

Kathy Arnold-Loftus – 2019

A longtime advocate for preserving the community's ranching heritage, Loftus has worked her entire life in San Luis Obispo County agriculture. Today, she has turned over the family ranching duties to her son, Claude, who raises cattle on several ranches throughout Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties, including their home ranch in the Cuyama Valley. Loftus has two children, Claude Loftus (wife Bonnie) and Katie Cooley (husband Stan), and five grandchildren, Hazel, Elsie, Ada, Clayton and Grady.

She is the daughter of the late Claude and Hazel Kuhnle Arnold, who farmed and ranched at the Chimineas Ranch in Carrisa Plains since the early 1940s. Her father's family moved to the Pozo-Santa Margarita area in 1913, and the Kuhnle and Weir families on her mother's side moved into the Estrella and Shandon area in the 1880s. Both families were farmers and ranchers.

"The grandchildren will be the sixth generation of my family here in San Luis Obispo County working in agriculture," Loftus said with pride. She said her love of the ranching lifestyle goes back to her childhood with her twin sister, Claudia. "My sister and I reminisce about going to Bakersfield with my dad to receive cattle off the railroad cars, sometimes in the middle of the night. We'd fall asleep on the catwalk waiting to unload cattle and take them back to Chimineas." She said the ranch offered everything a kid could ask for growing up. "We'd take a drive on the ranch every night, or we'd have a picnic and go check cattle or look at wildlife, and for us, it was the best vacation we could have asked for. When you truly love the land, you just never want to leave it."

Through the 45 years she leased and lived at the Santa Margarita Ranch raising cattle, Loftus was also a champion for agriculture education and outreach. She worked to promote and preserve the community's ranching heritage by hosting and volunteering for countless farm tours, barbecues, and events.

From journalists to farmers from foreign countries, leadership groups, teachers, students, and even a Russian nuclear scientist, Loftus is proud of her legacy as an ambassador for agriculture. "No matter what the event, ag or otherwise, I always made sure people went away knowing they had been part of something special, and that it was because of agriculture, especially ranching, that they were there!"

She served in a number of leadership positions in agriculture, including a decade at the San Luis Obispo County Cattlewomen as a board member and chair of several committees, 16 years as a San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau board member, a Cal Poly Rodeo Booster director, Paso Robles Pioneer Museum Historical Society board member, San Luis Obispo County Agricultural Education Committee board member, and an Agricultural Liaison Representative for former County Supervisor Mike Ryan.

She also volunteered in local philanthropic causes, including as a founding board member of Hospice Afternoon at the Ranch and as a fundraiser for Jack's Helping Hand. Loftus said the importance of supporting people with terminal illness and their families "really hit home" when her husband Don Loftus passed away from cancer at the age of 36.

Her peers have long recognized Loftus' contributions to the community. Today, thanks to the generosity of an anonymous friend, she has the honor of presenting the Cattlewomen's annual college scholarship in her name. "Nothing has been as rewarding as serving on the Scholarship committee," Loftus said. "Reading all those applications gives you faith in the future of agriculture."

"My main passion was sharing the ranch history with children. Through the years, probably every fourth-grade class in the county toured Santa Margarita Ranch. I called it, 'Early California Rancho Days, Past, Present and Future'. Loftus' love for telling the story of cattle ranching continues today. "We started a museum on the ranch, and presently I'm in the process of turning a cargo trailer into a traveling ranch museum so I can go anywhere throughout the state and give presentations." She treasures having opened up her home and the ranch to college students over the years. "I was extremely proud to have helped in a small way over 20 college kids live at the ranch with us, and of those, 17 went on to graduate at Cal Poly."

Looking back, Loftus said some the best times she ever had were at Cattlewomen events. "From making beef promotion videos at Caroline Bello's home, to volunteering with Lesa John to represent Cattlewomen at a Cal Poly cooking demo, only to find out we were just the dish washers, to preparing dinner for school teachers in the County, I am grateful for all the friends and good memories I've made."