

Orchardist prospers after early struggle

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, April 18, 1999

Both my parents were born in Iowa and grew up within five miles of each other, but they didn't meet until they were almost grown. In Iowa we had a farm, 230 acres. The crops were corn, oats, barley and soybeans. I think they're still raising mostly those same crops back there. Starting in 1932 or 33, we weren't doing that well there. Things just didn't work out and my father lost the property to the finance company in '37. I was just out of high school. The family moved out here that year because we had friends in Suisun.

The first thing my parents and my three brothers did was go down near Bakersfield to pick cotton. I stayed here. I was lucky because right away I got a job with the Sheldon Oil Co. in Suisun. Sheldon had large vehicles and he delivered oil, burner oil, road oil and heavy burner oils all the way to Colusa and below Bakersfield. For a night's work, 12 hours, I got paid 4 dollars. That was pretty good wages. I paid for the house rent while the family was picking cotton.

Sheldon was quite a nice man to work for. When he was first getting started, he delivered the oil in the daytime and kept the books at night. Then he got big enough to hire truck drivers and he worked at the plant. He had about 10 trucks and trailers and one freightliner.

When my family got back from the cotton, my father went to work as a night watchman for the Suisun Police Department. He went to work and came home feet first. He evidently walked out of the phone booth and keeled over in the street. He had a heart murmur. He knew about it, but back then they couldn't repair it. His death was awfully hard on the family, I'll tell you

We survived on what I made, but I didn't work too much. Then in December '37 I got laid off. I bought a car one day and got laid off the next. It was the last ones he hired who got laid off first.

In February '38 I went to work in Walnut Grove on the Shelley Ranch. It was a corporate farm, around 1,600 acres. They held most of the ranch in barley when I first went there. At one time they had 20,000 sacks of barley stacked up. As soon as they got the barley off, they had men out there with a D 6 tractor and a plow with 36 inch blades. They could plow 24 inches deep with no trouble at all. They rolled up a levy, and that's where I came in - irrigating. We could irrigate with 2,000 gallons of water a minute.

After the barley was gone, we planted pinto beans and some cranberry beans. When it came time to harvest, they pulled them up by the roots.

They have a machine that went through and cut off the roots. It would roll two rows of beans with the roots together and then they used a harvester to shell them. I'd haul all the beans they harvested each day to Sacramento to be stored. I was hauling three and four loads a day. I could make the round trip in about two hours, not more than three.

I got the truck going in the morning shortly before 8 and it was usually after 6 by the time I got back. My pay was 4.50 a day.

In February 39 I went to work at Hunter Boats in Suisun. There were about 35 people employed there.

The next year I had a supervisor's job putting on the ribs, the top planks and the decks. I was even a painter. Then, just before the war, they couldn't get any more engines, brass to make the parts for the strut for the propellers and the various other parts. You couldn't get Philippine mahogany for the superstructure at the top of the boat. I figured they were going to fold, so I put my application in at Mare Island.

In 39, Fay and I got married. I was 21 and she's eight months younger than me. Her stepsister was in the hospital and there was a gal my family knew who was in the hospital at the same time. Somehow we got to talking. We went together for about four months and then we got married.

I got the job at Mare Island in 41, the year Beverly, our daughter, was born. I went to work as an electrician's helper. I'd never had any electrical experience. I talked to my neighbor and he said, Don't worry, Frank. Take a few tools hammer, saw, hacksaw, a couple pairs of pliers and wrenches. You won't have any trouble. I had a chance to go to the training school and did. Next thing I knew I was working as a supervisor. I was still a first-class helper, but doing the work of a supervisor. I had two women and three and four men working for me and two of them were journeymen electricians! I kept my mouth shut. I was lucky to be working.

In 43, we bought our ranch. We both wanted a ranch. It's 30 acres in the Vaca Valley. We bought it from California Lands. It had been repossessed from a fellow by the name of Ackerly. He had a hardware store here in town. I was acquainted with Manuel Castro who worked for him and he told me it was for sale. "My brother had worked for Mangels in Suisun and done a lot of work in the orchard. We both went to look at the place and he said, Gee, this ought to work out real good.

The orchard was planted in pears, Hungarian plums and some French prunes. The

plums and pears were shipped and sold fresh and they didn't pay that good.

One time I owed money on the shipping. We got rid of the pear trees, pulled them out with a D 8, a Caterpillar tractor.

Our daughter, Marleen, was born in 45 and by then I realized I couldn't make a living on the farm like we wanted to. In 49 I went to work for Basic Vegetable and ranched. At Basic I worked with the equipment. I had that job for 29 years.

My grandson, Jimmy, is working the ranch now and he is aware that he must work along with ranching.

We planted the orchard to prune trees in the early '60s. Ever since the trees got to producing, we've done quite well. We joined the Sunsweet co-op in the early 80s. Now we have a picking machine and we can pick a prune tree at about a tree a minute. Before that we had to knock them off the tree with a pole and pick them off the ground.

We have 43 walnut trees. My grandson's got it in his head that he wants to pull most of those. They take a lot of time to harvest. It's eight days, 10 days to pick prunes and you're done. It takes a month to pick walnuts.

It has always been a family operation. For the harvest my daughters, Marleen and Beverly, help me. And my granddaughter, Kristin. Boy, she gets out and I've got to get with it or I don't keep up with her. We harvest from 7 to noon. The help doesn't want to work in the afternoon when it is 105 or 106 degrees. We get one coffee break, and if it's hot, they get one shot of water.

Beverly didn't want to pick prunes this year, but then she started thinking, Are we going to get new curtains this year? Are we going to get a new this or that? I pay them good. They get anywhere from 500 to 700 for those 10 days.

This year was Jimmy's first year taking over. He did a nice job cultivating the ground. I'd rather be doing the tractor work myself, but he needs to learn. The neighbors above us let the water run on to our property and Jimmy was blazing away across the field with the tractor. He got into that mud. He came walking back and said, Grandpa, I did a foolish thing. I ran in the mud down there and the tractor is stuck. We went down with a chain and I showed him how to get it out. It's happened to me.

1999 Vacaville Museum and Kristin Delaplane Conti

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/696>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/696/>

