

**OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE,
FOOD AND FORESTRY**

2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4912

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Betty Thompson, betty.thompson@ag.ok.gov, 405-522-6105

Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Bobbie
Steenbergen

By Bryan Painter

EL RENO – The nation's widest tornado on record -- 2.6 miles in width -- was on its way.

At times this storm on May 31, 2013, packed wind speeds greater than 295 mph.

About 15 to 20 minutes before the arrival of this monster, Bobbie Steenbergen, her daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter, took shelter in neighbors Pete and Catherine DeNegri's basement.

"They lost their roof and water started pouring in, and the basement ceiling started coming down," Steenbergen said. "My daughter said, 'Mom, we need to get out of here!'"

They did get out, physically unharmed -- and they were thankful.

However, so much else was gone.

Steenbergen has a small horse racing operation called Spear B Farm in the El Reno area.

"It destroyed my home, barn, horse shelters, fencing and I lost six horses," she said.

The latter was especially emotionally challenging for Steenbergen whose love for her horses dates back to her childhood in the 1940s.

However, amid all the pain, Steenbergen began to witness an outpouring of compassion.

In a way, this was a return on the kindness she has shown those around her in agriculture for decades, especially the equine industry.

She had developed a tremendous wealth of friends through her work with the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce at the National Finals Rodeo in Oklahoma City, numerous national, regional and state horse shows and through her involvement in

horse racing. Help came from near, such as neighbors, and far, such as those she'd never met before.

"I received a lot of support from the equine community," she said. "The wonderful volunteers, including my daughter Robbie, her family and friends from Edmond, weren't here only on Saturday, but throughout the next two weeks. There were two busloads of youth with their instructors from Chicago and Michigan called the National Relief Network, and a Boy Scout Troop from Arkansas that camped out in the pasture one night and worked the next day. My Sunday School teacher, Richard Laws and wife Judy brought lunches for volunteers.

"I stayed in a motel the first 10 days, and I was looking for an apartment, when Janine (Regier) with Express Ranch, who was here helping with the cleanup, invited me to stay at the ranch in one of their apartments. That was truly a blessing. Janine and Bob (Funk) were so wonderful and invited me to stay until I had a house built."

After two months, the fencing was coming along as well as a barn, so Steenbergen bought a used fifth-wheel trailer and moved it on the property. She wanted to be close to the horses because they had been through so much in the storm. Two of the horses had raced that spring and were home for a layoff before returning to racing in the fall at Remington Park.

"I started bringing the horses home that had been farmed out and those I had kept at a paddock close by that I could doctor," she said. "I have a rock and inscribed on it are the words: 'Never alone' with an angel. I do believe God and the angels were with me at this difficult time."

Preparing for her future

Steenbergen was the youngest of Robert Clyde and Velma Hammett's three girls.

Agriculture and non-farm businesses were both a part of her childhood.

The family lived on a farm south of Gracemont, not far from Anadarko. There, they raised cotton, corn and cattle. Like many small farms, they had swine, chickens and a big garden.

"We didn't have a lot of money, but we always had plenty of food that was raised from the farm," Steenbergen said. "I think the highlight of living on a farm was being able to drive a team of horses, when I was probably about 7, for my Dad while he shucked corn, and going to the sale barn with him when school was out."

When Steenbergen was about 10 years old, her parents divorced, and Bobbie, her Mother, and sisters moved to Gracemont where her Mom ran a restaurant.

"Two years later my Mom bought a confectionary in Anadarko," she said. "It was a big hang out for kids in and around the surrounding towns. I worked in the café from 12 years old until I graduated from high school in Anadarko in 1954. We were known for our good hamburgers and milkshakes."

The equine industry

After Steenbergen graduated from Draughon's Business College, she was offered the opportunity to assist in the offices of the President Pro Tempore of the Oklahoma State Senate.

In 1965, she was promoted to the position of State Senate Calendar Clerk, a position she held for 25 legislative sessions. It was also in 1965 that the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce offered her a part-time job assisting with the National Finals Rodeo.

"I would work the Senate, take the summer off to be with the girls, then go to the Oklahoma City Chamber to work on the rodeo," said Steenbergen, who remembers helping with ticket sales, souvenir program sales and the ladies luncheon, among other duties. "It took a few years, but the National Finals was a sell out and the place to be."

She also worked with Stanley Draper Jr. and Ray Ackerman to bring the Miss Rodeo America pageant from Las Vegas to

Oklahoma City so that it could be integrated as part of the NFR. By about the mid-1970s, the American Quarter Horse Association World Championship Show had moved to Oklahoma City, and she helped with ticket sales and other events tied to the show. In 1990, Steenbergen accepted the position of Director of Metropolitan and Agricultural Events for the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. She worked alongside many individuals, Draper, Steve Collier and several others to bring equine events to Oklahoma City.

She appreciates the efforts made by many to keep those events.

"With all the wonderful equine events held at State Fair Park," Steenbergen said, "the Chamber worked with State Fair Park to pass the 'Bed Tax' which financed improvements to State Fair Park. Due to these improvements, the American Quarter Horse Association, Oklahoma Quarter Horse Association, National Reining Horse Association, United States Team Roping Championships, International Professional Rodeo Association and many other equine and agricultural events enjoy the finest show facility in the nation."

How successful have the events been?

The AQHA World Championship Show, for example, began in 1974 at Louisville, Ky.

“There were six judges at the first two AQHA world shows and less than 900 entries before it moved to OKC in 1976,” said Don Treadway, who retired as AQHA executive vice president in 2015.

The 2017 Lucas Oil AQHA World Championship Show at State Fair Park featured 34 judges, spanned 17 days and consisted of more than 4,840 entries from 10 countries.

Treadway described Steenbergen as a special person who, during her time at the OKC Visitors and Convention Bureau, made visitors to the AQHA World Show feel special. Treadway said she went above and beyond. She helped AQHA members attending the show by offering to assist them with hotel arrangements, scheduling tours of area attractions and horse farms, and much more.

“Certainly, the AQHA World Show was a more enjoyable experience for attending AQHA members with Bobbie Steenbergen front and center,” Treadway said. “She made the AQHA staff’s life easier by tending to numerous details unique to the show and OKC.”

Horses and more horses

Through the years, whether working at the state Capitol or Chamber, Steenbergen and family raised and showed

Appaloosas. She would show horses at halter and in lead line classes with her youngest daughter Renee.

"We started this event when she was 2, and she won State Champion at age 4," Steenbergen said. "I was the secretary to the Oklahoma Appaloosa Horse Club for several years."

Bobbie has three daughters, Rhonda, Robbie and Renee and each started showing horses and participating in rodeo events at a young age. Rhonda and Robbie won several queen contests and are still involved with horses.

Whatever Steenbergen has done, horses have usually been close by.

After she retired from the Chamber in 2006, she began to focus on her equine operation, the Spear B Farm.

"My horses are all home bred, and I have raced at Remington, Iowa, Houston, Chicago, Nebraska, Kansas and Minnesota," she said. "My first race win was in 1991 at the Woodlands in Kansas City. Robert Clyde, named after my Dad, won his first Maiden race by 7 1/2 lengths. I didn't need an airplane to fly home. The biggest thrill in my racing career was to win the Oklahoma Classics Turf Champion with Jack Earl at Remington Park for two years in a row, and I am looking forward to another possibility of winning this prestigious stakes race."

Still, in addition to these accomplishments, she cherishes the response that came from friends and family after the massive late May 2013 storm passed.

"I was and am, so appreciative of all the support, love and inspiration from so many," Steenbergen said. "I wish I could name them all."

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Editor's note: This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of industry professionals.



Photo caption: Bobbie Steenbergen of El Reno is shown here with her horse Sister Shirley, named for Steenbergen's sister Shirley Hitt of Marlow. Steenbergen is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture.