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PRUNES! :

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A generation of prune ranching in Santa Clara Valley

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INTRODUCTION

The odor of drying prunes is one I will never forget. When I was a little girl, we used to visit Grandpa, Clarence Fagalde, Sr., on the Dorrance Ranch on Dry Creek Road where he was foreman. During the summer, the air would be filled with the smell coming from the dehydrators.

As recently as the 1950's when I was growing up, the Santa Clara Valley was filled with orchards. Prune, apricot and cherry trees were everywhere. Today, however, most of the orchards are gone, pushed out by new industries and homes. Where the Dorrance Ranch stood, there are rows of tract homes. Each year more trees fall, and houses take their places.

After more than 50 years of work in the prune orchards of this valley, Grandpa retired in 1962 and moved to a little house in Aptos near Seacliff. His sons, my father and uncle, went into other occupations. But it takes only a little digging for our family and many others like it to find our roots in prune ranching.

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PRUNES!

Prunes! The wrinkled fruit has often been the butt of jokes. Its name is used for such diverse purposes as KLIV's softball team and the way a baby looks when it is first born. At least one CBer I've heard calls himself the Old Prune Picker. But prunes are no joke for many longtime Santa Clara County residents who have devoted their lives to growing the prune.

Santa Clara Valley has been known since the days of the Gold Rush as a land of milk and honey where fruits and vegetables grew in abundance in the rich soil and mild climate. In the late 1800's, dried fruits took over as a major crop.

Experiments with dried fruits began here during the 1850's. Frenchman Louis Pellier brought the first prune d'agen seedlings to the valley and started an industry that has been a mainstay of Santa Clara Valley agriculture to the present day, dried prunes.

Local residents were unimpressed with this small prune from France at first. They preferred the larger Imperial and Cox prunes. Then Pellier gave some of his seedlings to John Q.A. Ballou and George W. Tarleton. Both had been experimenting with fruit planting and drying processes. They started the first successful prune orchard in California on their adjoining ranches.

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Soon others were getting in on the act. Drying processes ranged from Eastern-style evaporators to spreading the prunes in the sun to dry. Prunes produced here were very different from those sold in France due to the different drying processes. The French prunes, alternately baked and dried, were very dark and carmelized and tasted similar to licorice.¹

The prune industry took off with a bang in the 1860's. By 1870, there were 300 acres of prunes in Santa Clara County and nearly 350 more in nearby counties.

Conditions here were right for prunes. The moderate temperature, long growing season, low summer humidity and rich soil all added up to large healthy crops. Land was open and easily obtained in the late 19th century as many indebted Spanish grant-holders sold their large ranchos. Fertile land was selling for \$150 to \$300 an acre, and most prune ranchers realized a profit in only a few years.

Prune acreage expanded like crazy. In 1885, the total California crop added up to 10 million pounds of dried prunes. It grew from three million in 1885 to 17 million in 1890.

When my grandfather, Clarence E. Fagalde, Sr., entered the prune picture, the valley was filled with small, family-oriented ranches, averaging less than 300 acres. In the northernmost parts of the valley, pears were plentiful, he remembers, but in Almaden and South County, peaches, apricots, cherries and prunes dominated the scene.

Grandpa was only 9 years old when he started picking prunes on the Roberts Ranch on Pearl Avenue in 1905. Nearby ranches included the Rollins and Maines ranches. He recalls with a chuckle

that many of today's leading citizens picked prunes for 15 cents an hour as children. Fifteen cents an hour was big money then. In those pre-inflation days, he said, "You had just as much money as you have now."

Irrigation was unknown in the orchards where Grandpa grew up. For years, there was enough natural rainfall to supply the crops. Insects were not a problem in those days either. He claims the county was full of parasites that kept the crops free of fruit-loving insects.

Then came the dry years, around 1910 and 11. There was no rain, and the growers were forced to put in wells. Four wells supplied a mile-square area of orchards, and the ranchers took turns in using the water, which was pumped through ditches from the Almaden Creek to the various ranches. The only price they paid was the maintenance of the ditches, Grandpa said.

Many of the parasites couldn't survive the dry years, and the ranchers were forced to start using insecticides to protect their crops. The first spray rigs were slow and awkward, with the man working the rig receiving as much insecticide as the trees. Gradually spraying methods were improved.

In the early 1900's, prune growers were forced to deal with a glutted market for the first time. More prunes were being grown than people wanted to buy, and prices went down. The growers began to band together in earnest to improve conditions in the industry, standardizing processing and marketing procedures.

In 1916, the San Jose Chamber of Commerce organized Prune Week, December 4 through 9. Residents were urged to send five-pound boxes of Fancy Prunes to friends and relatives in the eastern United States. Grocers, railroad lines and some steamship lines joined in the promotion, and 20,000 boxes were sold.

By this time, Grandpa was in his teens and had graduated from picking prunes to managing a prune ranch for a Mrs. Shilling, who was secretary of the San Jose Normal School. Her 50 acres of prunes and apricots were near Pearl Avenue.

In 1917, with the advent of World War I, Grandpa enlisted in the Navy. In the years that followed his discharge in 1918, he tried his hand at trucking, driving tractors and mining. He met Clara Riffe while he was working at the Guadalupe Mine. They were married, and she taught at the Guadalupe School for a while.

By the time he was 25, he had headed back to the orchards. For a year or so, he was foreman for the Lindsey Ranch on Donner Avenue, making \$175 per month. Later he worked on the Athenour Ranch. When my father, Clarence E. Fagalde, Jr., was born in 1922, Grandpa was foreman on the Hanson Ranch, located near what is now known as Branham Lane. His next stop was a small prune ranch in Cupertino, owned by August Shoenheit.

Grandpa was foreman on the Shoenheit Ranch until a friend introduced him to Jack Dorrance, who had 350 acres of orchards in the area around Meridian Road (known for years as Kirk Road)

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bounded by Dry Creek and Foxworthy Roads. Other parts of the ranch were scattered near Booksin, Hicks and Allendale Avenues. Grandpa became the foreman for the Dorrance Ranch, a job he held for 42 years until he retired in 1962.

The ranch sold more than 1000 tons of prunes each year, Grandpa boasts, and it took 100 families to pick and prepare them for sale to local packing houses.

Each year in late June or July, the prunes would begin to fall from the trees. They were picked from the ground and boxed. From there, they would be taken to a dipping area where they were dipped in a solution of hot water and lye which cleaned them and cracked the skin so that they would dry better. They were also sorted by size and weight. In the early days on the ranch, the prunes would then be spread out in trays and taken to the "dry grounds" where they would dry for approximately two weeks. Around 1930, most growers, including Dorrance, began using dehydrators which would do the job in a matter of hours.

Most of the people working on the ranch were local residents when Grandpa first started on the Dorrance ranch, but as more and more immigrants came to California, he said, the work fell to foreigners, many of whom could speak little or no English. The Italians came first, followed by Filipinos, Japanese and finally Mexican workers. By the 1950's, he most of the workers on the Dorrance ranch were of Mexican descent. The Anglos had begun to disdain menial work such as picking prunes, Grandpa

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feels. "If it wasn't for the Mexicans, you wouldn't have your crops picked," he said.

Although prune ranching was never easy work and he believes he could have had a successful career in the packing or trucking business, Grandpa claims he had the best job in the county for those 42 years. There was no time clock to punch, and he was his own boss most of the time.

The ranch provided a good living for the family. Even during the Depression, they barely felt the crunch, although many other ranchers did. Dad remembers that in some years, the prunes piled up 12-13 feet high waiting for a buyer. A lot of ranchers didn't have the money or the room to store unsold prunes, and didn't make it. Dorrance did.

In the years during and immediately after World War II, the prune industry enjoyed great success, but then urbanization began to take over in Santa Clara Valley. Taxes became extremely high, and as more people moved into the farming areas, there were complaints about the smell of the prunes and noise of the dehydrators, Dad said.

Prune acreage dropped from 54,414 in 1947 to 33, 444 in 1961. As Robert Couchman wrote in The Sunsweet Story, "Homes and industries steadily crowded prune production out of this fertile valley where the industry had begun and where it was the predominant agricultural enterprise for more than eight decades." Many growers moved on to other parts of California. Others found other occupations.

Grandpa retired in 1962, moving to a little house near Seacliff Beach. That year the last of the Dorrance ranch was sold to housing

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developers.

The valley has changed considerably in the years since he left. Most of the orchards are gone, and the number of acres left is growing less each year. The county department of agriculture reports that in 1965 there were 28,769 acres of prunes. Last year, the acreage was down to 5,805.

Prunes are no longer the major industry in Santa Clara Valley, and the sons and daughters of many ranchers have gone into other fields, but they are still an important part of our heritage, a part that will not soon be forgotten.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

The bulk of this essay is based on conversations with my father and grandfather, both of whom grew up on prune ranches in the Almaden area. I have been hearing their stories all my life and decided to get some of the information in more detail.

I also relied heavily on The Sunsweet Story by Robert Couchman published by Sunsweet Growers, Inc. in San Jose in 1967. Couchman is also a San Jose native and picked prunes as a boy on his father's ranch.