Roy Mason continues ranching tradition with cattle, grapes

By Kristin Delaplane

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Roy Mason and his wife, Betty, live on a ranch in Green Valley, where he runs cattle and grows grapes. On the same property, his daughter and her family now occupy the house where his grandmother lived. The family, which traces its Solano County heritage to the mid-1800s, also owns and operates a vineyard in neighboring Suisun Valley.

Roy Mason grew up in the valleys west of Fairfield and recounts his family’s ties to them:

“My grandfather, George Washington Mason, arrived in 1860 in Green Valley. My grandmother, Sarah Ellis, was already in Suisun Valley with her family. They were married in 1863 at the Samuel Martin house, the stone house across from Solano Community College.

“George Washington and Sarah Ellis settled on this property here in Green Valley, and my father was born here in 1869.

“Their first home completely burned down. Their second home burned in 1937. My grandmother wanted the exact same house, and the home that is there now was built on the same foundation as the one that burned. My daughter lives there now.

“Their primary crop was apricots and pears, and they planted a cherry orchard. They were also in the cattle business and had a small dairy. They would separate the cream, put it in 5-gallon containers and we would take it down to Cordelia to ship the cream on the train. I guess it went to San Francisco. That was in the ‘30s.

“My father was a rancher. In 1916 or ‘17, he bought a 50-acre ranch in Upper Green Valley, which is now called Green Valley Estates. He farmed that for five or six years and had cherries, prunes and a few grapes. I was born in 1923. Two years later, in 1925, he sold the Upper Green Valley ranch and bought a 40-acre fruit ranch in Suisun Valley, just north of Mankas Corner. The orchards there were apricots, peaches, a few pears and a few prunes. We survived on it.

“Almost every ranch then had a variety of fruit. It kept people busy all summer. If you
had a failure with one crop, you had other crops. They were family operations, and a lot of the work was done by the owners.

“We also farmed my grandmother’s ranch in Green Valley. That was in pears, apricots and a few peaches. The cherries on the Green Valley hillsides were beautiful. The land wasn’t irrigated, so you didn’t have large production, but you had beautiful, beautiful cherries.

“We lived in the home in Suisun Valley. In fact, my wife’s grandfather Siebe built it. It was a very large, two-story home. It had four large bedrooms upstairs and one bath. Downstairs, it had two bedrooms, a kitchen and a pantry, a living room, a dining room, one fireplace and one bathroom. A screened-in porch went almost completely around the first story.

“There was no heat upstairs. We had a fireplace, and the chimney went through the house. My sister got the bedroom next to the chimney, so it was a little bit warmer than my room across the hall. When the hot weather came, I would sleep out on the porch until October, November, when the rain started. We had a lot of mosquitoes, but you got used to those.

“We went to Suisun Valley School, which was approximately a mile away. It was a two-room school by Mankas Corner. The school is still there. We had six or seven in our graduating class. It was a mixed group. We had Chinese. We had Japanese. We had Filipinos. We had rules, and the teacher was the boss.

“We had a Chinese foreman in Suisun Valley and a Filipino foreman down here in Green Valley. They ran the crew. They were the boss, as far as the men were concerned.

“Filipinos did the pruning and lived on the ranch in Green Valley. In the summer, they did a lot of the fruit harvesting. The fruit would come into the shed to be cut, and it was dried on the ranch. The neighbors’ children and wives would do the fruit cutting. Everyone wanted to get out and work.

“There were no child labor laws. We were taught to work, and all summer long we worked. If you were big enough to stand on a box and cut an apricot, why, you were allowed to do so. Our hours were from 7 in the morning, take an hour for lunch, and quit at 6 in the evening. For a 40-pound lug, we would pay 7 cents a box. If we cut 10 boxes of apricots a day, that was 70 cents. That was pretty good money. In ‘31, ‘32, or ‘33, when I was 8, 9 or 10, the foreman said, ‘I am raising everyone a penny a box.’ We thought it was a gift from heaven!
“In later years, I was picking fruit. We had a Chinese foreman. At five minutes to 12, he would get out in the middle of the orchard, take his watch out and he’d hold it there. That was the longest five minutes. It was absolutely terrible. No one would get off the ladder until 12 o’clock. At 1 o’clock, we were back on the ladder.

“The Chinese also worked on the ranch, and their housing was just very minimal - bunkhouses. They had their brick stove and a big pan where they would cook their rice. That’s where I learned to love Chinese food so much. Five nights out of the week, I would go down and eat with the Chinese. They would go down to the creek and cut watercress to make watercress soup. They would have chicken or duck or fish, and always rice.

“That was during the Dust Bowl in the Midwest. Almost every day, maybe three or four cars would drive in with mattresses tied on the top and maybe two or three young children in the car. The adults would ask for work. They just wanted to work. They were all good people who had been driven out of the Midwest.

“Those that were fortunate enough to get a job moved down by the cutting shed. If they had a canvas tent, they would put it up underneath a tree. A lot of the people would make a little house with the fruit trays. They had either a wood stove or a little gas stove to cook on, and their cooking utensils. No one complained.

“These people would go down to the Mankas Corner store, which was a little grocery store and a bar, and they would buy a loaf of bread for 10 cents, a quart bottle of milk for 10 cents, some potatoes and bacon. They were just happy to survive.

“One time I went to town with my father when things were tough. I asked if I could have a nickel for an ice cream. He said, ‘I don’t have it.’ He just didn’t have it.

“When I came out of the service after World War II, he asked if I wanted to go into the cattle business. I did, and he asked how much money I needed. He gave me a large amount of money to buy the cattle with and charged me no interest.

“During the Depression, things were tough, but we always had food. We had a cow on the ranch. I’d milk the cow in the morning and at night and sell milk to my neighbors for 10 cents a quart. That was a dime a day I made.

“My grandparents’ ranch was passed down to one generation in 1937. When my father passed away in 1956, that was another generation. Now it will go another generation.

“The ranch in Green Valley, the original ranch of 166 acres that was in pears and
apricots, has been replanted into vineyard. There were approximately 12 acres of vineyards that my father planted. He sold his grapes for $12 a ton. On the same piece of property today, we’re selling grapes for $1,650 a ton.

“Fortunately we still own the Suisun Valley ranch. For 25 years the ranch has been creeping with vineyards. The soil in Suisun Valley is prime and the climate is absolutely beautiful. It’s just a pleasure to go up there and work. It seems like the soil gets better the deeper you dig.

“The soil becomes part of a person. I was born and raised on the ranch, and I enjoy riding horseback; I enjoy going out and cutting hay, driving the tractor. It’s just part of my life. We are able to step outside and pick a few grapes, or pick some fruit, or go up in the hills and shoot a deer, or go up to the lake and shoot a duck or a wild turkey. We’ve done it all our lives. I’m not cut out to go to an office and work every day. This morning I was up feeding cattle. Tomorrow I’ll be up on a horse, working with the cattle. It’s just a wonderful life.”

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