

The Sossaman Family

Where to begin with this farm family. Their farm history in Arizona is amazing. To spotlight their agriculture history, we start with Jasper and Nancy Sossaman, originally from Oklahoma, who came to Arizona looking for a better life in 1914 after their pig farm near Galveston, Texas, was wiped out in a hurricane. Shortly thereafter, another tragedy hit in 1918 when Jasper passed away, leaving Nancy and three sons to manage by themselves. Luckily, homesteads became available in Queen Creek, and the family obtained not one, but two! Gradually, they extended the farm to 1,000 acres and grew cotton, watermelon, potatoes, Durham wheat, castor beans, corn and sugar beets.

One of the three sons, also named Jasper, married Faith Mather and continued farming. Their only child, Jamie, inherited the farm in 1962. Son, Stephen, and wife, Chris, now manage the farm including their innovative marketing of heritage grains.

On politics and service, Jamie and Steve both served as presidents of Maricopa County Farm Bureau and on the state board. Besides farming, Jamie served 24 years in the state Legislature, both in the House where he served as Speaker, and in the Senate. In 1992, the Arizona Farm Bureau recognized Jamie for his Distinguished Service to Agriculture.

Jamie's wife, Sue, was also active in county politics during some very turbulent times.

Over the years the farm has always been an innovative family-centered business run by people who cared not just for the land, but also for the community.

Tell us about your farm: Our family homesteaded in Queen Creek in 1919. The family had come to Phoenix in about 1914. Everything was irrigated with wells. It started out as a vegetable farm servicing the copper mining communities. Then they went on to potatoes, cotton, and grains.

Like most Arizona farms, Sossaman Farms is hands on.

Today, we mainly farm alfalfa with a rotation into wheat and barley. The grains we grow are called ancient grains, which means they've never been hybridized. The grains are hundreds of years old, and several varieties even over a thousand years old. Jeff Zimmerman, owner of Hayden Flour Mills, approached me to grow these ancient/heritage grains for Hayden. For a little Arizona trivia history, the Hayden family had a mill in Tempe for over 100 years. They were no longer using that name, so Jeff approached the family to use the Hayden name for his brand. Hayden Flour Mill and Sossaman Farms now grow, process, and distribute grains and flour all over the United States.

Every year we grow six to eight different varieties of ancient grains. We grow everything from barleys to bread wheats to Durum wheat for pasta. We farm all of our crops on about 800 acres. The grains we grow are on around 130 of those acres. We mainly distribute to Whole Foods and Sprouts and specialty stores. We also distribute to about 500 chefs across the United States.



Sossaman Wheat

Wife, Chris, and her Business: My Company is called TeaRoyalty. All of my teas is imported (as tea is not really commercially grown in North America). Arizona needed a fine loose leaf tea purveyor and I was up to the challenge! I create many custom blends and collections and work with corporate gifting, retail shops, bodegas, and restaurants. I strive to be THE local tea specialist.

What changes have you seen in your operation over the years? Since everything has to be irrigated, water is the most precious resource, and the one that costs the most money. We experimented with low water use crops over the years, and were the first people here in the Queen Creek area to get our own rig and start leveling our own fields using laser technology in the 1970s.

Another innovation came in the 1990s when I adapted drip irrigation tillage equipment for minimum tillage in our furrow irrigated crops.

Today we grow everything in level basin borders so I can switch from crop to crop easily. The next thing I did was go to minimum tillage with the alfalfa, grains, corn and cotton.

What is your educational background? Growing up in Queen Creek, I would go to high school in Chandler. I went to a community college and then the Air Force Academy, and I finally ended up at ASU. I received a bachelor's degree in AgBusiness in 1978.

CHRIS: I actually met Steve when I was eleven, because back in the day if you lived in the Queen Creek/Chandler Heights area you were bussed to Chandler schools. He would get on the bus first and save me a seat, so from that sweet childhood beginning we have been sweethearts! I've attended five different colleges but did not focus on a degree or a career. I went to learn what I wanted to know.

Will anyone in your family – younger generation – pursue farming? We have three daughters, and I've never encouraged them to pursue agriculture. This is for several reasons: Our

farm is now totally surrounded by urban housing, so it wouldn't really be an opportunity for them to keep going in our current location.

Agriculture is more of a lifestyle versus a business choice.

I have always believed that if your business was in commodities you must diversify or face the consequences.

Over the years we have diversified our family business in places other than farming and that is where we include the girls.

An example of that would be that the Hayden Flour Mills is now located on our farm, and two of our girls work for Hayden. That's agriculture related, but it's not actually the farming aspect of it. It's the milling and processing and marketing of a farm product. Our middle daughter works in the tea business with her mom.



Steve's parents, Sue and Jamie Sossaman and his grandfather, Jasper Sossaman.

What are your community activities? We've done a lot of stuff with the Grain Council, Cotton Incorporated, the National Cotton Council, U.S. Wheat Associates, and Farm Bureau, as well. Locally I serve on a lot of boards of commission. I was the second mayor of Queen Creek, on the town council, and school board. I still serve in several capacities with the town on economic development, and planning and zoning. We've always stayed involved with what's going on around us.

What do you love most about farming/ranching, or the agriculture industry in general? Some of the finest people you could ever meet across the country, and even in other countries, all have a common bond with the land. The other aspect of it is that as a business, it's a way of life, not a means to a paycheck. That way of life includes something different every day. There are new challenges, new opportunities, and it keeps you on your toes.

CHRIS: Every day is different, and because we are on a seasonal calendar it's not a typical nine-to-five job at all. I love that challenge of doing new things all the time. We meet with chefs, we

talk pasta, we talk grains, we talk about greenhouses, and we talk to brewers and distillers and foodies. It is just such a small community in Arizona. It's amazing how everybody knows everybody else. I love that part of it and it feels like an extended farm family. When we travel we do farm things. We tour packing plants, and mills, and implement museums and eat at local farm to table restaurants. Always thinking about what innovations we can bring back to Arizona.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time or what is something most people don't know about you? Of course we all have our leisure activities like hiking and travel and snow skiing and things like that, but this last year I really enjoyed restoring some old grain cleaning equipment. We got it up and running and it works perfectly. We now use the equipment in our processing.

We, as a family, are getting to design and build our own community on our farm in Queen Creek. It will include not only residential and retail, but also our Heritage Corner. The Heritage Corner agritainment project will be over 10 acres focusing on the many aspects of grain.

Very few people get to design their own community, so this will be a family project separate from farming. We will include multigenerational housing, that way you can age in place. The Heritage Corner will showcase agriculture past and future.



Steve Sossaman checks on some of his equipment in the field.