

Cutting cots was a Vacaville tradition

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Summer months have always been a busy time for the orchard industry.

Then as now, many hands are needed to pick, pack and process different varieties of fruit grown in our area. In the days before mechanization, the small towns of Vacaville, Fairfield and Suisun saw their population numbers swell as much as ten times each summer.

Close family members, friends from the city, relatives and large numbers of seasonal workers arrived when the early cherry crop needed picking and left after the last plum had been dried.

In an oral history interview for the Vacaville Museum, Vacaville rancher Buck Burton described how many of the seasonal workers lived in those days:

“We had a crew of men who were pickers. As early as I can remember, the early 1930s, the pickers were transients. These were people who followed the fruit. Jobs were at a premium. You worked wherever you could find work.

“There were thousands of people in the summertime, who just followed the fruit. Whatever crop was ripe, starting with the apricots and going to the peaches or pears or prunes. If apricots lasted three weeks here they would stay with it three weeks and move on to somewhere else.

“Usually they camped out. They had their own tents. We provided a place to set up camp and food and water. You just had little tent cities along the creek. Some had three, four or five children. Mostly these were younger children.

“The families that were on the move like that usually had just one or two small children. The man would pick fruit and the woman would work in the cutting shed. Sometimes they would make a little playpen out of boxes or trays and have the kids right in the shed with them,” said Burton.

While the men worked picking and drying the fruit, women and children were employed in the cutting and packing sheds. Children started to work early, often as young as 4 or 5, and were expected to cut fruit for at least some time of the day.

Often too small to reach the table, they would stand on boxes to be able to reach the fruit.

Suisun Valley resident Bob Hansen recalled the difficulties he had as a small boy trying to cut apricots:

"When I first started cutting apricots, I had to set the apricot on the head of the box and turn it sideways, because I couldn't hold both the knife and the apricot," he said in an oral history interview. "I had to keep turning the apricots to cut them."

Most children working in the sheds were either family members or came from nearby towns. Cutting fruit throughout the summer was a rite of passage.

Susan Grotheer Lippstreu worked in her family's Suisun Valley cutting shed. "From the time we were old enough to hold the knife, we cut fruit. We had a cutting shed where we cut apricots and two or three different kinds of peaches," she said in an oral history interview. "A standard day was 10 hours. Frequently, we'd go to work at seven and quit at six. At peak harvest, when there was so much fruit that it was going to rot, we would go back at eight o'clock at night and work to 10.

"There were a lot of kids helping. The Hall family lived here on the ranch with their seven children. They all worked.

"Mary Hall and I always cut across from each other at the cutting table and we were both excellent cutters. By high school, we could cut as much fruit as three or four people. They always gave us our own table. In those days, we got \$.03 for cutting a box of peaches. Every time you finished a box, they punched a tally. On a good day, Mary and I could cut over 100 boxes a day, so we were making \$3 a day."

Payment depended on the speed of the cutter, said Vacaville resident Joe Moreno:

"You got paid by the box, not by the hour. Everything you did was piecework. If you cut apricots, it was so much a box. You got more for apricots, because they were littler and they took longer to cut a whole box of fruit. Peaches, you got a little less because they were bigger fruit and it went a lot faster. Picking prunes was the same way. At one time it was \$.03 or \$.04 for a box for prunes. It wasn't a lot, but I could pick 60 boxes as a kid 9 years old," he said in an interview.

It was hard work, but for many children it provided the chance to earn some pocket money with which to fulfill a wish.

Peggy Byrd, who grew up on the Bassford Ranch, always had a specific goal in mind.

"When I worked for my dad I didn't get paid, but when you worked for the neighbors that was your money. I started here at my Dad's when I was 5 or 6. My sister and brother would cut the apricots and I'd spread them on the trays. I'd pick prunes too," she said in an interview.

"I was a good apricot cutter and a good peach cutter. We raced with a couple of Spanish girls. They could beat me cutting apricots, but my apricots were flat and perfect. That was good, because the juice had to stay in the center of the apricot. If you tipped them up, then the juice would run out. My hands were big. I could whop them in peaches.

"In apricots I could do maybe 12 boxes a day. Peaches you'd cut twice as many, because they were bigger. We got paid \$.10 a box for apricots. This would have to be in the early '30s. I'd always want to make enough money cutting apricots to buy a season ticket to the swimming pool. That was \$5. Once I cut for Harry Nelson and didn't cut enough to make \$5. I was so disappointed, but when I went down to get paid he was paying \$.12 cents a box. That put me over the hump."

While cutting sheds are a thing of the past, the Vacaville Fruit Co. still employs hundreds of men and women who cut fruit for drying throughout the season.

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