough money to purchase his own land. However, he became discouraged each time the Salt River would flood and returned to Canada in 1900. John established a store in Rouleau, Saskatchewan, married Sarah Lecty and began a family. In 1906 he got word that Roosevelt Dam was being built. John decided to return to Arizona knowing that a dependable supply of water would be available for farming. He and a friend from Canada, Alex Knox, purchased 320 acres in the vicinity of what is now the site of Guadalupe and Dobson Roads.

Within twenty years, John had expanded his farming operation to become the owner of one of the largest ranching operations in the Salt River Valley. He owned 4,000 acres of farm land in the Mesa and Chandler area and 32,000 acres of desert land which included state land grazing leases ranging from Meridian Road in Apache Junction to Florence Junction. He also had the same amount of grazing leases in the White Mountains. John ran about 20,000 head of cattle each year on his ranch on Baseline Road.

In 1929, John expanded into the sheep business with

the purchase of George Scott's sheep outfit. He continued to farm with alfalfa, wheat, barley and sorghum for silage. His numerous alfalfa pastures were available for lambing. During World War II, John divided up his ranches between his five children – sons Ray, Cliff and Earl and daughters Mildred Fitch and Ruby Patterson. Cliff took over the feed yard on Baseline Road. Mildred stated that her father couldn't leave a good piece of land alone. His wife Sarah kept telling him to stay out of debt "but he said debt was all right if it was for land. He told us to never go into debt to buy something like a car or a refrigerator. But for land it was OK."

John helped with the early development of Chandler selling part of his land for the San Marcos Golf Course. He passed away in 1949. On Mother's Day in 1950, his five children donated the site for the First Methodist Church in Mesa in their father's memory and in honor of their mother Sarah.

Earl married Eileen Gates and they began farming and ranching in 1937 in the Mesa-Chandler area. For many years the couple lived on a farm on Elliot Road in Chandler. Dwayne, Earl's eldest son, was raised in the Chandler area; although the school boundaries had him attending Mesa High School. He was active in FFA and served as a state officer. Dwayne graduated from the University of Arizona and returned to the valley. He married Carol Miller and they became the parents of 4 children.

The Dobson's raised alfalfa, corn silage, barley and from the 1960's into the 1980's they also raised a lot of cotton. Dwayne's brothers Dennis and Vinson farmed and all were in the sheep business in their younger years. Dwayne was the last brother remaining in the sheep business. The family also raised cattle along with their farming and sheep ranching through the years.

Early in the 1970's the City of Mesa purchased 2000 acres from the family for the Dobson Ranch community which opened in 1973 with seven man made lakes, three recreation centers, tennis courts, swimming pools and a golf course. The golf course club house is the former home of Cliff Dobson.

The family's sheep grazed on alfalfa fields in the southeast valley during the winter. When the rain was good, the



Dwayne Dobson.



Sheep crossing the Verde River Sheep Bridge. Dwayne (second from right) was still in high school. Taken in 1954 or 1955.

sheep would be put on the desert. During a drought year if the sheep could not go to the desert by March first, they would remain on the alfalfa fields and the farm would lose a cutting. Each spring the sheep would begin a six-week, 220 mile trek up

the Heber-Reno Sheep Trail to a cooler climate. Crossing the Salt River, they headed up to the Mogollon Rim and on to the Snowflake area where the Dobson sheep picked up the Morgan Mountain Trail on the way to the summer grazing leases near Greer. The summer pastures were used for shearing and breeding. Returning to the Salt River Valley, the winter pastures were used for lambing.

Both Earl and Eileen were active in the agriculture community and Eileen was a founder of the Desert Club in Mesa and committed to helping women improve their education. After Earl's death in 1993; Eileen lived in a condominium in Dobson Ranch. She passed away at the age of 93 in 2011. For 30 years she had organized the family's annual picnic timed to commemorate the sheep

crossing the Salt River and heading north for the summer.

The sheep from the Sheep Springs Sheep Company were sold in October 2011 with the exception of 100 head being kept for the family. Dwayne advises the high cost of hay and

other farming expenses combined with urban development left him with no options. Alfalfa used to cost \$80.00 a ton; the cost has risen to over \$200.00 a ton. Dwayne's son-in-law Mark Pedersen notes that the sheep also used to feed on farm fields through the winter when farmers could not harvest the fields. But with the advent of machinery that cuts any type of grass to be harvested, there is not enough feed left for the sheep on those farms. The Dobson sheep were the last to use the Heber-Reno Trail and their sale was the end of an era in Arizona history.

The family maintains their cattle ranch near Vernon and Dwayne serves as the Maricopa County Director for the Arizona Cattle Growers' Association. He also serves on the Salt River Project Board, is an officer of the Arizona Wool Producers and a member of the Sheep Heritage Foundation.

The Dobson family has been very generous to the east valley donating land for the Banner Desert Medical Center, Mesa Community College and Dobson High School. Ruby Dobson Patterson's husband Dwight is credited as a founder of the Cactus League and a civic leader who lured the Chicago Cubs to Mesa in 1952.

Dwayne and Carol's children, daughters Dawn Cosenza and Candi Pedersen along with her husband Mark, as well as sons Carey and Chris are all involved in the family's agricultural pursuits. Carey lives with his family at the cattle ranch in Vernon. He has grazed fewer animals during the recent drought years and works with the Arizona Game and Fish Department to improve wildlife habitat. Carey has found non-violent ways to keep Mexican gray wolves from ravaging his herds, such as by using portable electric fencing, earning the praise of such groups as the Defenders of Wildlife. But Carey says that in spite of this, government regulations make ranching difficult. Carey is quoted in a newspaper interview as saying "I just hope I get to watch my kids and grandkids do this before I go. I was blessed, and I'd like them to be blessed with the same." That sentiment holds true for many of Arizona's farming and ranching families wishing to pass their legacy to future generations.



Dwayne standing with son Chris and grandson Warner in tractor.

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