

## Longtime Solanoan recalls family's past

By Kristin Delaplane

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Granville Swift was my great-grandmother's brother. He got to California in 1841. In about 1844, he moved to Orland where he started a horse and cattle ranch. "In 1848, when gold was discovered, he went over to the American and Feather rivers and made a killing. After he got his fistful of money, he went back to Missouri and brought his entire family back to California - father, sisters and brothers. He bought up an estate in Orland and became the largest rancher up there.

"In the mid- to late 1850s, they ran into three years back-to-back drought and there was no feed for the cattle. He moved down to Sonoma near his brother-in-law, Franklin Sears (Sear's Point). They ran the cattle operation there and Granville built a big mansion, 'Temelec.'

"Their neighbor was Frederick Sidney Jones, my great-great-grandfather. He and a couple of partners were in the wholesale butcher business in San Francisco.

His part was taking care of the livestock for slaughter, which was in Sonoma (where Stornetta's Dairy is today). I guess they'd raft them across to San Francisco. By the 1860s he was very wealthy. Granville's sister, Polly, married Jones and my grandfather was born at Temelec in '61.

"In 1866, Swift and Jones invested money in the Comstock, a famous stock swindle. They lost a great deal of money. That's when they got in their wagons and moved to Green Valley, where Granville owned a ranch and a house.

"That house was built in 1856 by Harbin. It broke him. Granville had loaned him \$31,000 to \$32,000, but Harbin had all kinds of liens and the house was being sold on the courthouse steps. Granville said, 'I'll lose everything.' So he went and bought it.

"The Jones and Swifts moved in together. Granville, his wife and their two sons. My great-grandmother and great-grandfather, my grandfather and his sister.

"It was a little too tame there for Granville's wife. She divorced him and went off to San Francisco and Granville went off prospecting, so my great-grandmother took care of the boys. In 1875, Granville was killed when his mule stumbled down a hill.

"Jones became a farmer. He bought more land until he worked it up to just short of 600

acres. The ranch was a vineyard and they had the facility to make brandy. Practically all the brandy went to San Francisco. They had sailing ships there at Bridgeport (Cordelia). They'd take it down with a horse and wagon and load it on those flat bottom scows.

"During the 1800s, phylloxera killed the vineyards and they replanted apricots, peaches and 26 acres of olives. However, it was the cherries that took over.

"Somebody owed Jones money and couldn't pay. He had a trunk full of rooted cherry trees - little saplings as big as your little finger that he had brought from Germany. He said, 'This is the only thing I've got of any value.' My great-grandfather planted a row on either side of the road going into the ranch. When those trees came into bearing in the late 1800s, they shipped the cherries to San Francisco and got so much money for them it was just phenomenal. They pulled out everything and planted cherries. He wound up with the largest single planting of cherries in the world, about 125 acres. They were shipping back East as well as locally.

"It was one of the largest operations in the country and was under the George Washington label. Real imaginative. I remember pasting those labels on the boxes when I was a kid.

"There were over a 1,000 laborers during the harvest - pickers and packers. They had a tent city there with streets and curbs. We ran a big mess hall. Three meals was part of the deal. I'd go down there and have breakfast. A hundred fried eggs on a plate.

"Then when the season was over it, there wasn't half a dozen people on the ranch. Early on there were local Indians on the ranch, the domestics and people that worked around the place. Their last names were Jones and Swift, because they didn't traditionally have last names.

"We had a big bunkhouse and the Chinese were our first supplemental labor, outside the Indians. The Filipinos came in the late '20s. A big gang of Filipinos lived there year-round. During the late '40s we had a transition there and we started in with the Mexican nationals.

"My grandfather took over that operation and in the late 1920s and he noticed a cherry tree had turned kind of yellow and the leaves were kind of leathery. He said it looked like 'buckskin.' It eventually became known as buckskin disease and it wiped out the cherries.

"Then my father took over the operation. He had his own ranch, half way down Green Valley Road, that my grandmother bought that for him around 1913. That was 114

acres in a vineyard.

"My dad also had the Suisun Valley Ranch. He had loaned Will Pierce money and in the '30s had to foreclose on him. Pierce kept where Willotta Oaks is, but my father had to take over everything else. He sold some and kept a piece for himself. He was farming prunes, peaches, apricots, plums, peaches, cherries and pears. At that particular time I think he was the second largest farmer in the valley.

"It was at the outbreak of the war that we lost all our help. I was 14 and my dad yanked me out of high school to work on the ranch. He needed somebody who could drive a truck and weigh cherries.

"I worked for about two years and then they realized I was going to get drafted. My mother got all excited and shot me down to Berkeley to a prep school for Cal. I finished school in 18 months while working at a furniture company as a shipping clerk. Then they took me at Cal.

"In '49 my dad sold the original Green Valley place to the Green Valley Development Company. It was too big a home, a white elephant. Today it's the Green Valley Country Club.

"Meanwhile, I got married and my wife, Kathryn, and I were living in Southern California where I was a chief counter boss for an automobile parts warehouse. In 1955, my dad says, 'You either get up here and take over these ranches or I'm going to sell the whole damn thing.'

"I took over the property and also leased a couple of ranches. I was operating about a 1,000 acres of orchards. It kept me running.

"In 1969, I purchased five acres where the Pioneer Fruit Stand is. An Italian fellow had a little tiny pink fruit stand there, the size of a closet. He used to come over from Napa and run his little fruit stand. I was going to build a home there.

"When we bought it, there was still some zucchini, a few cucumbers and some other things out in the field. I told to my kids, 'You can sell whatever you can find out in the field.' They sold everything. I had my bulldozer in there, but that kind of opened my eyes. The next spring we sold about 15 tons of cherries across that counter, 5 pounds at a time. My God, I sold practically my whole cherry crop. I was in the produce business.

"We ran the fruit stand and I sold pears, apricots, and plums, you name it, we had it. "I still had my ranches going and that was supplying the fruit stand, but in '74 we had this

terrible freeze and I lost my vineyard in Green Valley. I said, 'Let's get rid of everything and put all our eggs in the fruit stand.'

"By then we had purchased 40 acres across the street from the fruit stand where we had our house. We also had that land in produce - cucumbers, corn, bell peppers, watermelons. Our big thing was the pumpkin patch. It was a big hit. Cars parked all over the place. Bobby Powers of the Nut Tree came down, looked around and he was just astounded. The next year they had a pumpkin patch at the Nut Tree.

"We sold the fruit stand in the late '70s. I'll tell you what happened. Three years of drought and our Berryessa customers fell off to nothing. At the same time the Department of Interior came to Berryessa. One of their edicts was that no private property could touch the lakeshore. Now, we used to have Cadillacs and Lincolns parked three deep here at the fruit stand and these people didn't buy 5 pounds or 1 pound. They used to buy boxes for family and friends. All of a sudden people started dropping off. My former customers were traveling the Napa road. The people that took their place were the guys with the \$20,000 pickups dragging the \$25,000 boats, and they couldn't afford either one.

"The fruit stand sold, but I was still growing stuff and going to the produce market in Oakland to supply them.

"I put up a little store in a building next to the fruit stand and started my jewelry work. I bought about \$5,000 to \$6,000 worth of Indian jewelry and was polishing turquoise and making silver jewelry. We became a full service jeweler. I had five men working on the bench doing repair and design. We did casting, wax work, finishing and stone setting. I had a rip-roaring business.

"In the '80s, the Solano Mall opened and that was the death knell on the jewelry business. I did work for Mervyns and about five or six stores in the Mall sent me work, but I didn't have that spiral upwards any longer and it started on its way down. After six years, we quit.

"I moved to Benicia and went into a retail jewelry store with a partner. She took care of the sales and I did all the work. But it wasn't enough to make two families prosperous, so after six years I quit.

"Before I went to Benicia, the fruit stand was sold again and the new owners didn't need my produce, so Kathryn put up a fruit stand in our yard for the stuff I was growing here. I was working and running out here and driving a tractor and disking and planting and cultivating and irrigating. After a few years, Kathryn wanted a rest.

“Our family is back to a vineyard. I leased the land out for 20 years and it’s planted in grapes.”

1999, Vacaville Museum and Kristin Delaplane Conti

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