

Town 'built around the shipping of fruit'

By Kristin Delaplane

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The following are excerpts from an oral history with T. Robert Boone Hawkins, interviewed June 1977. The Hawkins first came here in 1852, with my great-grandfather Arculus C. Hawkins. The family started from Virginia, moved out into Kentucky for a few years, then Missouri for a few years where my father, Arculus Jr., was born and then they came on across the plains. There were four sons. Three got out here. One of them was picked off by the Indians and they never did find him.

When they came out here, they didn't have anything much with them. They settled out east of town and then in the first or second year my great-grandfather went back to Missouri and brought back 500 head of cattle.

When the family first came, there were about four families in Vacaville, outside of the Spanish. You had the Pleasants family way up the valley there. There was the Long family that owned most of the floor of Vaca Valley. There was another family by the name of Wilson that used to have a hotel right there on the corner of Main Street and Davis. And of course the Penas were still squatting out there in south of Vaca Valley. Then the Nut Tree people were the Harbisons. They came in and bought that area north of the highway and over this way up to Leisure Town boundary about. So that was sort of the original set up. Those few families.

I don't know where my family first located, but they used to find their cattle down on the edge of Ulatis Creek. They finally decided their cattle were smarter than they were and moved over there to "Slap Shack Ranch." There was a lot of mud out there. A lot of little creeks over there overflowed.

My great-grandfather had about 200 acres. Then he came in and bought 500 here, the old home place and the place across the road. He didn't like the guy across the creek, so one day he went out and offered him \$250 to get off his 250 acres. The guy thought the old man was crazy. That brought my great-grandfather over and he took over the top of Bennett Hill. Then he bought up another 500 acres.

In those days if you wanted to go to Sacramento with your stock, you had to go up to Knight's Landing and take a ford across there, because this was just a swamp going across here where the freeway is now. Or you took the stock down to Benicia. Or you went out to the slough and put it on a sailboat or barge that took it. Originally, all it was, was cattle and grain in there. And grandpa, he gets his family out here one year, and

then he has to go back the next year and bring out 500 head of cattle because he didn't have any breeding stock. In the meantime, they were raising grain, then having to haul it all up to Knight's Landing or up the sloughs or down to Benicia and there. I guess the first year they were pretty much living on elk and antelope meat. I can remember hearing the old-timers talk about the hills between Vacaville and what is now Travis Air Base. They used to call it "Elk Hills," because the elk would stand up there in the summertime where the wind would blow the mosquitoes and flies off them.

Right across the road here, those are the original apricot trees planted by old Arculus. It was about the first fruit orchard that was ever planted here. He planted 30 acres of solid apricots over there. One of those gambling idiots, you know.

He died at the age of 25 or so. He came down with gout or consumption and died six years later. My father Chauncy J. Hawkins was on about a year old then and they moved back with his mother's family in the Suisun Valley. His mother was an Ellis. The Ellises came out here from Tennessee and were way up the head of Suisun Valley.

My father didn't stick around here. My father's mother decided that she was going to have a son that was going to get an education and going to know something instead of just turning around and hanging around the saloons in town. He graduated from your College of the Pacific class of 1896. Some old holy man here in town talked him into becoming a minister and he went back to the Yale Divinity School and graduated there. He became a very prominent minister and wrote books. He was back East for a while. I was born in Boston in 1909. Then we went to Seattle and finally he ended up in San Francisco at the Congregation Church at Post and Mason. Nobody was living around there. The parishioners were scattered all out in the outlying districts. You could get some of the old-timers to come in on Sunday morning service, but Sunday evening it was mostly people from hotels and living in apartments down there, and transients. I haven't been there since he died in 1938.

He was always quite interested in the outdoors. God, he was brought up here. His boyhood pal was one of the local Indians, "The Kid." My father and The Kid used to spend half their youth up there hunting in the Twin Sisters. As a matter of fact, you go down to the cemetery where the Mason plot is and you can see a sign made out to "Faithful Friend." That's The Kid's grave. That gave him an interest in the frontier, growing up in the frontier environment and with his grandfather coming across the plains in a covered wagon. He spent all his vacations for the rest of his life out in the woods. He was killed in an automobile accident here coming back from a camping trip.

Well, my father had inherited this house. It must have been built around 1874, a year before he was born. This is where he came for vacations. He always demanded a two-months vacation from the church. He had a hundred acres of orchard and he had

tenants on the land. He always looked at it from the point of view that retirement for a Protestant minister in those days was maybe 75 bucks a month. "What am I going to do to eat around here, when I reach the point where I just stop preaching?" Plus the fact that the family was here. So he mostly worked around the ranch. He put in one of the first irrigation wells in here at that time.

Then my father died in 1930. The land had been a paying proposition until then. When I came up here in 1930, the tenant was bankrupt, as was everybody else around here. Vacaville was built around the shipping of fruit. There was a real fruit aristocracy in town. They all ran around in leather puttees (a gaiter covering the lower leg). In the meantime they were also buying Bank of America stock and selling it on margin. And when the crash came, half the guys in the valley lost their places overnight. It was from the farming and it was from speculating on the stock market on margin. It just absolutely ruined the valley. And, of course, none of the valley was irrigated. At that time you were beginning to hate places like Placerville and Auburn for putting irrigation districts in. Now their fruit came just as early as Vacaville's did. Where they'd raise a couple of buckets of fruit in some of those trees up on the English Hills, they'd raise 10 boxes up in Auburn and Placerville and Southern San Joaquin. These farmers just couldn't compete, so they never came back after losing their farms. When the fruit went to hell, Vacaville went to hell.

I came to town in 1930. I was 21 years old. I had gone to school in Pomona and over to Europe and I was finishing up at Cal majoring in art. I had to come up here to kind of get things kind of square. Then I went back to school. I was back and forth from school to agriculture for the next three to four years. Then I married in 1935 and we moved up here permanently.

My father also had a place in Winters and we operated from my place up in Winters because we had a Japanese tenant here. They worked hard. Then suddenly they put all the Japanese on a train one morning and that was good-bye.

In the 30s, the drought got a bunch of the orchards, but what got them worse was working all year raising a crop of fresh fruit and shipping it back East. You got red ink on it. You paid a couple of fifteen hundred dollars for freight for nothing. And, for several years there, prunes were down to a quarter-a-cent a pound. You couldn't get the cost of protection out of them.

We grew prunes, apricots, peaches, and French, Sugar and Sharon prunes. We had a packing house for about 20 years and used to sell this stuff mail order to the East. Almost all our fruit went East in specialty packages. We'd run out four-color catalogs. We had a couple hundred people working in the busy season.

We ran with Burton fruit for a while. Not the Burton Prune, but I had a big deal with these big material prunes that run about 24 to the pound. The big plug was that they were the softest and, if you were constipated, you could eat them raw without having to cook them. We used to sell about a hundred ton a year for about six cents a piece. We bought some of them from the Burton boys. They had about a block of them.

Now those Burton prunes were just a pain in the back. Those big, big prunes run about eight to the pound. Where, say, these prunes you buy in the store as large size are about 60 to the pound and the small size is about 80. And those great big ones, they have the damndest, biggest pit in them you've ever seen. So, getting is pit and skin. Two-thirds of it were good for nothing but hog feed. They were a son-of-a-gun to process. You had to put them in steam chambers and hold them there like for 24 hours in order to break down the protein in the damn things to get them so they would be soft.

The French prune was 90 percent of the prunes in Vacaville. That's the small one. That's the one that goes into SunSweet's and Del Monte cartons. It has a good sugar content. You get the tonnage on it with practically no labor.

You see all these big prunes, like Robes, Imperials, and Burtons you had to go out and hand-prune the tree. You had to hand-thin the tree. The expense just went out of sight.

A French prune is sort of a pendulous type of tree. You prune them every couple of years, just kind of thin them out a little bit. The prunes are shaken off mechanically. I think probably 95 percent of the prunes in the state, at that time, were French prunes. I imagine probably 98 percent now. People just can't afford to pay for the labor to monkey with these others, so they just pulled those trees out right and left.

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