

J A C K P A R N E L L

He Did It His Way

by Barbara LaBarbara



Think of innovative things you can do to help urban America understand what agriculture is and why it's an important part of the economy we enjoy in this great country.

— Jack Parnell

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people criticize the United States and its way of life and government, yet it has provided for anyone who wants to dig in and try," says Jack Parnell. "This is something I get very emotional about. You can attain anything you want!"

Parnell, who started with nothing, should know. He has enjoyed several careers and reached many goals, including working as Deputy Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture. Most importantly, he did it "his" way and he's not through yet.

"When you don't have a father to provide the proverbial golden spoon, you have to work pretty hard to make things happen," Parnell says.

Until Parnell moved to Washington, D.C., he had never lived in town. He grew up on his family's dairy and has been involved in agriculture all of his life.

Through 4-H, Parnell became a breeder of Angus cattle. His 4-H project evolved to the point he has never been without them.

He began his many careers as a field editor with the *Pacific Stockman* and *Stockman's Weekly*. He later purchased the *California Cattleman's Magazine*.

"In the process, I was working auction rings for pedigree livestock sales," says Parnell. "I became infatuated with being an auctioneer. Even though I don't have time to do any auctioneering now, I dearly loved the business,"

Hamey James, Paul Good and J.B. McCorkle are names out of the past that he fondly remembers.

He considers being a professional livestock auctioneer his primary profession. He gained a tremendous amount of respect throughout the United States as one of the nation's best.

His 20 years in the auction business proved to be very rewarding. It allowed him and his wife, Susan, to acquire their ranch near Auburn, Calif., and build their Angus herd. The 1,500-acre ranch is home to Clydesdale horses as well as Angus cattle.

Fifteen acres of the ranch are devoted to pumpkins, Indian corn and gourds. During harvest time teams of draft horses are hooked to hay wagons to take school children through the ranch to learn about agriculture. Last year more than 4,000 children participated in this learning experience.

They hope to do something similar

when their first Christmas tree harvest begins in 1991. Eventually they will increase the Christmas tree acres to sustain a market of 1,000 trees per season.

He and Susan also ventured into the restaurant business near Auburn. They built The Headquarters House, noted for elegant country dining, and complemented it with the Angus Hills Golf Course,

Parnell founded and was board chairman of a bank in Auburn. Due to conflict of interest, being an active member of the bank's board is one of the many things Parnell had to give up when he went to Washington. He also had to lease out the ranch, relinquish The Headquarters House and the golfcourse.

Their two sons, Lon and Randy, and daughter, Jill Flanigan, stepped in. Randy replaced his father as board chairman of the Auburn bank. Lon is involved on a day-to-day basis with the ranch. Jill manages The Headquarters House. Randy is an auctioneer and sells some Angus sales. He also manages a business that receives, warehouses and sells confiscated Drug Enforcement Agency goods.

"I always told Susan I was going to quit (auctioneering) while I was on top," says Parnell. "I really didn't plan to quit so soon."

In 1983 California Governor Deukmejian asked Parnell to become a member of his cabinet.

"I started with nothing and fought like hell to buy ranches and put things together and raise our family," says Parnell. "Susan and I thought we could pay back some of what we had gained through government service."

So began a political career.

Parnell went into state government as Deputy Director of Agriculture. When the Fish and Game Department ended the year with a \$9 million deficit, the Governor asked him to take over. With his expertise in management and economics, Parnell tackled the job. He spent four years as director of the department.

When California's Director of Agriculture resigned, he moved into that position which he held for two and a half years.

In 1989 Parnell accepted President Bush's invitation to become US. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture.

He humbly says, "One thing just led to another."

During his tenure as deputy secretary, Parnell didn't spend much time at his California ranch home. His day at the Washington, D.C. office began at 6:30 a.m. and he was rarely home before 8 p.m. He spent one day of the weekend going through papers he didn't have a chance to review during the week.

He also did a lot of public speaking and traveled throughout the United States. In one week he may have visited Kansas City, Springfield, Ill., and have stops in Iowa, Alabama and Nevada.

Meanwhile, Susan became involved in Agriculture Literacy, which is a program designed to bring agriculture into the classroom. It is a national organization associated with the Department of Agriculture. In her spare time she rides jumping horses and has joined a fox hunting club.

She likes it all and says, "Life itself is such an education. If you can laugh, it helps."

Parnell feels a political career is a rare opportunity. When he was done in Washington he went home to California, where state politics holds great fascination for him.

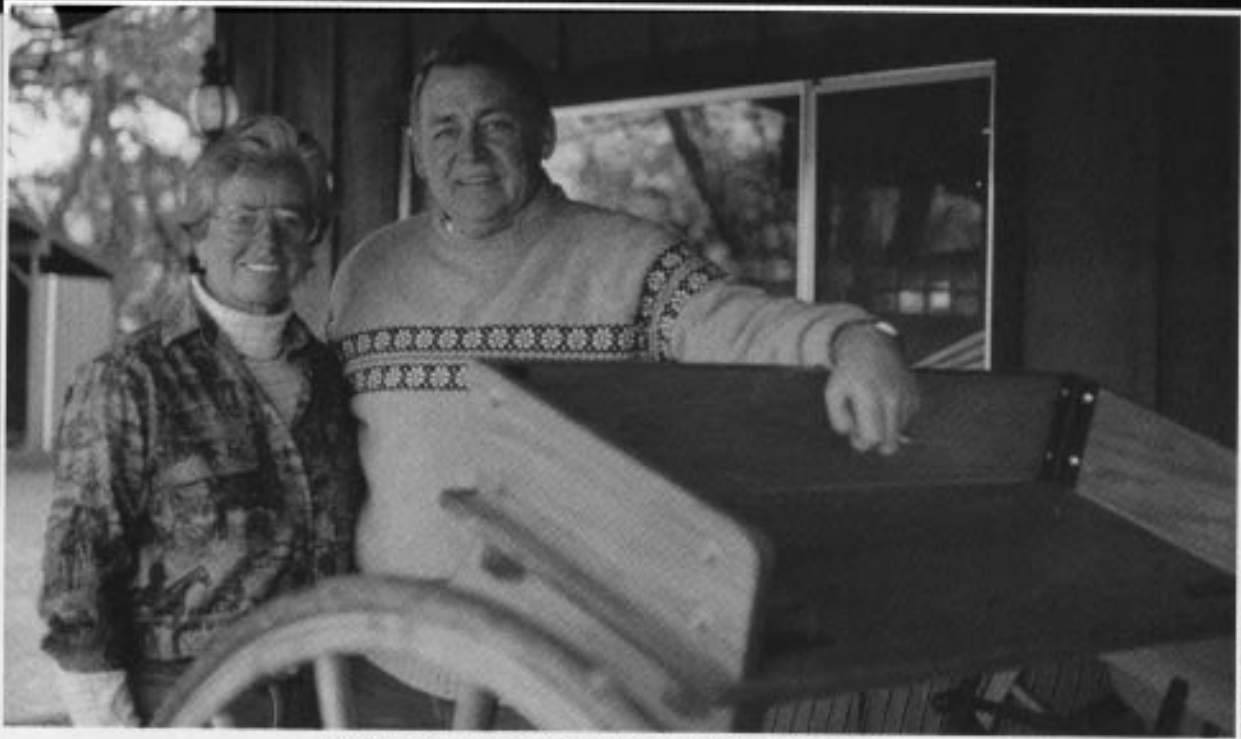
"I may run for the Senate or lieutenant governor," he says. As an afterthought, he adds, "When a person becomes governor one of the things he has to deal with is making the money go around."

While in office, he had the total budget obligation of the Department of Agriculture which is approximately \$70 billion, not dissimilar to the size of the California budget.

"It is a privilege to serve in a position where you try to make long term sense out of regulatory decisions that the government makes," he says. "Particularly in these times when environmental interests are at an all-time high.

"People like to believe the devastating things that newspapers print about what is happening to the environment. For example, people like to talk about an unsafe food supply. When, in fact, our food supply is the safest in the world."

Parnell believes when an environmental organization questions the use of fertilizer and chemicals, they are really questioning agriculture's



Jack and Susan Parnell at home on their California ranch.

BARBARA LABERGE PHOTO

viability. They are questioning the very reason we have an affluent society which allows us to make solid environmental policy. Lesser developed countries, people who have no money, cannot do that.

We need to recognize when we regulate agriculture and industry so tightly that they are no longer economic and viable, we have shot the goose that laid the golden egg.

Organic labeling is a good example of such regulation. Organic and natural do not necessarily mean safe and should not be seen as such. Today's chemicals preclude many devastating results from micro toxins contained in various fruits and vegetables. Realistically, organic labeling is questionable. Little will be derived from it. It will be hard to regulate and monitor for authenticity.

"It was exciting to be in Washington, D.C.," Parnell says. "Not only because of the environmental issues but because the world balance of agriculture is so complicated.

"World trade is important to us because we have 250 million people in America and 250 million people cannot buy everything we produce. If we take our eyes off of international trade our farmers will have to shrink to half the volume that they have today."

To tell you how efficient we are, only 2 percent of our people are involved in the production of agriculture; 40 million acres has been taken out of production through the Conservation Reserve Program; and we are still feeding the world. Our efficiency enables Americans to eat for less than 12 percent of their disposable income.

"We are very good at what we do." Parnell says. "I am proud of that."

Twenty-five percent of the U.S. work force depends on agriculture. It not only involves the person who operates the ranch or farm, it is the person who weaves the materials for clothes and makes shoes out of leather. It is the druggists and chemists.

"Agriculture is a high risk, sophisticated, highly capitalized business that requires a lot of talent," says Parnell. "We have come to a place where we have an affluent society that has migrated away from the farm and ranch."

Ninety-eight percent of the population does not understand agriculture. They are putting pressure on us in the name of the environment. People need to know the scientific facts and that agriculture contributed \$289 billion to the economy in 1989.

Agriculture people need to speak out on these issues at their local Lions, Rotary and Elks Clubs. They

need to be involved in politics on the local and county level, he says.

They need to allocate time in the classroom to help Susan advance agriculture literacy. She thinks young people do not realize the opportunities that are in agriculture, such as world trade and research.

A farmer in Auburn has school children visit his farm where he shows them how his cattle are handled. He explains why they are vaccinated and why it does not hurt them to be hauled in a trailer. It is a direct rebuttal to animal rights activism.

"I would like to tell the Angus world to actively engage," says Parnell. "Set goals on how to tell the story of agriculture from the point of view of what we contribute to society. Engage in environmental debates. Agriculture in general has not been very good at that. I encourage Angus breeders to think of innovative things they can do that will help urban America understand what agriculture is and why it's an important part of the economy we enjoy in this great country.

"Other than that, tell them (Angus breeders) I miss them a hell of a lot," says Parnell. "I have traveled the country over and I absolutely miss being involved in the Angus business. It was a great time in my life."

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