

# Orchardists and workers clash

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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All eyes focused on the dispute between local orchardists and fruit workers during the months of November and December 1932. The Nov. 25 clash between the workers, led by members of the Agricultural Workers' Industrial League, and law enforcement had deeply antagonized both sides.

The local chapter of the Agricultural Workers' Industrial League distributed pamphlets calling for a mass meeting on Nov. 30. Other pamphlets circulated, encouraging the strikers with inflammatory rhetoric.

"The big bosses say they cannot pay a small and miserable wage of \$1.50 a day while small farmers pay not only \$1.50, but \$1.75 and more a day. The big bosses through their police and hired thugs try their best to create trouble by instigating race riots, by intimidation and terrorizing the starving workers ... It is the big bosses that spread the 'RED' scare..."

In response, residents formed a Vaca Valley Citizens Committee to Protest Communism. On Dec. 1, they held a rally in front of the Carnegie Library in Vacaville. One of the speakers, the Rev. Fruhling, admonished that "a real menace confronts this community which must be met in the good old American way." Judge Ball of Winters elaborated further: "If necessary, we can adopt the same American system as is used south of the Mason-Dixon line."

Many residents heeded this indirect call to action. Ed Uhl recalled in an interview taken in 1977: "The Sheriff/Constable deputized myself and others. I carried a Colt 45 and got others to do the same. There were over 276 residents that were deputized. The town population was only 1,200."

He remembered the two Melgar brothers, nicknamed Black and Red for their respective hair color, among the leaders of the strikers.

On Sunday afternoon, Dec. 4, the strikers organized another mass rally in front of the Carnegie Library, despite warnings by Constable Stadtfeld that this meeting was unlawful without permission. At the end of the speeches, the deputized residents struck back.

"There were 20 outsiders there causing most of the trouble," said Ed Uhl. "Frank

Thompson was representing the Buck Company and I asked him to arrest Black Melgar ...

"I took Red Melgar, who was bigger than me. I grabbed him and told him he was under arrest. He resisted ... I had a huge crowd behind me and they were calling names, and even the women had knives. I had him almost halfway to the jail house ... and he just wasn't going. So I saw this big strapping fellow ... and told him he was deputized, and he came over to help me."

In all, they arrested 20 strangers and about 15 locals. The two cells in the Town Hall jail could not hold this number of people. Ed Uhl continued: "So I got the Sheriff's permission to have all the local people that had been arrested shipped over to the Fairfield jail. I had a plan ...

"I was on the sidewalk in front of the jail, with one of the officers, who was a close friend of mine. I said to him, wouldn't it be great if somebody just happened to drop that key to the jail ... I said we could take those men for a ride ... That fellow turned around and walked away from me, and about the third step a great big key dropped out of his pocket. I grabbed it, making sure that nobody saw me."

Ed Uhl then contacted about 50 residents by phone, telling them of his plan and asking them to be at the Cooper School House that night at 8 p.m.

Everyone contacted came to the meeting. Ed Uhl explained his plan, told them to bring their cars, four men to a car, to wear coveralls, to leave their guns at home, and to be at the jail at midnight. They all synchronized their watches before going home to prepare for the night's event.

When the cars met, the drivers bent their license plates so that they could not be identified. Somebody cut up harness tugs into strips two-inches wide and 1/2-inch thick.

Then six of the nine terrified prisoners were fetched from the jail and distributed one to each car.

"Up past Elmira," recalled Ed Uhl, "I had a car come up alongside of me, saying 'Listen, there's two Sacramento Bee reporters following you.' I said 'I appreciate your telling me; now we're going to go in a circular route and we'll lose them.'" It was foggy, very foggy. We had a pretty good parade, we fooled around, and most of the roads were not marked in those days. I'm sure some of my men were wondering what I was doing ... I had to make a quick decision, and we did shake those reporters, because we couldn't have them in on this thing.

The convoy eventually made its way to a slough near Main Prairie. There the prisoners were forced to get out of the cars and were stripped of their clothes.

"... We gave them a dozen strokes on the fanny, and on every stroke we had them say 'Down with Communism.' We painted their heads with fast-drying red lacquer and their chests, and below the waist ... Some of them were crying, because they thought they were going to be hanged. We paddled them and painted them, then told them to walk home to wherever they lived.

"We left at midnight and I came home that night around 4:30 a.m. I got into bed, and got a phone call from the Sheriff's office telling me 'Congratulations!' Since the Sheriff's department could not get involved, they were glad that I did."

On Dec. 9, the Vacaville Reporter was full of the story. The events were described in detail. Chief of Police Alley could not explain where the key had come from, as all four keys were accounted for.

Frank Buck issued a statement condemning the kidnapping and mistreatment of the six prisoners. "I do not believe this kidnapping was engineered by responsible persons," he added, "or that it will be countenanced by the great majority of Vaca Valley residents. Such action is unlawful, and to my mind more likely to breed further trouble than settle existing disturbances."

Hundreds of telegrams flooded into Mayor C. J. Uhl's office, condemning the deed. People were shocked at what had occurred.

On Jan. 20, the workers voted to end the strike. None of their demands had been met. According to Kate Bronfenbrenner in her article in "Labor Conflict in the United States," the Agricultural Workers' Industrial League emerged stronger, "They had developed a nucleus of dedicated and capable organizers who faced the turbulent months ahead with hard-won recognition and respect from California farmworkers across the state."

In his interview, Ed Uhl reflected on his involvement in the vigilante committee: "I would never think of doing something like that nowadays ... but back then we were becoming helpless and knew that if we could get rid of those outsiders, then we could get back to work and that was it."

This two-part article is based on an interview by Ed Uhl on Jan. 12, 1977, (Vacaville Museum collection); Ron Limbaugh, Vacaville, The Heritage of a California Community (1978); and numerous contemporary articles in the Vacaville Reporter. I am especially grateful to Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University for faxing me her article on the Vacaville Tree Pruners' Strike published in "Labor Conflict in the United States, An

Encyclopedia (1990),” which provided the union side of the conflict.

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