

A Man of His Word

Although he's first a cattleman, Steve Pierce has chosen to give back by serving in the Arizona State Senate.

by Sara Gugelmeyer



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— Steve Pierce

His story starts out like that of so many other cattlemen: a third-generation rancher, went to college, returned to the family operation with his wife, raised four kids. But Steve Pierce is the exception, because when he didn't like where his state's government was headed, he took action and not by just going to the polls; he put his name on the ballot. And won.

Steve Pierce's family has been ranching in Arizona since 1935, but it was his father, Delbert, who started the Hereford operation on their Las Vegas Ranch near Prescott in the mid-'50s. They've been breeding top-quality Hereford bulls ever since and selling them mostly by private treaty.

Larry Stark added his expertise to the Pierce family operation in 1975 as herdsman and partner. He's helped manage the ranch ever since, although he's now retired. Las Vegas Ranch began showing cattle in the '60s and exhibited a national champion in 1981.

Meanwhile, Steve graduated from Prescott High School and earned his bachelor's degree in animal science from the University of Arizona. He also married Joan in 1973.

Returning to his roots

After a short stint working for the University of Arizona

alumni association, Steve happily returned home to manage the Las Vegas Ranch, which also raises Angus cattle and American Quarter Horses.

Steve and Joan raised four children a good 25 miles from the nearest grocery store, an upbringing Steve says teaches improvisation and problem-solving skills. “On the ranch when something breaks, you can't just stop everything and run to town for a part,” Steve says. “You have to improvise and be practical.”

You also have to be a steward of the land, something that is always a consideration on Las Vegas Ranch. Pierce and his family have won environmental awards including two Range Manager of the Year awards from the Society for Range Management, the Arizona Game and Fish Commission's Wildlife Habitat Stewardship Award and the 2006 Private Lands Fish and Wildlife Stewardship Award from the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies of the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Steve has always been active in community and cattlemen's organizations including Yavapai Cattle Growers Association, Arizona Cattle Growers Association, Arizona Hereford Association, Arizona Angus Association, Arizona Beef Council, National Cattlemen's Beef

Board, U.S. Meat Export Federation, Arizona Beef Council, County Bank Board of Directors, the Anasazi Foundation and the Central Arizona Partnership and was a 4-H leader. As if being active in these organizations wasn't enough to keep him busy, he was also active in the Yavapai County Republican Party, serving as chairman.

Giving back

All of this community and industry involvement was Steve's way of giving back. "I didn't serve in the military but I feel that it's everyone's duty to give something back," Steve says.

He upped the ante though, when, in 2008, he ran for the Arizona Senate. His family was grown, and while there was plenty to do on the ranch, Steve was not happy with the way things were going in the capitol.

"I didn't care for the way I was being represented," he says. "The guy in the senate was from Chicago and I had a whole different set of values than him, being born in Arizona and raised on a ranch. He was the incumbent but I had excellent guidance in campaigning, ran and beat him."

Then it was time for the real work to begin — albeit a much different kind of work than what most cattlemen are used to. "There are few rural people that are serving in the Senate with me," Steve says. "They're an entirely different people. All the rural issues come to me, whether it's land rights, property rights, water rights. Ranching is simpler because cows don't talk back. You want to drive them from one pasture to the next, they go. That's not necessarily true in the Senate. You don't know what they are going to do or

say. The real challenge is there are people that don't understand rural issues and they don't have a clue. As long as they can get their food from Safeway that's all they care about. So I have to educate them. But it's fun and it's rewarding and I enjoy it."

Case in point, Steve told the *Prescott Daily Courier*, "Down at the capitol I've learned there's so many people that don't understand food and agriculture. I'll be in committee and they'll be talking about land planning and they completely overlook agriculture. And I'll say, 'Well, where are you going to get your food?' And they'll stop and go, 'Oh, we didn't think of that.'"

Facing challenges

Steve served as the Arizona Senate President from 2011-2012, which he called a "full-time job." Although he is no longer the president, he was re-elected as a



Steve and his wife, Joan, were married in 1973 and now split their time between Phoenix and the ranch at Prescott.



Larry Stark (left), longtime Las Vegas Ranch herdsman with Steve and his father, Delbert, who has since passed away, with the ranch sign.

senator in 2012. The road ahead is a steep, bumpy climb.

"We have some real challenges with health care because of the Obama administration and some real challenges with income and revenue," Steve says. "I think there are issues we need to face with tax reform. We want to get Arizona as the top state in growth, technology and jobs."

His background in ranching has helped him understand when and where cuts need to be made. He says, "When the price of cattle falls, you have to cut back — when it doesn't rain you cut back on the number of cattle you have, on the number of employees you have. You could keep on selling your herd, but then all of a sudden you don't have any more cattle to sell. So, you have to manage through the tough times. Similarly, we have to be careful with the important agencies in the state — we've got less money for the budget but we can't just keep cutting and cutting until there's nothing left. It's balancing, just like a business, but you have too many people wanting the same thing: revenue."

At the same time, Steve advocates for agriculture,

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always looking out for his fellow cattlemen and landowners.

"We'd like to get taxes and regulations under control so that people can work on the ranch and not have to have another source of income," he says. "I love our life. And ranch people, cattle people, are salt of the earth people. It's sad to see all the changes coming in agriculture. Because of taxes the big ranches are getting chopped up and sold. Farms are becoming more and more corporate entities and the lifestyle is disappearing and a lot of it is because of government. They're telling us what we can do with our own water, land."

Steve has served the beef industry's interests in Arizona; he was appointed by the governor to serve on the Arizona Beef Council and was also a member of the U.S. Beef Export Board. It was his committee that came up with the now famous slogan, "Beef. It's What's For Dinner."

The problem though, he says, is lack of education about agriculture. "It all comes back to as long as everybody can get what they want at Safeway or wherever, they don't care about us. We're not doing a very good job of telling our side of the story because most ranchers are working too hard. They don't take time to talk to people about what they're doing. It's a hard lifestyle."

Don't let somebody else do it

But it's one worth saving, Steve says. And he encourages fellow ranchers to get involved with politics.

"Too many people don't like the way the world is going but they let somebody else deal with it," Steve says.

American Hereford Association field representative Mark Holt says he's seen Steve's ability to look out for the beef industry firsthand. "He's easy to talk to, very comfortable and down-to-earth," Mark says. "I am thrilled that he's in public service because he brings

interest and attention to land and cattle issues from the inside."

Steve encourages ranchers to consider public service because they already have the problem solving, management and business skills to help.

"People need to have life experience first but they are afraid of what someone might find in their background. What I've learned is there are very few people in politics that have actually signed the front side of a check," Steve quips.

He admits, though, that a day at the ranch is probably more rewarding, and he often feels guilty for not tending to things at home. He says, "I think that a good hard day's work is very satisfying. This is rewarding but this doesn't happen that quick. It's a slow process and it's difficult. You have to work with people you may not even like, and it's a lot of listening."

Steve and Joan have a house in Phoenix, where they live while the senate is in session. But they spend as much time as they can on the ranch near Prescott. Arizona law limits the time he can spend in the senate to eight years, of which he is on year five. But he hints that he's not done yet.

"I intend to stay here," Steve says. "We'll see in the next election. I am here to do a job, not keep it. A lot of people in politics just see which way the wind's blowing and go with it and I am not at all that way. I intend to do what's right for the state of Arizona and if they don't want me, think someone else can do a better job, well that's just fine I've got a ranch and another life waiting for me to go back to it.

"I don't BS anybody, my word is my bond and whatever I say is what I'm going to do. A man's word is important." Wouldn't we all like to see more politicians who live that philosophy? **HW**



Steve says he's in politics to do a job, not keep it. If the voters no longer want him to represent them, he'll return to full-time ranch life.