

## Area fruit growers faced prosperity, ruin

By Kristin Delaplane

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'The golden age of the fruit business was 1880 to 1897. I think that apricot orchard of my great-grandfather's paid off. They started getting refrigerated cars on the railroad for shipping the stuff.

"They were doing well, especially up in those English Hills. Those English hills are all zone nine, which is like the Oroville orange country and means the fruit came in earlier than any place else in the state. I guess they got a premium price for that stuff.

"You go up and look at that ground. It's all sandstone in those hills. There was no moisture and they couldn't irrigate, so they had these little trees that only grew so high.

"You'd get maybe a bucket or a box to a tree. You couldn't take more than a bucket or a box off a tree or the tree would die before the next rains came.

"But it was early fruit for the market, so they made plenty of money. They were getting 10 or 15 bucks a box to replace the normal crate price.

"Then they started planting that whole valley. All the shipping fruit would come in early in the spring. It would be pretty well gone by July.

"When I came up here, even then it was mostly just shipping fruit, but right then the crash came and most of the people in the valley went bankrupt from gambling in the stock market.

"Then the irrigated districts in California were beginning to come in and those areas were able to produce bigger fruit.

"Dad put down this well in 1923. It might have been one of maybe three irrigation wells in Vacaville at the time.

"Up the valley they couldn't get any water. They'd go 60 feet and hit blue shale. Well, that stuff goes down for thousands of feet. So the people up there were just dead until the irrigation district came in.

"In 1937, we decided we were going to have kids and we had to figure out some way to

support them. It was obviously going to come out of the ranch here.

"We were shipping dates and other fruits that weren't all grown here. We'd buy them wholesale from packers in Imperial Valley and we had an operation here.

"It was one of those deals where you went crazy in October, November, and December because a lot of it was for Christmas gift stuff. We'd get 75 to 200 people working out here.

"Then, during the summer, you could use the place for a bowling alley.

"We hired all local people. You had the tradition here of the families living in town. The men had jobs and in the summer the women worked for extra money in the packing houses packing fresh fruit.

"Then the packing houses went to pot and here Hawkins comes along and offers them a job packing fruit out here.

"Most of them had been old fruit packers, so they had a feeling for handling fruit. It worked out very nicely for all of us. We had a nice class of help. There was a nice relationship there. It was more like having a bunch of friends working for you.

"In the early '30s, some people came down protesting the wages and started burning barns. There was this Spanish family, Alonzo. He lived out on Davis Street and was the local head of this thing. When they started to burn barns, they had this big riot in town.

"Things were rough as hell. Old Joe Stadfeld, the constable, got wrecked for life during the riot. He lived on crutches ever after.

"The movement was really a complete dead end here because the farmers were all losing their pants. You weren't just breaking even, you were losing money every year. You sold at a loss.

"Wages were getting down to about 12 1/2 cents an hour. People couldn't eat on that, but the farmer was losing money paying that. What do you in a case like that?

"They were coming around and putting ranches up for auction down at the county courthouse for the taxes. About 3,000 guys showed up down there once. By God, the sheriff disappeared into the courthouse. He didn't dare open the sale. They would've killed him.

"So, you have an atmosphere like that and then you have a bunch of Commies come in

and start burning barns. Why, you had farmers out there with guns, pitchforks, and everything else. Boy, those were rough days.

"I didn't go armed, but you always had a gun around the house. Every farmer does for jackrabbits and deer hunting. And, if somebody got tough on you, you had a gun.

"Those were rough days. The whole valley bankrupt. You never seen anything like some of these old fellas who considered themselves the cream of valley.

"When they had been shipping fruit, these growers had been going around here dressed up and driving Cadillacs.

"Suddenly they had nothing. Their ranches had been taken away. All their cash was gone. They were just bums trying to hold up their heads and their pride.

"Poor guys. It was a tough one.

"And there was the drought. These old prune orchard were just dying off.

"Well, I'll tell you, most of the orchards were still operating, but the farmers were just leasing the farms from the Bank of America.

"The bank leased the farms to all these Japanese. They were running these places that the bank had taken over.

"Then the war came along and there was a market. Anything you could raise, you could sell. Some of it was very profitable.

"Then they came around and very neatly froze the prices. But they didn't freeze the prices on the shipyards, so you're competing with that.

"In the meantime, they took all the Japanese labor out of here. That was all your supervisory help.

"That first year of the war, we took a couple hundred, two-ton of prunes off this place and lost money on it.

"It was the problem of working with winos and high school kids. You had nobody to supervise all these guys and the cost of getting a crop off was crazy.

"My foreman was Japanese - Ynei. He was the honcho. He was the big shot with the Japanese in town with their association. We had Japanese families here for 30 years

and 30 or 40 of them were working for us.

"I remember Pearl Harbor Day. We had a candy cooker in the double garage and were back there making candy. A Japanese kid threw the door open and came busting in saying, 'My God, the Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor. We're screwed.' I had a half dozen old Japanese gals in there pumping candy.

"They were screwed all right. They came in first thing and took all the leaders in the place - the leaders of the Buddhist Church, their Christian Church and their associations. That was about a dozen guys out of Vacaville and Suisun.

"By May 1942, they finally took them all. Just before they were to leave, they were trying to sell off their tractors and businesses and, of course, there was no market for it.

"After they left we had FBI guys coming in here every month or so asking about this guy and that guy. These were young fellows in the concentration camps asking to go into the Army. The FBI men would come around ask me, 'Do you consider this person loyal?'

"We thought generally that the Nisei were loyal.

"But you take this one guy. He'd been here since the early 1900s, and yet you'd go over to his place and he had a picture of the emperor over his desk and a Samurai sword. He'd made his life here, had his kids here, but how loyal would he be if suddenly the Japanese Army moved into Vacaville? I don't know what his feelings would have been. If you were Japanese, maybe you'd take the side that your bread was buttered on. Wouldn't you?

"Ynei had a brother who was a grocer in Sacramento, who was prosperous and he would make trips back to Japan.

"And Ynei subscribed to the California Japanese edition of the newspaper.

"And every couple of years the a member of the council from the association would come up here with his chauffeur and his big limousine. Ynei would get to the limousine bowing and scraping and take the man around to introduce him to all the Japanese in town.

"Like every place, there was a social strata and Ynei came from a better class family. Most of the local Japanese were pretty much peasants.

"There were a few guys like Ynei who'd come from town families and they had a little

more status. They were definitely looked up to by the rest of them.

"These leaders like Ynei were taken to Bismarck and put in a camp there. They grabbed them right off before Christmas 1941. They were gone within about two weeks of Pearl Harbor (Dec. 7, 1941).

"Eventually, Ynei was released to join his family. He had three kids. His wife had died.

"Very few came back. The Hyami family next door to us did and the family that rented the place across the road here. And there is one family in Winters.

"Ynei came up here for a visit. He had a daughter who married a man who was a chauffeur for somebody in the city. Ynei ended up living with her down in San Francisco. He died down there."

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