



Pride of the Poncias

The story of Stemple Creek Ranch in California.

Words by Karen Pavone. Photos by Scott Baxter.

Nestled in the rolling, fog-covered hills of coastal West Marin County rests Stemple Creek Ranch. At nearly a thousand acres, this “damn good” grassland stretches off Old Highway One near the small Northern California town of Tomales. The creek, its namesake, winds through the basin of the property on its way to the Pacific Ocean.

This land has been in the Poncia family for four generations. Owners Al and Cathie Poncia have been married nearly 50 years and raised four children here.

Al was a jack of all trades. Alongside his mom, Jennie, he ran the family dairy, mended fences, and repaired equipment. “Al was up at 2 a.m. every day to milk,” Cathie recalls, smiling at her husband. “He’d come in long enough for breakfast, play with the kids, and then head out to do it all over again.” She often caught him dozing at the table with a fork still in his hand. “He’d barely sit down for dinner at night before he was off again to a meeting.”

Cathie was a 4-H leader, active in PTA, and a trained EMT volunteer. If their neighbors had an emergency, Cathie was there—always



ready to lend a hand. She sang at weddings, funerals, and many local events. Al marveled at her ability to have the kids “washed and powdered up,” ready to hug their dad after a long day working the ranch.

Al was a leader in his community. As president of the local farm bureau in the late '60s, he helped ranchers organize and successfully fight proposed changes in the Marin Countywide Plan. The original plan proposed a development project for 125,000 people that would have ended 150 years of family farms in the area. In many ways, he was before his time. He saw environmental regulations coming, and was one of the first ranchers to restore creeks on his land that had been damaged by cattle. To protect sensitive wildlife habitat, he fenced off access to Stemple Creek and replanted native shrubs. He welcomed visits from local schoolchildren, teaching them about ranching and conservation. Others soon followed his example. In recognition of his accomplishments, he received a Natural Resources Conservation Service Award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2002.

In the early '70s, he was one of 30 California farmers selected to participate in the California Agriculture Leadership Program. For three years, he and his colleagues traveled the world as ambassadors. They observed different farm practices, and exchanged ideas for ways to keep the future of ranching alive globally.

Today, Al is actively involved in local land preservation. “There was a time I thought farming was forever,” he says sadly. “These days that’s less and less true.” He points to rules and regulations being heaped on ranchers by the state and federal government. “The people who are making these policies don’t have a clue what it takes to run a ranch,” he says. “They make it extremely difficult to be profitable.” Stiff inheritance taxes pose a serious threat to many ranch families. “The problem with most farmland,” Al continues, “is that it has appreciated more in value than its ability to pay back.”

Many ranches do not survive past the third generation because the younger generation is either uninterested or financially unable to keep the ranch going. “It’s damn hard to keep,” Cathie says. “There’s a



lot at stake. The regulations keep coming fast and furious. We can't promise our grandkids this future, but we're sure gonna try."

To preserve their land for the generations to come, the Poncias have sold conservation easements to the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT). Formed in 1980, this nonprofit was made up of members from the agriculture and conservation communities who joined forces with two shared goals: to help ranch families keep their land and to preserve open space. Al was a founding member. He and his son Loren served on the board for many years.

To date, MALT has purchased the development rights on 45,000 acres of privately owned farmland in the county. Landowners often use the money to capitalize their businesses or pay inheritance taxes, making the family ranch more attractive to future generations. Ranchers still own and can sell or will their property, but it is protected under MALT's umbrella—set aside as agricultural land forever. "MALT has given ranchers a usable alternative," Al says proudly. "It's a way to sell something and still keep it." Cathie agrees, asking, "Why spend your whole life here if not to pass it on?"

Credit for the ranch is given to Angelo "Pa Nono" Poncia, Al's grandfather. "None of us would be here today if it weren't for Grandpa," Al says. Angelo arrived in New York from his native Italy on a steamship in 1897 searching for fresh opportunity, higher wages, and the chance to own property. Traveling west to California by train, Angelo made his way to the remote West Marin coast where he settled in the tiny town of Fallon. The area was home to many dairies and he found work as a dairy hand. Within a year he had saved enough money to lease the land that would become the Poncia home ranch.

In 1905 he met and married Swiss-Italian Rachel Pozzi and together they ran the dairy and raised four children, three boys and a

ABOVE: Al Poncia, his son Loren, and fifth-generation Poncia granddaughters in front of one of the first dairy barns built in Fallon, circa 1860. BELOW: Lisa Poncia, Loren's wife, holding Julianna (age 1), and Avery Jane (age 4). OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Cathie Poncia with her granddaughter, Avery Jane, taken inside Angelo's red ranch house, also referred to as "over home." This, too, is circa 1860, and one of the earliest buildings in the area.



RIGHT: A traditional “just the Poncia boys” photo, from left, Guido, Al with baby Loren, and Pa Nono. BELOW: Four generations of Poncias. Top row, left to right: Al Poncia, Cathie Poncia, baby Loren, “Zia” Carrie Poncia and Marietta Albini Bastistessa “Nona” (Jennie Poncia’s mother). Bottom row, left to right: Alfred “Guido” Poncia, Jessica, Melissa (on Pa Nono’s lap), Angelo “Pa Nono” Poncia and Jennifer. Guido’s wife Jennie is not pictured.

girl, eventually purchasing the Fallon Creamery in 1911, and the home ranch property five years later.

In those early days the creamery supplied nearby San Francisco residents with milk, cream, and butter that traveled first by railroad car from Fallon to Sausalito, then by ferry across the bay to the city. Remnants of the railroad trestle are still visible today along the banks of Stemple Creek.

Angelo died at 100. Well into his 90s, he still strolled the fence line, chewing on a Toscanelli cigar, carrying nails in his pocket and a hammer for repairs. Oldest son Alfred “Guido” Poncia started his own dairy on the ranch in the ’40s. He and his wife, Jennie, raised their two children—Al and sister Edwardeen—while running the business. Alfred’s sister, Carrie, attended business school in San Francisco and returned home to help Angelo run his dairy. She became a successful dairymaid in her own right.

Al remembers hearing his dad before dawn, singing opera in the field at the top of his lungs to call the cows in for milking. His mother, who worked the ranch as hard as her husband, encouraged him to go to college—but he stayed to work the ranch instead. In 1974 he formed a partnership with his parents, naming the business Box A Ranches after his brand. When Al’s dad passed away, he and his mom carried on the family legacy.

In the mid-1980s, the Poncias had to adapt to stay alive. Changes in government regulation caused a steep drop in milk



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prices, which destroyed much of the dairy industry. Unable to make a living, Al, Jennie and Cathie made the heartbreaking decision to close the dairy in 1989 and raise Angus beef instead. Fortunately their son Loren was eager to step into the family business. “Loren is obsessed with ranching,” says Al. “Some people are born cow people and he is one of them.”

Loren and his three older sisters grew up playing in the ranch’s barns, building forts, and picking wild blackberries in Stemple Creek. He knows every piece of the property. Cathie vividly remembers her five-year-old son perched on the bench seat in the kitchen, studying every cow and blade of grass he could see through the window with binoculars. He was active in 4-H and FFA, often helping his dad and grandmother with chores around the dairy. He loved hunting the ducks, quail, geese, dove, and deer that lived on the property. After high school he attended college at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and earned a degree in dairy science/ag business. It was there that he met his future wife, Lisa, and the couple returned in 2005 to take their place as the fourth generation on the ranch.

Now 73, Al recently made the difficult decision to hand the reins over to Loren, who is working hard to make the business his own. Loren changed the name from Box A Ranches to Stemple Creek Ranch. He recognized the local consumer demand for organic beef and lamb and so began the lengthy process of certifying their cattle, sheep, and grassland. Today, Stemple Creek’s pastures and animals are certified organic—a move that’s proved highly profitable to their bottom line. They also sell their meat direct to the public through the Stemple Creek website and at local farmers’ markets.

Following in his dad’s footsteps, Loren looks for ways to make the operation more sustainable. Stemple Creek’s cattle are now grazed on rotation, using movable hot wires to keep cows off resting fields and encourage new growth. Forty water troughs are powered by solar pumps and a gravity flow tank (made possible by a matching funds grant from the Environmental Quality Incentive Program). Stemple Creek Ranch has been awarded a four out of a possible five rating by Global Animal Partnership for animal welfare, which demonstrates the Poncias’ commitment to humane husbandry.

Al says Loren’s changes “scared the living hell out of me to take that dive. We did things differently in my day, but he said to me: ‘Dad, you worked too much in the business and not on the business. If we keep doing it your way, we’re gonna go broke.’ He’s a businessman, and I’m very proud of that.”

Loren welcomes his sisters’ involvement because he believes that working together will secure the future for their parent’s eight grandchildren. All three of Al and Cathie’s daughters share a deep love for the ranch and its history. Jennifer Poncia, an artist and teacher, creates unique folk art inspired by their family heritage. Melissa Williams, an elementary schoolteacher, combines agriculture with project-based lessons in her classroom. She’s also the ranch historian, spending countless hours interviewing old-timers in the area. Jessica Valentine recently launched Box A Designs, her business using reclaimed wood and artifacts from the ranch to make one-of-a-kind furniture pieces.

Loren’s middle name is Angelo after his great-grandfather. “I have great admiration for what he did,” he says. “I consider it an honor and a privilege to continue what he started.” That thought drives him to succeed. “I don’t want this story to end with me. I want the business



ABOVE: A curious Stemple Creek Ranch Angus heifer. BELOW: Loren Poncia uses movable hot wires to rotate his cattle on Stemple Creek’s pastures.



to be fun and profitable so the next generation will want to stay and keep it going.”

He knows making that dream a reality means long hours and a lot of hard work. While he focuses on the daily ranch operation, his wife Lisa, an attorney, holds down the home front and helps keep the business running smoothly. Together they make the perfect team. “Sometimes I wish I wasn’t so passionate about all this,” he smiles, gesturing to the pastures around him, “but I am.”

Al and Cathie now look forward to this new chapter in the history of their ranch. They both know it’s in capable hands. “I think it takes both generations,” says Cathie thoughtfully. “There have been lots of sacrifices, but we are blessed. In spite of all the obstacles, we’re confident our kids will keep it going.”

Al concedes times have changed. “It’s hard to recognize that you’re redundant,” he reflects. “There’s the herd of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I’m the yesterday. Our children and grandkids are today and tomorrow.” ■

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