

Uhl family's peachy start in Vacaville

By Kristin Delaplane

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Clarence J. Uhl was married to Lula M. Thompson. The Uhls could trace their ancestral line back to 1760 when three brothers arrived in America.

Clarence was born in Ohio in 1865. He received a solid education including college, and was 22 when he came to Vacaville to make it on his own. Uhl first found employment in the town's stores and the post office. He then turned his eye to farm work.

By 1892, he had enough saved to lease some land of his own and, from the knowledge he had acquired in farming, he prospered.

In 1900, he began buying land, 80 and 70 acres in Pleasants Valley and planted it in orchards. By 1926, he owned 232 acres near Vacaville. He made his home on land formally known as Dobbins place and owned a tract in the Lagoon Valley known as Rivera Place that had been part of the Spanish Grant.

In 1909, he was one of the founders of the Vacaville Fruit Growers Association. He also owned the Masonic Building in Vacaville.

His total holdings came 2,000 acres in fruit, vineyards and pasture. In the busy season he required a large number of helpers in gathering, packing and shipping of fruit. Clarence Uhl was a city trustee and was on the high school and library boards. He was well-known in his time for his temperance views and served as mayor of Vacaville from 1932 to 1934. He was also partial to good horses and bred "Solano Boy."

Edwin Uhl, an only child, was born Feb. 15, 1895. When he was 8 years old his father had just made a profit selling off 20 acres for \$8,000. With this money, the family purchased a ranch in Vacaville with a house that had formally belonged to Dr. Dobbins.

"Our home was at the corner of what is now Gibson Canyon Road and Monte Vista," said Ed Uhl. "It was built in the 1860s. It was built by the Dobbins and was a real charming old home with three marble fireplaces.

"There were Suskuhana peaches planted and they were a hell of a peach," he added. "They weren't what you would like to have. Even though my dad was in debt heavily, he took acres of those trees out immediately. He knew what he was doing.

"Suskuhana peaches," he added, "have never heard of them since. Dad planted cherries in their place. It was good soil, and that was a paying crop in those days."

Ed Uhl was educated in Vacaville and then attended Santa Clara University, Boone's Private School and University of California.

His studies came to an end with World War I. He enlisted and saw action as an infantryman in France. On returning to Vacaville, he went into the family farming business. By now the orchard was planted in peaches, prunes, pears, and plums. He had about 15 varieties of plums and about seven varieties of cherries.

"Then I took over leasing from my dad, the Depression years," said Ed Uhl. "As you know, the Depression started in 1929. I had Dave Dobbins, an attorney here, draw up a lease for between my dad and myself. It was a little bit different than most tenants would have. I was to take care of everything in the way of maintenance, the trays for sun drying the fruit, the lug boxes used to carry the fruit and the packing house for the fresh fruit.

"Now my dad was not one bit sold on this idea," he added. "You must realize a father can't imagine the son being the boss, but my dad was about to lose the ranch.

"He had lost a lot of money in the stock market. He owned outright \$600,000 worth of Caterpillar stock. In my opinion, he had no reason to gamble like that. That's all it is. Put up a few dollars and hope to get thousands of dollars worth of stock. Naturally, it would collapse some day and it did.

"So presented this lease and told him I thought I could get the money. I had someone in Napa in mind. The man I had done some business with who owned the Napa Fruit Company, a dried fruit business. They processed and pack prunes, apricots, peaches and pears and we had all of those.

"I could see procrastination on his part so I tried to be very patient. I bet I made 12 or 15 trips to see him," Ed Uhl said. "He was always glad to see me, but he never got down to talking about coming up with the money. So I lost my shirt the first year, because I had to ship what was on the trees.

"My dad was quite a believer in fresh, or green, fruit shipped to New York and other large cities on the East Coast. As a rule, most of those cars went to auction sales.

"I remember coming home from France my dad wanted me to stop in New York and get acquainted with some of the people who were buying our fruit off the train," said Ed Uhl. "He told me to go to P. Ruhlman Company. They were the biggest of the

auction crowd, probably had 35 or 40 auction buyers. My dad was kind of proud of them for buying so many Liberty Bonds during the war. I think they bought over \$30 million worth of bonds.

"I said to my dad, 'C.J., that's some of the money you gave them when they didn't give you enough for the fruit and you had to pay the freight!' So, I didn't feel a bit kindly about green fruit. I shipped one year, and the very next year I got a Caterpillar and pulled out every tree that grew fruit that couldn't be dried.

"That meant that I had only had peaches, pears and prunes, and we had a big acreage of prunes," said Uhl. "In other words, I went the dried fruit route. My thinking was it wasn't perishable like the green fruit. They always had us tied up when we relied on green fruit, so I was never sold on that.

"C.J. and I didn't get along very well for a while, but it was a must. I'm still sure I was right. I talked this over with some very experienced men. I didn't jump in without some reasonable background.

"Eventually more trees were planted that could be used as dried fruit, mostly prunes. We'd have 500 or 600 tons of dried prunes - they dry at a 2 1/2-to-1 ratio. Two-and-a-half dried prunes equal 1 pound of fresh prunes.

"I had the only dehydrator in this part of the state at that time. It was built in 1925 before I took over. The year before, 1924, was very wet and my dad got 5 or 6 inches of rain on the prunes as they were out drying in the sun plus, those in the orchard that were in boxes waiting for the horse and wagon. Naturally that rain ruined the prune deal completely. It was a heavy loss and it put C.J. in a very precarious situation financially.

"So I had this hydrator built. I was able to get some finance from the bank plus a little from my dad to build this dehydrator. Two tunnels were built in 1925 and two in 1926. Next I built a warehouse with bins, 20 feet in depth, 6 feet wide, and some of them double that, 12 feet wide, to hold other people's prunes besides my own. Probably 70 percent of my drying was done commercially, for other farmers. Thirty percent for our prunes. I also dried some apricots and peaches in the dehydrator, but not on a large scale.

"This was the dehydrator that was eventually used by Basic Vegetable in 1933 for their onions," remembered Uhl. "They would use it when I was not using it. That was the deal. I gave to them for a very low price, because I wanted their business. I needed that income. I only made it that low price for one year. Then one of the Humes of Basic made a statement to me a few weeks after the contract was made and signed that we'd given them a contract on that price for five years. I'd said, 'No, no we won't do

that.' Naturally I got a higher price for the next contract. But it was still reasonable. I was going to cooperate.

"I leased it to them for so much an hour. So, they had a dehydrator for their onions because of my financial condition. That's where Mrs. Leonard Buck was very much put out. She didn't like the odor. She was so put out about it that she moved away from here. Moved to Ross. Having no relatives and a lot of money, when she died, she left \$400 million to Marin County. That could have been Solano County's had we not had a dehydrator with onions!

"I drove her out of town, as it were, no question about it. But all the people in town were against her trying to dictate what would be here as an industry. This town was in the depth of the Depression and here comes an industry."

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