

Carrying on family's agricultural tradition

By Kristin Delaplane

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"I am a fruit rancher and fourth-generation Vacavillian. My great-grandfather, George Sharpe, came here from England. He was a contractor and a builder and when the train stopped in Elmira, he decided the building opportunities were here. The towns were booming in the 1860s or 1870s. He built many of the old buildings that are still standing in Vacaville. Some of his notable buildings included the first college, the first grammar school, and the first high school and he built the Buck Mansion. He designed them, he built them and did the landscaping.

"He built a lot of the houses on Buck Avenue on speculation. He would build them and the family would live in them until someone came along and wanted to buy them. He had three children. His daughter, Esther, was my grandmother. His son, Millard Sharpe, became a farmer and developed some fruit varieties. He always named his plums after girls that he had a crush on or admired like 'Becky Smith.'

"My grandmother married Charles Eldredge. His father was a pharmacist and was trained in chemistry. He got a job offer as city chemist in Ft. Worth, Texas, so they moved there. But while he was in Vacaville, he fell in love with it and all the fruit ranches and he wanted one, even though he wasn't a farmer. After serving in World War I, they came back here and they bought a 20-acre fruit ranch, which is the one I farm today.

"My great-grandfather built them this house as a temporary dwelling. It's built out of lumber from an old schoolhouse. When they got settled, he planned to build them a large house like he had built his other children.

"He dropped dead at about 45 years old. He left my grandmother and three children. She wanted to keep the place, so she leased it. She stayed on the ranch, but in the early 50s, when she was in her 60s, she told my father, Charles, if he didn't want to farm the place she was going to sell.

"I was about 2 when my father took over running the ranch. He also worked as an agricultural inspector. We built a house on the property and this is where I grew up. I was almost out of high school, when my father dropped dead. He was 53. Now my mother's there with two children and she leased the farm. She sent us to college. I became a librarian and went to work at U.C. Davis.

"In 1988, the people leasing the ranch decided to cut back. My mother told me I had to find somebody to lease it or take it over. I couldn't find anybody, so I took it over. Eleven years later, here I am.

"I always loved the country, but I wasn't really trained to be a farmer, although I did some jobs. When I was five, my father would sit me down; I would sort the peaches by size. I used to pick up walnuts and fill buckets. I'd make five cents or ten cents a bucket. I enjoyed all of that part of growing up on a farm.

"When I was growing up on the ranch, a retired Chinese man, who had farmed and lived all of his life in Vacaville, was living here on the ranch in a trailer. His name was Chong Yee. He used to catch me when I was coming home from school or when I walked out on Saturday and he taught me more than I can tell you about farming. When I was reading 25 years later about pruning, I recognized it was exactly what he had told me and had showed me. So it was easier for me when I started farming.

"What he said was right out of the textbooks at the university. He was a very interesting man. Now I know how progressive he was. How intelligent he was. And he was always doing experiments. He has a tombstone out in the Vacaville Cemetery

"In the first year I sold the plums I was absolutely boggled by the prices they paid me for my product. My plums were worthless. I began studying the market and realized the major problem with this ranch is it's a little too small. I'm too small to compete on a commercial level, to compete with farmers dealing in volume. When I went to buy 2,000 boxes, they cost me \$1.50 a box. The guys said to me, 'If you buy a lot of them, you can get them cheaper.' You get your first price break at, 50,000 or 80,000. This kind of thing goes on with everything you do from labels to shipping. So I had to find another market

"I found the organic market, because when I took over I immediately stopped spraying insecticides and herbicides. Ever since the science of ecology was popularized to where you could understand the theories, it made sense to me. Living on this place, spraying and killing everything in sight, just didn't make sense to me. I didn't like it. Also, theoretically, it doesn't work out if you subscribe to the theory of the food chain or the circular pattern of life; you can't be taking out chunks of it and still have it work. If you take something out of the food chain, what does each group on either side of it do? So, I wasn't going to spray.

"I read about being organic; how they combated problems and the theories involved. I realized I would be better off being Certified Organic. Certified I can sell all the plums I want. I have a market for the smaller amount of produce. It took three years for me to be certified. I didn't have the problems that a lot do, because we were never fumigating

and doing really bad things.

"I planted vegetables where I had empty spaces because of the dying trees. Among the produce we grow for are tomatoes, eggplant, cucumbers, melons, tomatoes, plums and persimmons. I read that persimmon trees are highly resistant to oak root fungus, so I planted Japanese persimmons. You could not sell a persimmon in California for years. Now you can. I credit it with the great influx of Asians.

"We've always gone to Farmers Markets and now we have the fruit stand at Orchard and Fruitvale. All of our San Francisco stuff is 'Vaca Valley Orchard Company.' At the fruit stand, we thought it was too formal sounding, so we named the fruit stand after the woman who actually runs it most of the time: Alikis.

"When my mother told me I had to take over the ranch, I continued to work full time as a librarian. But as I realized what ranching entailed, I realized I could not keep that job. I decided I would go part time at the university and I basically take off one, two, or three months in the summer depending on what the demands are.

"The negative part of farming is that I started a little old and I don't have the physical strength. Farming is physically taxing. I think that's one of the reasons there aren't more women in agriculture. I read a book this man wrote about farming in the 1880s and 1890s. He said, 'It's a very rewarding life, but I do not recommend that anyone take it up after passing the mid-point of life because you will never be strong enough to do the work or withstand it. You have to grow up doing it to be able to withstand this kind of work.' I have found that to be true. I love my tractor, but it's getting too hard for me to go out and do it.

"I started in my 40s. I'm 51 now. The difference between those early days and now is like night and day. At the university, where I work with a computer and whatnot, I don't notice my age.

"Farming is very interesting, because there's a lot of variety in it. You follow the cycle of the year. If it's hot in summer and you're harvesting and things aren't working, soon it will be winter. In winter, you look forward to spring. The other thing is farmers must be the most optimistic people in the world. Those are positive things about it."

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In 1915, the Carnegie Library was completed. It was built by George Sharpe, Mary Eldredge's great-grandfather.

George's daughter, Esther Sharpe Eldredge, became the city's librarian. The street "Eldridge" is named after her (Yes, it is misspelled, but family decided long ago to let it

be).

Mary Eldredge has followed in the family tradition as a librarian at University of California, Davis.

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