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Heritage: Boskovich Farms traces history back to 1915 — and beyond

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In 1915, Stephen Boskovich bought his first parcel of land in the Lankershim District near Los Angeles and began farming. One hundred years later, two of his grandchildren are running what became Boskovich Farms in nearby Oxnard, CA, and the fourth generation of the family is beginning to find its way in the family firm.

It has been a legacy of success and family succession that few companies in the produce industry, or in any business, have duplicated.



Phil Boskovich Sr. on a tractor in 1939.

A well-known axiom in family business academia says that the first generation builds the company, the second generation struggles to maintain it and the third generation tends to destroy it. Not true with Boskovich Farms.

Each succeeding generation has grown the company to loftier heights, and while the job of the third generation isn't yet complete, it has grown the company far beyond the capacity that existed when the first two generations gave up the reins. And this current generation has no plans to abdicate any time soon.

"The Boskovichs don't retire," quipped Phil Boskovich, the 63-year-old current president.



Stephen Boskovich He shares decision making with his cousin, George Boskovich, who wears the title of chief executive officer, and is a few years older.

When a decision needs to be made, the two owners go into a room, discuss it and come to an agreement. Phil says they don't always come to the decision easily, but it works out one way or the other.

In fact, the company has expanded that original several-acre plot to producing fresh vegetables on more than 15,000 acres in California and Mexico. It has grown from being the "Onion King" as a singular specialist in green onions to a highly diversified mixed vegetable grower, shipper and processor of more than 40 crops.

While that first land purchase in 1915 marked the start of the company, the story pre-dates that by a couple of decades.

It was in the late 1880s that teenager Stephen Boskovich left what is now Croatia and headed to the United States with no money and no education. He was not even literate in his native tongue. He landed on Ellis Island in New York harbor, as did other immigrants, and had to pass a health test to gain admittance.



George Boskovich Sr. with a Boskovich Bros. truck, circa 1946. His first break came when he heard his native language coming from the back room of a New York City restaurant. He secured a job and began his journey toward creating an American success story.

"From there, my grandfather moved up to working construction, digging ditches," said Phil.

After the turn of the century, Stephen headed out to California and joined forces with a cousin in Los Angeles. That led to an arranged marriage around 1908 to the cousin's sister-in-law, who came from Croatia to fulfill her side of the bargain.

Those early years in L.A. are a bit sketchy. Stephen did come from a family of subsistence farmers in Croatia, so most likely he did make his living working the land. Boskovich Farms pegs its start to 1915, because that is the year on the deed of what was Stephen Boskovich's first plot of land.

Over the next 20 to 25 years, Stephen raised his family and grew his farm incrementally. He had four sons, Phil, George, Joe and John, who died at a young age. When the United States entered World War II, Phil Sr. got a deferment as a farmer, while George and John went off to war. It was during this time period that the Boskovichs began growing what would become their specialty — green onions.



Boskovich family members in photo from the mid-1980s include (front row) Joe Boskovich, George Boskovich Jr. and Philip Boskovich Jr., and (back row) George Boskovich Sr., John Boskovich and Philip Boskovich Sr. After the war, the three Boskovich sons took over control of the firm, and it began to resemble the major company it would eventually become.

A major turning point, said Phil, was in 1950, when his dad got married.

“My mom, Lena Boskovich, who is 91 and still alive today, started the first set of books the company ever had,” he said. But it was still 10 years before the brothers would incorporate under the Boskovich Farms name.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the company continued to specialize in green onions and increased the land it farmed each year.

In those years, Phil Sr. was in charge of growing, George Sr. handled the packing shed and John was driving the truck delivering the green onions to the L.A. produce market. By the late 1960s, urbanization pushed the company out of the San Fernando Valley and further north in Los Angeles County to Saugus.

In the 1970s, the third generation of Boskovich’s joined the family operation. George Jr. followed his

dad and began running the packing shed and sales. Phil's two sons — Phil Jr. and Joe — also joined the company after graduating from the University of Southern California. Phil Jr. followed his dad into the field, but Joe, who had a business degree, took over the sales department, and became the face of the company through most of the 1980s and '90s.

After Joe took over the sales department, George and Phil teamed up in the field operation and split their duties due to the substantial growth of the business.

It was in the early 1980s that the third generation began taking over the leadership of the company and grew it into the business it is today. Phil said it has been very evolutionary and not the result of following a well-defined master plan.



Boskovich Farms workers on a processing line at the firm's facility in Oxnard, CA. Year by year, the company has added land, crops, and, eventually, value-added items. While he, his brother Joe and cousin George were much more aggressive than the second generation, Phil credits an outside grower with actually unlocking the firm's potential.

"In the early 1980s, Jim Barkley came to us and said he had 500 acres of green onions in Mexico and wanted us to market it," Phil said. "That's how we originally got into Mexico."

At that point, the three Boskovich Farms leaders realized there was a lot of potential for growth. Soon they moved the operation to Oxnard. Radishes were the first crop added to the mix, followed by leeks, carrots and kale (before it was the super star it is today).

Phil also credits increased green onion production from Mexico for sending the firm down a more diversified path.

There was no doubt about it, Mexican growers had a huge labor advantage in a labor-intensive crop like green onions. Diversification was necessary for survival. The addition of a robust spinach program with bagged spinach was one of the company's first entrees into the value-added arena. Today the firm has many products, including an entry in the brussels sprouts category, which Phil called the "next kale" in terms of gaining consumer popularity.

It was in 2001 that Joe Boskovich retired and George assumed Joe's responsibilities in sales, marketing and as CEO of the company, while Phil took over all of the farming operations.

Some of the newer products on the firm's sales board are about 30 SKUs of organic vegetables. It is a growth category and Phil expects it to continue to expand. He said California's water situation has also created the need for change. Boskovich Farms may need to follow the water and expand into different areas.

But without a doubt, for Boskovich one of the biggest changes that occurred in the 100-year history of the company has been the attention paid to food safety. For most of the firm's history, it was just a given that they produced safe food. Phil said sophisticated testing methods have led to a much greater emphasis on food safety. Boskovich Farms now has a sizable food-safety department that didn't even exist 20 years ago.

Though George and Phil are in their 60s and eyeing the next generation of Boskovichs that will take over the operation, they are not ready to give up the reins.

"They don't have enough experience yet to make the decisions," he said in a matter-of-fact way.

Currently, there are three members of the fourth generation working at Boskovich Farms: George III, 35, has followed his father in sales, while Phil III, 25, has followed his father in the growing end of the business. Bridget, Phil's 23-year-old daughter, just recently joined the firm in the marketing department. She had been wanting to join the company earlier but her dad didn't have a position for her, and his first instinct is to believe that women don't belong out in the field.

Bridget, on the other hand, loves the farming end of the business and appears to share a passion for agriculture that has sustained the Boskovichs for more than 100 years.

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