Capitol's last cowboys ride on

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Politics is a lot like ranching. It's just the art of herding people instead of cattle.

Throughout its 94-year history, Arizona has had so many rancher politicians (more than 120 in all) that, at one point, critics took to calling the state's government the "Cowboy Legislature."

But like so much of the state's rural roots, that era is coming to an end.

Sen. Jake Flake and his lifelong friend Rep. Jack Brown, with a combined 22 years in elected office, are the last active ranchers in the Arizona Legislature.

Just as Arizona has drifted away from the "Five C's" emblazoned on the state seal (cattle, cotton, copper, citrus and climate) to more of a service, manufacturing and knowledge economy, political power long ago shifted to the urban areas surrounding Phoenix and Tucson.

"These guys are a symbol of the Old West that many of us want to hold on to," Arizona historian Jack August said. "They represent a way of life that all of us want to keep in our hopes and dreams. A part of our intellectual warehouse as Arizonans includes a guy on a horse rounding up cattle in the fall."

As ranchers leave the Legislature, Arizona loses ties to its rural roots

Much of Arizona's political zeitgeist, from a barebones state government and local control of schools to fierce protection of private property, water and gun rights, is rooted in its cowboy past.

Ranchers have served in the Arizona Legislature in every session since statehood. They were at the peak of their power in the 1960s, when at least a dozen were serving, along with others with farming ties. That is when the "Cowboy Legislature" moniker took root.

And in the early days, ranchers like John Orme, who also served in the Legislature, were among those who wrote the Arizona Constitution. They created a populist, Jacksonian government that included short terms in office and a strong voice for the common man through initiative, referendum and recall.

They also set up a part-time Legislature with a goal to finish the yearly sessions in 100 days so rural members could return home in the summer to tend to their land

and herds.

But when the Legislature reconvenes in early January, the only lawmakers who will actually head back in from the range will be a pair of old cowboys from the scrub country of eastern Arizona.

Rep. Jack Brown has been serving, off and on, since the Kennedy administration, first winning office in 1963. Sen. Jake Flake won his first legislative seat in 1996, a year when there were five other ranchers in office.

Now there are others with only ranching backgrounds: Sen. Marsha Arzberger, a Willcox Democrat, is largely retired from ranching. Rep. Manny Alvarez, D-Elfrida, was a rancher but sold his cattle when he ran for office in 2000. He still farms alfalfa, pistachios and other produce.

Last of a legacy

To the casual observer, Flake and Brown would appear to be opposites.

Flake, 72, is a Republican. Brown, 78, is a Democrat. Flake is tall and burly, with an ample belly, smiling eyes and a thunderous baritone voice. Brown is as skinny as a shovel handle. Bespectacled and with a weathered squint, he seemingly struggles to raise his voice loud enough to be picked up on a microphone.

But professionally, ideologically and spiritually, Flake and Brown practically share a heart.

Both are Arizona natives, born to pioneer ranching families about 30 miles apart on the high desert plateaus of eastern Arizona. Both are members of the Mormon Church. And both are profoundly worried that they might be the last of Arizona's cowboy lawmakers. They fear that if they don't continue to serve, the Legislature's focus on rural Arizona will fade.

"There's darn few cattlemen anymore," Brown said. "We're sorta hanging on by our fingernails."

'Regular guys'

Flake and Brown may be holdovers from a bygone era, but both retain more than their share of political muscle.

Flake rose to become speaker of the House from 2002 to 2004 before crossing over to the Senate to switch seats with Brown to avoid term limits. Flake is chairman of the Senate Natural Resources and Rural Affairs Committee, exerting control over all bills concerning grazing, water rights and agriculture.

Brown was part of a ruling centrist coalition during his first stint in the Legislature and was the minority leader in his last term in the Senate before running for the House in 2004. After the November election, he was elected assistant minority leader.

As their numbers have dwindled, cowboy lawmakers have held on to power not just by fighting for purely rural interests but by supporting powerful lobbying forces like home builders and real estate agents - ironic, perhaps, given that much of the Valley's farm and ranchland has been sold for residential development.

Spencer Kamps of the Arizona Homebuilder's Association said Flake and Brown do not support his organization on every issue, but he has counted on them to support private property rights over expanded government oversight. He said that position has led to economic development that has benefited both urban and rural communities.

Kamps also praises the "upfront and candid" political skill of Flake and Brown.

"Whether you agree with them or not, guys like Jake and Jack have become successful ranchers, successful community leaders and successful political leaders because they have and are able to express core values," Kamps said. "It may not be unique to their lifestyle, but it's fundamental to it. They are regular, down-to-earth guys."

Shift in power

Brown was part of a ruling center-right coalition in the 1960s dominated by rural lawmakers who set policies designed to benefit Arizona's major industries: farms, ranches and mines. The Legislature at that time was primarily concerned with the price of commodities and cheap labor.

The agenda was controlled with a few lawmakers calling the shots. They felt justified because their counties were the economic backbone of the state, with mining interests wielding more clout and raising more tax revenue than ranching and agriculture.

The system was more than a little unfair, even to a fellow Democrat like the late Gov. Sam Goddard. There was little public input and no reflection of the growth and burgeoning diversity of Arizona's population. Goddard summed up the rural-controlled Legislature as having "no semblance of democracy" because of the power exerted by the coalition.

It worked like this. A county like Greenlee in the rugged mountains of eastern Arizona was home to about as many bears as people in the early 1960s. Even today, only 8,605 people live there. And yet Greenlee County had two state senators. The same as Maricopa County, home to more than half of Arizona's population.

That system, which had ruled the state for 50 years, cracked when a rabble-rousing University of Arizona law student named Gary Peter Klahr filed suit in 1964. It came crashing down two years later, when he won. Klahr, a former Phoenix city councilman turned Democratic activist, was then a Republican.

The death knell sounded for the era of the "Cowboy Legislature" in 1966. An Arizona Supreme Court decision installing the concept of "one man, one vote" took legislative districts that were defined by county borders and redrew them according to population.

"I was hung in effigy by the Cowboy Legislature, right in the Senate lobby," Klahr said, recalling an incident in February 1966. "I put a lot of people out of work down there."

The Arizona Republic ran a photo of several rural legislators admiring the work of the unknown person who strung up the dummy representing Klahr. After the 1966 election, many of those lawmakers would be gone.

"The fact is, urban people had no rights in those days," Klahr said. "It really was a cowboy legislature. Rural people would not do anything about pollution. They did

not care about education."

Even after the court ruling, there were often up to a half-dozen ranchers elected from rural districts at any one time. The power shift, however, was immediate. The House went from 80 members to 60. Arizona would thereafter have 30 legislative districts, with equal population, each with two representatives and a senator. Maricopa and Pima counties immediately gained more than three-fourth's of the state's legislative power.

More significantly, Republicans seized control of the House and have not relinquished it. They have pretty much held on to the Senate as well, with Democrats gaining control only intermittently since 1967, most recently from 1990 to 1992.

Brown does not argue that some changes were unjustified, but he would have kept sending senators from each county to the Legislature.

"A lot of other states still do it that way," Brown said. "It took power away from rural Arizona and really made it tough for us."