

AQHA Executive Committee member Gene Graves has shown horses, run his own ranch and sent horses to the racetrack.



Being One of the Doers

AQHA Executive Committee member

*Gene Graves says that if you're going
to belong, you have to do your part.*

Story and photos by Jim Jennings

AS THE NEWEST MEMBER OF THE AQHA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, Gene Graves of Grand Island, Nebraska, has some definite ideas as to what needs to take place to make AQHA more viable for the average member. No. 1 is to get the members involved.

"There is a certain percentage of what I call the 'doers,'" he said, "those who do the work. The rest are just hanging on. Those that are hanging on have got to become more involved because if they don't, pretty soon the doers are going to get tired of doing, and then we are in trouble."

Gene is a doer, but he's not getting tired, he's just getting started.

Born and raised on a small farm in central Nebraska, about 30 miles east of Grand Island, Gene grew up in corn country, where corn stalks are all you see when you drive down the highway. But corn wasn't in Gene's plans and in 1955, as soon as he finished high school, Gene left the farm.

The next several years saw him get a degree in education, teach school, work as a pharmaceutical sales representative, return to college for a master's in psychology and counseling and then work as a school counselor. He was successful in all those callings, but in 1975, Gene changed careers again.

Back in 1963, he had married Barbara Bosselman, who had grown up in Grand Island, the daughter of a former trucker and owner of a truck stop. Barbara's father then opened another truck stop on the brand-new Interstate 80 and added to it a line of convenience stores. Barbara had worked for the company for a number of years, most recently as administrative executive secretary, but Gene joined in 1975, taking over as chief executive officer of the convenience store division.



Gene and Barbara Graves

Gene helped expand that part of the company throughout the state, but in 1999, with more than 30 stores in operation, he retired from the business, and he and Barbara sold their interest in the company to Barbara's brothers.

That's when they bought the ranch.

"Growing up, I would go to the rodeos and I decided early on that I wanted to be a cowboy. I never forgot that dream, so when Barbara and I got the opportunity, we bought a 3,000-acre ranch in the sandhills northwest of Burwell, Nebraska," Gene said. "We divided the ranch into several small pastures, piped water to each of them and established a pasture rotation plan."

Gene and Barbara decided early on that a cow-calf operation wouldn't work for them because they couldn't be at the ranch every day, and their plan was to do all the work themselves. So, they pastured yearlings for other cattlemen. They attended a team roping school put on by two-time Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association world champion Walt Woodard to learn how to rope, and for the next five years they traveled to the ranch several times a week, moving the cattle to other pastures when needed and roping and doctoring those that needed treatment. Gene headed and Barbara heeled, and their horses held the cattle while one or the other got off and did the doctoring.

"It was a great experience and it gave me a real insight into what the ranchers go through, but after five years it finally just got to be too much for us," Gene said. "It was 100 miles from our house to the ranch and we were driving it almost every other day. The winters can get tough up here, and those cattle have to be fed and taken care of. We tried to do everything ourselves, and we finally had to admit we

just couldn't do it."

So Gene changed careers again. They sold the ranch in 2004, and three years ago Gene obtained a real estate sales license and became a Realtor. Recently, he passed the exam to become a real estate broker, and having become a licensed auctioneer 10 years ago, he can now supervise real estate salespeople as well as handle all facets of land sold at auction.

"The auction thing is probably the most fun thing I do," Gene said. "We have at least two big consignment auctions at our farm every year and a lot of smaller auctions for people out in the community. And now that I have a broker's license, we're going to really push the auctions."

"Another thing I'm looking at is farm and ranch management. A farm or ranch manager in the state of Nebraska has to have a real estate license, and that's an area that I think I might want to get into. I know there's a definite need. There are a number of people who are managing farms or ranches who are not legally licensed to do so, and I think we're going to see a big crackdown on that."

Gene is involved in one other business. Three years ago, he and Barbara purchased the Barranada Shirt Co., revised the shirt design to make it more appealing to horse people and started marketing the product.

"The shirts were a new challenge for us," Gene said. "It has really become more Barbara's project because she loves the design field, but I agreed to help with the selection of the fabric and with the marketing."

The Horses

IT WAS WHILE GENE WAS RUNNING THE CONVENIENCE STORES that he and Barbara got into horses.

"Barbara and I actually met at the horse races in Grand Island," Gene said. "We had a lot of the same interests, but I had not been around horses as much as she had. The horses that I had been around growing up were horses that we had to have to farm. I even remember when we got our first tractor. We farmed with horses, and we had saddle horses that we used with our livestock, and that was my background as far as the horses went."

"Barbara had shown some as a girl growing up," he said, "but together, we didn't do a lot of showing until later on in our marriage. Times were tough, but as we became a little more successful, we bought a couple of mares and started riding them and then we had the opportunity to buy a great trail horse by the name of Brook Lin. She was about 13 when we got her; bought her and a trailer from



Today Gene works in real estate and continues to operate Diamond G Auction Co.

the same guy one night, one of those horse-trading deals. But she's still probably the greatest horse we've ever owned."

Brook Lin earned a Register of Merit in trail, but she also had points in tie-down roping, heeling, reining and western pleasure, and she was just what the Graveses needed. Barbara showed her some, but then she was assigned to their daughter, Cindy, who showed her successfully in both trail and western horsemanship.

Brook Lin was the start, but as time went on, they bought other horses and became active in the Nebraska Quarter Horse Association and with AQHA.

Gene said, "One of the good horses we've had is PVF Flashy Phantom. He was reserve world champion in junior western riding as a 4-year-old and he has taken me to the (AQHA World Championship Show) and the (Bayer Select World Championship Show) many times. I have won 50 western riding classes with him, and we still have him.

"We've also got Good N Plenty Benny, who I've made into a Superior western pleasure horse. He's only 7, and he has qualified for the World Show two different times. And Barbara has Impulsive Playboy. He is a real all-around horse. She has taken him to the World Show and the Bayer Select World many times in western pleasure, western riding, western horsemanship and showmanship.

"We've taken horses that have really worked for us and kept them," Gene said. "We've had opportunity to sell them for big money at times, but we told ourselves that maybe we are better off to keep these horses because we can have a lot more fun and we know where we are with them. We've started some young horses and sold some young horses, overseas and everywhere else, but the ones that we really like and really trust, with the grandkids and everything, they're still here."

Gene and Barbara's daughter, Cindy, grew up showing horses and although she no longer shows, she's still in the industry, running a western store in Broken Bow, Nebraska. Cindy's children, Taylor, 15, and Samuel, 11, both showed also, but neither is involved with horses right now because they are too busy with athletics. Cindy is married to Jim Duncan, a lawyer in Broken Bow.

The Graveses are also involved in the racehorse industry and have bred and raced a number of Thoroughbreds.

"One of the good Thoroughbreds we raised was Native Gary," Gene said. "In 1995, he won the Special Stakes here in Grand Island at Fonner Park. That was a \$25,000 race and he went on to win the Marion Van Berg Derby at Ak-Sar-Ben in Omaha the same year. That race had a \$25,000 purse, too. And we are partners in a Thoroughbred that we have at our barn now. Triple X is his name. He has made a little more than \$300,000. He's a nice horse."

AQHA

GENE IS VERY PROUD TO HAVE BEEN ELECTED TO SERVE ON THE Executive Committee – the first from Nebraska, he points out – and he's ready to go to work. With that in mind, one of the first things he wants to focus on is membership.

"I think the state affiliates, the various state associations, are one of the most important areas where we can get the members involved," Gene said. "We have some great affiliates, and then there are some that are not too strong. I think AQHA needs to set up a template of what we see in those affiliates that are very successful and provide it to those that are struggling. I think AQHA needs to be the



Gene has won 50 western riding classes on PVF Flashy Phantom.

leader and urge those affiliates that are struggling to let us help, let us show them how another affiliate that has had the same problems they are having, has worked around those problems and is getting things done. It's a lot easier to go to your state association meeting and have a good bottom line than it is to say, 'What are we going to do now to raise funds so we can keep going?'

"So often I see in some affiliates that the only reason someone wants to help is because it's going to benefit himself. That's one of the biggest problems we have. We've got to get these people to do things that are going to be good for everybody."

Gene said he knows there are lots of AQHA members that are members simply because being a member makes it cheaper to register and transfer horses.

"Somehow, we need to get those people to join their affiliates and become involved," he said. "The time has come that we have to get people involved because if we don't, the doers we have now are going to get tired of being doers. And if we lose those, we're really in trouble."

Gene became an AQHA director in 2000 and since then has served on the marketing and Foundation committees, the Foundation Council, and the nominations and credentials committee.

"When Barbara and I started becoming active at the AQHA level, I said right then, if I can't become involved and do my part, I don't want to do it," Gene said.

Gene's a doer. 🐾

Jim Jennings is AQHA's former executive director of publications. To comment, write to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.