



This page: Taylor Brown and his wife, Shannon, at home on their ranch. Facing page: Brown hits the airwaves on his Northern Ag Network radio show.



Through his TV and radio shows and now as a state senator, Taylor Brown is a voice for farmers and ranchers

# Agriculture's Biggest Advocate

His voice needs no introduction but radio protocol requires it. From the coulees near Sand Springs, where his family put up a one-room school, to the halls of the Montana Senate, everyone knows: "This is Taylor Brown on the Northern Ag Network."

The emphasis is on the "Ag" with a rising tone accentuating the "work."

And what a network he has formed. It now includes more than 90 affiliated radio stations from the western Dakotas through Montana to Idaho and Wyoming and 13 TV stations in Montana and Wyoming.

Since his first radio job in 1979 to ownership and expansion of the Northern Broadcasting System to launching a new Web site for agricultural information, Brown's intense work ethic has garnered name recognition that many politicians beg for. Whether that familiarity is a boon or bane remains to be seen.

Last summer, Brown found himself presented with a draft movement for governor in 2012 by some politically active students. Brown says he is unsure that is a direction he even wants to consider. He is satisfied to be known as the voice and advocate of agriculture in a region where

food production is the underlying economy.

A state senator from southcentral Montana, he just completed his first year of a four-year term. The four-month legislative session in Helena in 2009 ▶

STORY BY JIM GRANSBERY  
PHOTOS BY DAVID SCOTT SMITH

was an education, but also a distraction from running his business in a down economy, he says. He has hired good help. Just like running a ranch, which is the family history.

Taylor Brown's grandfather, Bill Brown, Sr., at age 16 left Texas for northern Wyoming, heading where the grass was thick and a man could carve out a ranch by sheer force of work and will. He hired on as a hand with the Spear Cattle Co. of Sheridan, Wyoming.

Over the years, he acquired cows of his own, building a small herd while laboring for his employers, who were not too happy that he was working both sides of the fence. When confronted by the ranch owners about how many cattle he intended to raise, Bill Sr. told them, "I intend to get as big as I can, as fast as I can." Kind of like collecting radio affiliates, his grandson acknowledges.

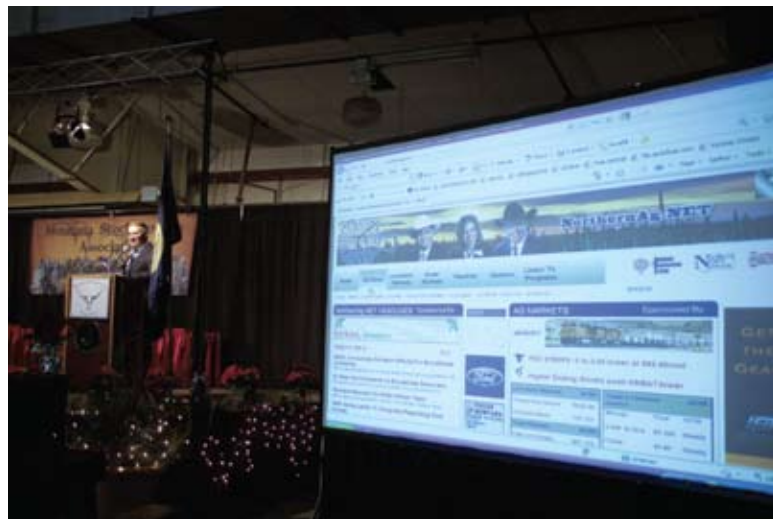
In 1948, the grandfather partnered with Porter Kennedy and for a decade they built a cattle business. But each wanted his own operation. In 1958, they flipped a coin to see who would buy the other out. Brown lost, but got his stake to start anew.

Taylor was 2 years old at the time. In the spring of 1960, three generations of Browns founded the family ranch 11 miles west of Sand Springs, a tiny community in middle of the "Big Open," where historically, cattle trailed from Texas grazed on the range between the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. Sand Springs is a dot on Highway 200, which forms a belt across the mid-section of Montana. Taylor grew up here—isolated but not alone in a rural community.

There was no school, so the family started one. "There was an old abandoned school they hauled up to the ranch and I started the first grade in 1962," Brown remembers. "One teacher, who lived in the school, and seven or eight kids. I went through the school as the only student in each grade." The oldest of four children, Brown has a brother and two sisters.

In 1970, the family bought a house in Lewistown, where Brown lived while attending Fergus High School. It was a bit traumatic: "There were 160 kids in the freshman class, and I didn't know one of them," he says.

It was there that he learned to speak in public through the efforts of a mentor. "He put me in (Future Farmers of America)," says Brown, referring to vocational agriculture instructor Jim Schultz. A combination of 4-H and FFA provided the grounding that Brown needed for self confidence. In 1973, Brown won the state FFA public



speaking contest. That was his epiphany. "I can do this and make a living at it," he recalls thinking.

A sojourn overseas after high school graduation gave him an international scope. During the summer of 1974, under the auspices of the American Field Service, he lived with a Belgian family that owned a dairy farm. "They spoke French," he notes with a laugh.

He returned to the U.S. and began working on a degree in agricultural science at Montana State University, and he became a member of Alpha Gamma Rho, the ag fraternity. "The three big influences in my life were 4-H, FFA, and AGR" he says, with the latter giving him his first taste of politics. It provided the foundation for his election as MSU student body president for the 1977-78 year.

That was the year he met fellow MSU student, Shannon Clouse, from Missoula. In the fall of 1979, he came to work for farm broadcaster Conrad Burns in Billings, and the next summer he and Shannon married. In 1983, he became a partner with an option to buy, which he exercised in 1985, right in middle of a huge economic

washout in American agriculture. "It was tough times in the 80s," he recalls. "It got ugly, but I knew I could make it work. It was all on-the-job learning, no voice training. But right away I knew this was what I wanted."

It was during this time that Burns dove into Republican politics. He was elected Yellowstone county commissioner in 1986 and U.S. Senator in 1988, defeating

Democratic incumbent John Melcher largely on the strength of his name recognition throughout Montana.

### Radio Days

Since 1985, Brown has built up his business across the northern plains and has a national reputation among farm broadcasters, twice being named national Farm Broadcaster of the Year.

At first, Northern Broadcasting System covered four states. Idaho was added in 1996, with Rick Haines, who joined Brown in 1987, moving to Twin Falls to set up a base of operations in 2001. Haines bought the Idaho portion in 2007, but remains associated. "There is still a lot of cross pollination there," says Brown.

Haines credits Brown with being an excellent businessman and a true champion for rural America. "He epitomizes what is wonderful about Montana," Haines says. "Growing up there (in Sand Springs) allowed him to be a free thinker."

NBS has two components—Northern Ag Network and ▶



This page: Taylor Brown on the set of his Northern Ag Network. Facing page: Brown introduces NorthernAg.net at the Montana Stockgrowers Association meeting.

**'Taylor is a person of strong convictions coupled with action, especially with agricultural education and research.'**

Jeff Jacobsen, dean of the School of Agriculture at MSU

Northern News Network, the latter of which is subdivided into news and sports programming, including daily rodeo reports and Colorado Rockies baseball and Denver Broncos football games during the seasons. Brown and staff provide daily ag news reports for television. In addition to Brown and his wife, who is comptroller of the company, NBS has 12 employees.

Travel keeps Brown and staffers Russell Nemetz and Haylie Shipp reporting across the map. An annual live broadcast from the keynote luncheon of the Montana Stockgrowers Association convention in Billings in December provided the backdrop for a new production, NorthernAg.Net, a Web site for ag news, market reports, weather and event announcements—the information farmers and ranchers need to run their operations. Right up to the minute the Web site went active, Brown was editing and rewriting material. “It’s like building a house; everyone is mad at you,” he says, laughing. “But this is a real ag portal—day-to-day, up-to-date information,”

At age 53, Brown says he is content, but not complacent. His three children are grown and making their own paths in the agricultural and business worlds. His parents, Bill and Ann, are retired and live in Billings. He is especially proud of co-chairing a committee to raise \$16 million to build an Animal Bioscience complex on the MSU campus. The complex is set to open in the fall.

“Taylor is a person of strong convictions coupled with action, especially with agricultural education and research,” says Jeff Jacobsen, dean of the School of

Agriculture at MSU. “A good example is this bioscience center. That will have an impact 50 years out.”

#### More Politics Ahead?

Brown says he is chagrined by the effort to draft him for the governor’s race in 2012. Montana Republicans are in need of a candidate with statewide appeal.

“I’ve not yet finished a year,” Brown said referring to his service in the Montana senate. The effort by three college students to form a draft movement to entice him to run for governor caught him off guard. Their goal is to acquire 25,000 signatures on a petition as evidence of support for a gubernatorial campaign.

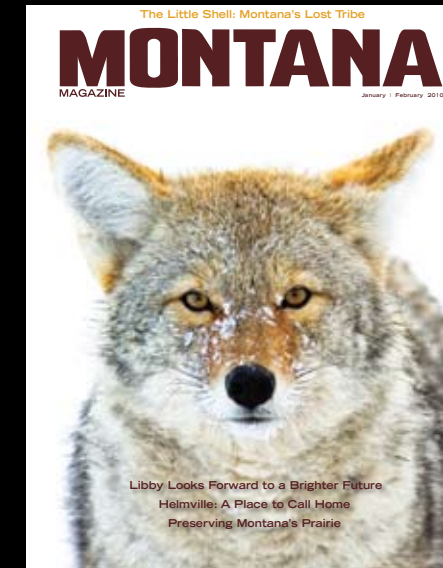
Friends say Brown could put his communication skills to work in politics. “He is an excellent communicator who has a common-sense approach to often complicated issues. Those of us who have known Taylor for many years have long expected and anticipated his foray into politics and I know he will do well in that capacity, wherever that road takes him,” says Lola Raska, executive vice president of the Montana Grain Growers Association.

While offering little insight into his political future, Brown says he sees leadership as empowering others, to get good ideas going and to do so without instilling fear.

He sums up his life so far: “I have so much, love what I do, make a living and do good. I’m so lucky. God has been so good to me.” **M**

Jim Gransbery, a freelance writer, is the former agricultural and political reporter at *The Billings Gazette*.

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