



RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

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Healdsburg: Buckle of the Prune Belt

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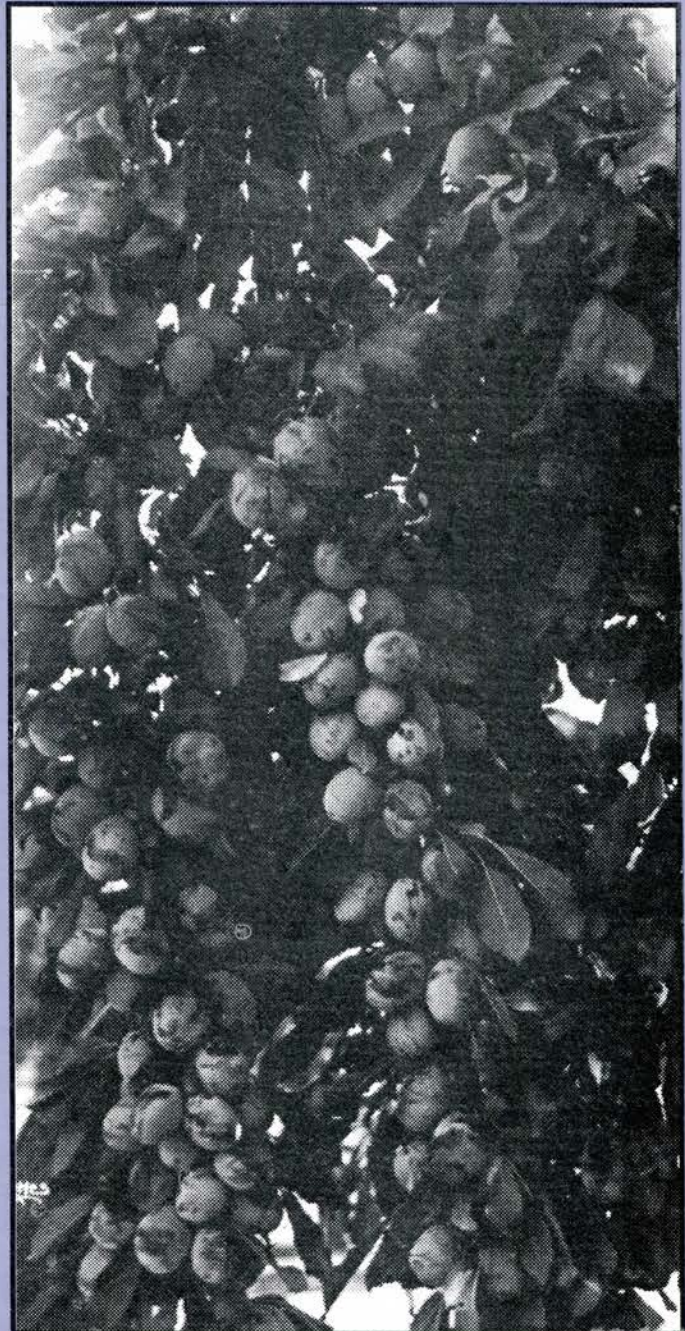
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"All Prunes Are Plums But Not All Plums Are Prunes"



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RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

*The Official Publication of the Healdsburg
Museum and Historical Society*

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IN THIS ISSUE

This, our first issue of the year 2000, features a look at two of Alexander Valley's historic buildings, a very comprehensive study of a crop once very important economically to the Healdsburg area, and an interesting oral history interview with this year's recipient of the History Lives/Pioneer Award, Louis J. Foppiano. In addition, our curator Marie Djordjevich begins a series on the Museum's artifacts, *Fashions of the Past*, with descriptions by Dawn Moser, former volunteer and Museum historian.

It is the staff's desire to bring to our readers and the Museum's membership articles that reflect the vibrant history that makes Healdsburg the special place that it is.

I wish to express my appreciation to the publications staff - curator Marie Djordjevich, assistant curator Holly Hoods and June Maher Smith - for their professionalism and dedication in this, our mutual endeavor.

Arnold Santucci
Editor

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The first of a series.

HISTORIC



BUILDINGS

TWO VISIBLE SYMBOLS OF ALEXANDER VALLEY'S PAST

By June Maher Smith

(The historic Alexander Valley Community Church and the Alexander Valley Community Hall are two visible symbols of the valley's past and continuing neighborly proud spirit. Here is a brief history of these two beloved buildings).

Alexander Valley Community Church

The first church services in the valley were held in the early 1850s in Cyrus Alexander's adobe home. Rev. A.L.S. Bateman, a Methodist preacher, was the circuit rider who conducted services every two weeks. Soon a small church, funded by the people of the valley, was built. The congregation, however, wanted more frequent services. Alexander presented a "rich farm" to Rev. James Woods who then moved to the valley and conducted weekly services. The first little church burned down in 1863. In the early 1890s we find the congregation meeting in the Guilford School on the Peter Young property. At that time Rachel Young saw the need for a Sunday School and started one for the children of the valley.

The present church was built in 1896. Pastor William Floyd of Geyserville headed the successful campaign to obtain pledges from the residents. The Alexanders donated the land and the Patrick Family of carpenters and other local men did the construction. Mr. Floyd built the hand carved pews and the lectern.



Alexander Valley Community Church

Many church-oriented organizations formed; the Ladies Aid Society has been active in supporting the church since 1896. Over the years there was an A.B.C. (Always Busy Club) for primary Sunday School students, a Sunshine Club for the intermediate group, and a Junior Endeavor Group. The Mothers Club, a study group; the Alexander Valley Band; and the Community Orchestra all had connections to the church. The Boy Scout troop, organized in 1912, had its club room in the church.

The congregation disbanded when attendance dwindled during World War I. In 1929 Rev. Glen Butcher resumed preaching services and Beulah Balderee reorganized the Sunday School. The church was painted and repaired. Ruth Seeman not only was the first secretary of the Ladies Aid Society she kept the Sunday School going for many, many years.

A new wooden foundation, more painting and polishing followed in 1946. The trustees voted to completely restore the building ten years later. This time a concrete foundation was poured, the wood was refinished, the kerosene lamps were converted to electricity, and the floors were reconditioned.

Hands-on work continued. Millie Howie tells us in her article in the *Healdsburg Tribune* that "Vicar Kron and Robert Young tore down the old shed in the back of the church. Peter Bellotti cleared the weeds. Walter St. Clair helped with scraping and leveling."

In 1961 not only was new carpeting installed, but blacksmith Jesse Harrington designed and donated the weather vane which was placed on top of the steeple. Through the years the Ladies Aid Society has paid for many improvements and repairs.

Presently the church is again being restored. The first phase, replacing the roof and trusses and other structural upgrades, has been completed. Funds are being raised for the second phase. Today the church is again a place of worship. The Alexander Valley Christian Fellowship, led by Pastor Ken Goodyear Marshall, leases the church for services. And, yes, there is still a Sunday School.

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Mrs. Rachel Young

Alexander Valley Community Hall

The Alexander Valley Community Hall is of a later vintage. The hall, which received our HM&HS Historical Commercial Restoration and Preservation Award in January of this year, was originally built in 1922. In those days Valley residents looked forward to their weekend dances. These dances had outgrown private homes and were being held in Walter Leroux's hop barn. Local history tells us a group was visiting after one of the dances when someone proposed the idea of building a hall. Leroux picked up a hat, put \$50 in it and passed it around. That was the beginning of the hall. Funds were collected from Valley residents and Solomon Patterson donated the land. Jim Patrick, son of the then owner of the Jimtown Store, was the main carpenter and the people of the valley turned out to help him. The hall officially opened in July of 1923 with a dance and supper. Everyone was invited; gentlemen paid \$1.25 admission and ladies were admitted free. An article in the *Sotoyome Scimitar* stated it was a "central meeting place for social events, civic meetings and all other meetings interesting to the people of the valley and their friends." The people had their hall and dances were held every Saturday night. Each gentleman was charged

\$1 to help maintain the hall; again, ladies were admitted free. Music was furnished by several talented neighbors. Roy and Vera Johnson, Bob Goodyear on drums, Evelyn Pitts at the piano, and Ted Kellogg on the fiddle were a few of the musicians.

The first basketball game at the hall was played in November, 1923. George Penry, Russell Leroux, George Meek, Wilbur Peavler, Charlie Neussle and Melvin Wilson

Presently, the well-equipped and spacious building is used frequently by the community for various events - meetings, birthday and anniversary celebrations, class reunions, weddings, etc.

The Alexander Valley Community has cared for and enjoyed these two historic structures for many years. May they continue to be the focal points of the valley for many more years to come.



Alexander Valley Community Hall

were on the team that defeated the Healdsburg Grammar School team. The hall also boasted an undefeated girls' basketball team. Members of that team, organized in 1929, included Irene Wasson Cook, Fern Wasson Cook, Adela Griffith Preston, Helen Martin, Maxine Patterson St. Clair, Vivian Wasson Hall, Mildred Kitchen, Winifred Wilson Kennedy, Lois Nugent Banti and Gladys Wasson Smith.

Although the hall was originally close to the highway, in 1931 it was moved back on the lot away from the road. In the early 1990s the building was in need of extensive repairs, and the Valley community once again came through with pledges, donations and numerous fundraisers. Under the leadership of Robert Young and Russell Green a total of \$550,000 was raised to completely restore the building. Construction began in August of 1996 and the "new" hall was rededicated in April of the next year.

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HISTORIC



CROPS

HEALDSBURG: BUCKLE OF THE PRUNE BELT

by Marie Djordjevič



Picking Prunes circa 1919

"It was mostly prunes too, in those days. Healdsburg was the buckle of the prune belt. Yep, that was pretty true too, because you could go anywhere, in any direction from the town, and you'd run into prunes..." (Pryor "Buzz" Passarino)

In February 1924 Healdsburg's Chamber of Commerce decided to have a contest for securing a slogan for the town of Healdsburg. The contest was open to people from all over. Entries had to be ten words or less, and the prize for the winning entry was \$100 cash. Three months later Healdsburg had a slogan. Merrill Miller of Visalia, a former Healdsburg resident, won the contest with the words: "Healdsburg, the Buckle of the Prune Belt."

While Healdsburg received this slogan in the 1920s, prunes were already an established and productive crop. In fact, in 1909, Chamber of Commerce promotional material read, "Surrounding Healdsburg are thousands of acres of prune orchards... The yield is always heavy, and the price paid...is above the average on account of size and flavor. These prune orchards usually yield from five to ten tons per acre... A five acre orchard of prunes is a splendid investment, and will easily support a family and make a bank account." By the time of the slogan contest, prunes were an industry with fifty years experience.

The great Depression brought years of hardship. Prune prices were very low, and ranchers gambled on selling early or holding on (a common agricultural practice, with harsher consequences during this

economic catastrophe). Many small growers "continued to face over-supplied markets which kept crop prices low, so that many of them saw little or no financial return for their efforts" (Rithner 1997). Still, prunes remained Healdsburg's most important and ubiquitous crop. By the mid-1940s Healdsburg was declared "the center of the prune industry." Healdsburg's prune industry enjoyed another two decades of prosperity and good fortune. But by the 1960s a combination of consumer apathy and economics brought about the downfall of the prune industry in Sonoma County.

Because the last of the prunes is not far back time-wise in history, many people still remember prunes, remember this important part of Healdsburg's past, and are able to vividly recall the prune days. Through their words we are able to get a sense of what it was like when Healdsburg was the buckle of the prune belt.

"Annual production of prunes is increasing by leaps and bounds, and there is little doubt that acreage will be increased every year until prunes are one of the great staples" (Healdsburg Enterprise, January 16, 1916).

Almost from the time of U.S. establishment, Sonoma County experienced an agricultural boom. The rich soil of the Russian River and its tributaries, coupled with the mild climate, gave rise to a variety of different crops. The

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fruit industry was very productive. The coming of the railroad made it even more so, for now the fruit, both fresh and dried, could be sent out to market much easier.

By the 1870s, while most farmers were still cultivating wheat, others were branching out. By 1876 nurseryman Luther Burbank was in Santa Rosa, and C.F. Julliard had planted thirteen acres of orchard. Tomales banker Walter Dutton planted French prunes on an acre in his cherry orchard. The success prompted him to ask Luther Burbank in March 1881 for 20,000 trees by the fall. Burbank used almond seedlings for stock, grafting prunes onto the nut trees. By December he had purchased 1 1/2 miles of land southwest of Santa Rosa. Thanks to the experiments of Dutton and Burbank, the French prune became an established Sonoma County crop. Other varieties, including the Imperial prune, followed.

"The prosperity of Healdsburg correlates very largely around its annual prune crop. Just how largely this is true is known when it is said that of the average annual harvest return of \$1,500,000 that enriches local channels of trade each year, something like \$800,000 comes to us from the prune industry, a figure that must rapidly increase as the new orchards commence bearing... This amount is arrived at by figuring the total annual per acre cost of prune orchard care, including cultivating, pruning, spraying and harvesting" (Healdsburg Enterprise, October 2, 1915).

All prunes are plums, but not all plums are prunes.

The large-fruited European-type plum is the most important to Sonoma County. It is botanically known as *Prunus domestica*. In this group are the prune varieties. It is valid to call a tree that bears fruit that is dried into prunes a "prune tree". The two main prunes that were grown in the Healdsburg area were the French prune - a medium sized, late maturing fruit that was self fruitful - and the Imperial prune - a large fruit, that was late maturing and required cross pollination.

Prune trees were planted spaced apart in plowed soil. The trees started to bear fruit four to six years after planting, and reached full production capacity between their eighth and twelfth year. The trees then went on to bear good quality fruit for about thirty years.

Prune trees are deciduous meaning that they are dormant in winter. During that time the grower pruned the tree to shape it and to try and control the fruit size. The soil was cultivated, and often a cover crop, such as tomatoes, was used between the trees for soil management. Trees were sprayed to combat pests and disease.

In the spring the blossoms formed and burst out, covering the Healdsburg area in a blanket of white. The blossoms lasted for about a week and fell off, while the fruit then began to grow. By late summer the fruit had usually reached the desired sugar content, and was ready to harvest.



Drying prunes in the sun

"In the summer [picking prunes] was a given. You picked prunes! I remember there was the neighborhood kids and my brother and I. My father would get the truck and we'd pile in the back of it and go out to the prune orchards early in the morning... We picked prunes from the time we were six years old. If we were really good, we didn't have to pick in the afternoon... My mother would keep track of how many boxes we picked; and then before school started we would go shopping for our clothes" (Gloria Christensen, as quoted in Hoods).

Prunes were usually harvested in the late summer and fall months. Many different people picked prunes. Migrant workers, many of them coming from Los Angeles, picked prunes before moving to and from hops and apples. In 1942-43 a large number of Mexican nationals began working on U.S. farms under a government agreement known as the Bracero program. Many of these people worked at picking prunes. The native Pomo people spent years working on ranches, including during the prune harvest. Local Healdsburgers - whole families' worth - made up the majority of prune pickers, often working to make money for things like school clothes. As Norma Passarino recalls: "We began picking prunes for Fred Henderlong in Dry Creek Valley in the fall of 1954. We being me, my daughter Patti and my son Pryor; my sister Pauline Henderlong and her two daughters Lee and Mary... We, except for Pryor, picked for Fred Henderlong for ten years... Next we picked prunes for Paul Rued for three years... Why did we pick prunes so long, you ask? We picked to earn money so the girls and Pryor could buy school clothes!"

"Pauline and I had rubber knee pads that fastened in back. The kids had quilted pads sewn in their jeans. We had two pairs of jeans, and each day after work Pauline and I washed, so we'd have clean pants for each day. When the kids got older, they also had rubber knee pads. We had buckets with our names printed on them, and a piece of garden hose on the handle so our hands wouldn't hurt." (Norma Passarino)

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Prune orchards were picked as many as four or five times. Crews carrying shaker poles - long wooden poles with a metal hook on the end - would go through the orchards shaking the trees. The pickers would then get on their knees and pick up the fallen fruit and put them into buckets. When full, the buckets were dumped into boxes, which were identified as belonging to a particular picker. As the prunes continued to ripen, the crews would go through the trees, shaking down more fruit. This would happen until the fruit was gone. Clean picking was wanted. Pickers were not supposed to pick overripe, underripe, bird chewed or sunburned prunes. Leaves and dirt were also not desired in a picker's box. Pickers were paid by the box - at different prices in different years. Some people, like Eloise Hoffman remember being paid 5c, other, like Norma Passarino recall 25c a box.

"The prune drying was a little different. We had this big brick vat that was filled with lye and water. We would dump the prunes into a basket and lower the basket into the vat with a rope and then pull it back up and dump the prunes out onto trays. We would stack the trays ten feet high and then the horses would pull the stack of trays out into the field. The trays would then just sit out in the sun to dry. We had to hope it didn't rain. There were many nights we had to run out of the house and cover up the trays because of the rain." (Marie Louise Dal Colletto in *I Remember Healdsburg*)

Once the prunes were picked and put into boxes they were ready for processing and drying. The first step in processing the prunes for drying was dipping. The prunes were dipped in lye before drying because the lye crackled the skin, making the fruit dry faster, and therefore making it less likely to mold before drying completely. The simplest way to dip prunes was to put them - different sizes and all - in a basket and to lower the basket into a cauldron or vat of water and lye mixture.

As the years went on more sophisticated dipping methods were invented. Jack Soracco recalls the rotary dipper that was used on his family's ranch: "It had a shaker for dry leaves first. Then the prunes entered the rotary dipper drum which revolved in hot water and lye, then down another shaker making 1,2 and 3 grade: 1 the largest, 2 slightly smaller, and 3 very small. You had to segregate into three grades to dry properly - for equal drying. The larger took more time in the sun." (Jack Soracco)

After the prunes were readied with the lye solution, it was drying time. Much of the prune drying took place under the sun. The prunes were dumped onto trays and hauled - usually by horses, later with autos - out in the open to be dried by the sun. After a while, the prunes were turned with a special rake in order to ensure even drying. Rain was the enemy. If it rained the growers and workers had to rush out to the trays, stack them up, and cover them to protect the drying fruit from the wetness. Once the rain was over and the sun came out, the trays were unstacked and spread out again to complete the drying. Sun drying was used from the industry's beginning to its end, but dehydrating became more prevalent as the years went on.

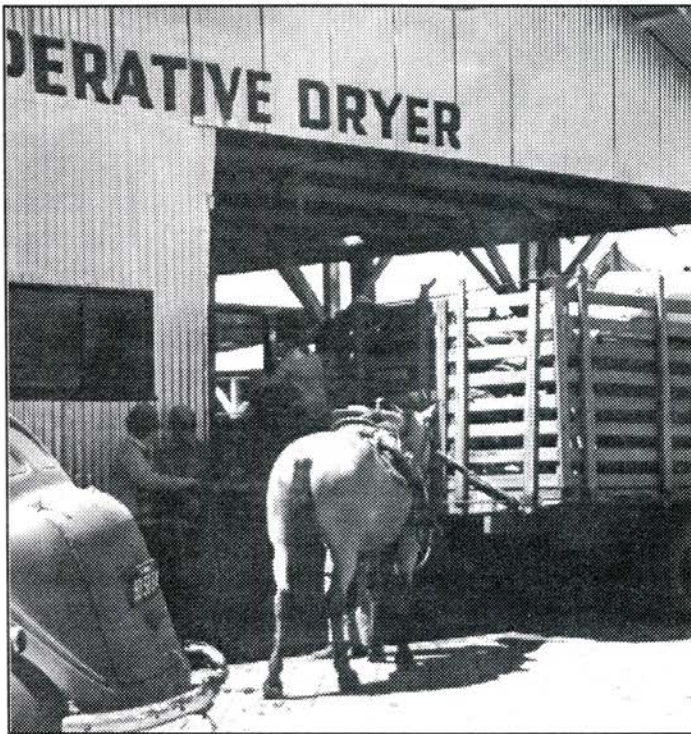
"Earlier, prune dryers always had a metal baffle to deflect the air. It never worked well. The fans in the drying side - the heating side - they had a furnace and the big blowers and stuff. I increased the sizes of all these to where it was getting like 45 thousand cubic feet of air a minute just going through these trays. But it still had wet spots on the inside, when the air would come down the chamber and it would make a turn, it would leave the wall and come back gradually as it went down the passageway. So I decided that that was wrong. I made a curved inner wall, and I changed the shape of the inner wall on the end, so that it was actually deflecting the air and making it come around really close behind, and it dried up all the wet spots. It also increased the productivity. They could dry about twice as many in about half the time. There was so much air coming out to dry that you could just stack carts with the trays on them outside. It just made it like a bigger machine." (Pryor "Buzz" Passarino)

Many ranches, especially some of the larger ones, had dehydrator tunnels on their property. Some of these larger ranches were operating two or three of their own tunnels. Each tunnel had a set of tracks running through it. The average dehydrator had ten car tunnels, meaning that there could be ten cars of trays being dried at one time in the tunnel. Each car was the size of a tray, was stacked high (twenty five trays), and was rolled down the track into the dehydrator where they were dried. Many prune people would forego the humidity readings and rely on the feel of their skin to check for too much moisture in the tunnels.

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Van Allen Fruit Packing



Drying Prunes at a Cooperative Dryer

Once the prunes were dried they were left on a loose pile on either a wood or concrete floor for curing. Piles of dried prunes were shoveled from one side to another in order to check for mold spots. Upon sale, the dried prunes were shoveled into sacks - up to an average of 100 pound sacks - to be delivered to the buyer.

Prune prices were always established according to size. A basic price was always set, and that base price was always set upon a grade of fruit that went 80 to the pound for French prunes and 33 to a pound for Imperials. After 80 prunes per pound the price leveled off. The ideal size per pound for French was 40-50 to 50-60. For Imperials it was 18-24 (remember that Imperials were bigger than French).

"There are in Healdsburg three of the largest prune packing plants in Sonoma County. Two of them, the Sherriffs Bros. packing plant and the Miller and Gobbi plant are engaged in packing the prunes of the members of the California Prune and Apricot Growers, Inc., and the third is the plant owned by the California Packers Association, formerly the California Fruit Cannery Association." (Healdsburg Enterprise, October 12, 1917)

Healdsburg's prolific fruit output and railroad connection encouraged the development of the fruit processing plant. The first plants opened in Healdsburg in the late 1880s, and the industry flourished until the 1920s, with both large and small canneries and packing houses doing business. In the 1930s smaller plants folded because the cost of mechanization made operation unprofitable. Bigger plants continued to operate, packing up Healdsburg's fruit and shipping it out to buyers.

"When they got orders for shipping they'd hire local people, mostly on a part time basis, and a lot of women. George Vellutini was the foreman for the plant - he worked directly under my father, but he was in charge of the packing plant. They made their own boxes and everything right there - stenciled them, lined them with wax paper - and then they steamed the prunes before they packed them to soften them up. They were waxed paper lined boxes, and that's what a lot of the women did - they lined them, and when the box was full they folded the paper over and put a box top on. The box went to a nailing machine and the top was nailed on. The boxes were all made at the start of the line. They were precut of course, but they had these guys that were operating as fast as they could, putting the sides on and everything but the top, and setting them on the line. They stenciled them as to where they were going to go. They had a stenciling machine, and they'd make up separate ones for different orders, and then they'd ship them out on box cars." (Temple Smith)

Cannery and packing work was seasonal based on the harvesting of the crops. Once the rush began, companies started recruiting workers. Most of the workers were women and girls. Hours were often hard and long due to the seasonal nature of the work. Workers were pushed to get the fruit processed as quickly as possible. It was then shipped out by railroad cars. Most of the packing houses were located on the railroad line.

Many of the packing houses had their own dry yards for sun drying, or, later, dehydrators. The rancher, instead of drying his own fruit, brought it and sold it to the packing houses, who dealt with it from there. Many of the packing houses worked in conjunction with prune pools or cooperatives.

"It was known as the California Prune and Apricot Growers Association, and my father worked for them. He was the representative for Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino Counties, and that worked out of Healdsburg, his office was here. His title was superintendent, and that could be all inclusive. But he essentially was the representative for the Association in these three counties and he, of course, reported to Santa Clara. But he was the lead man here, and he was in charge of the packing house and the members - the prune ranchers were members because it was a co-op. The great majority participated, because this was during the Depression, and by pooling through the co-op they could be sure of getting some price, and everybody sort of shared in it." (Temple Smith)

As early as 1905 various markets and competition allowed for the growth of "prune pools", in which member growers would pool their crops and hope to receive a better price from the packers. In 1917 the California Prune and Apricot Growers Association was organized, and it became the giant of pools. Its mission was to achieve better stability in the market for dried fruits, and to set higher product standards.

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The Association, headquartered in the Santa Clara Valley (which was Sonoma County's number one competition in prune growing) had various ups and downs, and some brutal infighting among its superiors. It was reorganized in 1922, and by 1937 had over ten packing plants and a 2-3 million dollar investment in the industry. This group sold prunes under the "Sunsweet" label, and later renamed itself "Sunsweet, Inc."

"My dad, along with Sid Grove and there was one other person, formed the dryer that was at the end of East Street. It was separate - it was a co-op that was subscribed to by the different growers, and they were all connected with the Association, but there was no direct connection, as I recall, between the packing house. The dryer was formed as a separate co-op. It was actually owned by the members. The weather was so touchy... it gave them an assurance that all of their crop would be processed and dried. It was all done right there." (Temple Smith)

In early 1936 Orrin W. Engelke headed a group eager to build a cooperative dehydrator in Healdsburg. Many growers, a lot of them operating their own dehydrators, were interested. A minimum tonnage signup was set to start the dehydrator, and the Federal Bank of Cooperatives was to provide 60% of the funds to build, with the remaining 40% to come from the growers. This plan was abandoned due to the frost damage to that year's crop.

In 1937 the drive for a co-op dryer started again. Orrin Engelke, Temple Smith and Sid Grove were the three main instigators of the Dryer. This time it was organized a little differently. The project was capitalized at \$30,000 which was placed in a revolving fund, with certificates issued to members. Each member purchased the amount of space in the dehydrator needed for handling of his crop, and also paid the actual cost of drying his fruit.

The co-op dehydrator had the firm support of the California Prune and Apricot Growers Association, though it was not an Association project. However, membership in the dehydrator was limited to those belonging to the Association.

"Everything around here was prunes. Dry Creek was mostly prunes, Alexander Valley was all prunes. Then they started to raise prunes over in the valley around Marysville. They'd get twice as much tonnage to the acre as we would, and it was more profitable. The grapes started to look good, and everybody went from prunes to grapes. That's what happened." (Louis Foppiano)

Lack of consumer interest and demand, increasing production costs and the emergence of grapes and wine took its toll on the prune business.

In 1915 the *Healdsburg Enterprise* stated: "The prune has grown into public favor gradually and in the face of a mild protest, until its year round consumption is greater than any contemporaneous fruit..." Fifty years later it was a different story. A 1965 California's Prune Advisory Board survey showed that most people liked prunes, but they did not eat them.

By 1971 it was "an old story for prune growers" - they could only sell 60% of the crop they picked. In 1975 the *Healdsburg Tribune* wrote: "Unprecedented increases in production and drying costs alone have over the past year seriously eroded the net income of California Prune Growers and will continue to plague them..." And in 1977, when the prunes were all but gone, the *Healdsburg Tribune* said, "The emergence of the Russian River area as the home of scores of premium wineries has taken some of the shine off the importance of Sonoma County as a prune growing region."

That shine was soon gone. The once limitless looking orchards were replaced by the ubiquitous vineyards. Prunes live on only in a stray tree or the memories of those who lived them.

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Oral Histories:

Eloise Hoffman, Norma Passarino, Buzz Passarino, Temple Smith, Jack Soracco (Courtesy of the Healdsburg Museum, 2000).

Louis Foppiano (Courtesy of the Sonoma County Wine Library, Healdsburg).

Rithner, Claire. "Healdsburg's Cannery Row: An Overview, 1890-1920". In *Russian River Recorder*. Healdsburg: Healdsburg Museum and Historical Society. Winter 1994.

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HISTORY



LIVES!

AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH LOUIS J. FOPPIANO

(conducted by Carol Hicke, 1996)

Excerpted from "A Century of Winegrowing in Sonoma County,
1896-1996" U.C. Berkeley

By Holly Hoods

First Foppianos in Healdsburg

I was born in Healdsburg, right where the winery is. November 25, 1910. My grandfather John Foppiano came in 1864. He was from Chiavari, forty miles south of Genoa. He was really from Cicagna, which is about thirty miles back in the mountains. He walked across the Isthmus of Panama and then came up [to California]. Then he went to Sonora where the gold was, but I guess in '64 the gold was gone and the gold rush was over.

He was in Sonora for two years, and then he came to Healdsburg. He had some relation over here who had just gotten here. They came over together and they started a vegetable garden here in Healdsburg. He worked in the garden and sold vegetables with a horse and wagon; he'd go to Santa Rosa and peddle them. He made a few dollars, and then he started buying ranches.

He bought a couple of ranches. He bought the ranch where the winery is in 1896: the Riverside Farm. There were grapes there at the time. They were mostly Zinfandel, Petite Sirah. There were no varietals hardly, except for Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. Then we had Carignane. I imagine that was about it at the time. There was a winery on it at the time, an old winery that I imagine was built in the 1880s.

Growing up in the Vineyard

Grant Grammar School was right across the street. Kids didn't even have bicycles; all you had was legs in those days. All the kids around here grew up together and had a nice young life. [After school] I worked in these vineyards. In those days, you came home and hoed the vineyard, and your second vineyard,



Louis J. Foppiano at right with Louis Coyne in pickup cab

and you did all the little jobs around . . . When you got home, you always had your chores. We had two cows, four horses, and a garden. Your father and mother always had something for you to do, that's for sure.

Winemaking Before Prohibition

In those days, you sold to the Italian and French people. The American people weren't drinking much. It was the Italians and other immigrants who came over from Europe that bought the wine, and that's who you sold it to. Or you sold to another winery that was larger. You'd sell them 20,000 or 30,000 [gallons]; maybe they'd want some wine to blend with what they had.

You picked all day. If it was warm, you picked it warm. We'd go uptown and buy a 250-pound box of ice, and if it got too hot we'd throw it in there and try to cool it down. You had a hydrometer. You'd get the juice and drop it in there and it would give you the percent of sugar. It wasn't like today, where you get an instant reading, but we'd check it to see. Then you'd haul the grapes in with horse and wagons, in those days in big 60-70 pound boxes about a foot high. Then you'd dump them in the crusher. It wasn't very modern. It had the screw and

spikes for a stemmer. It had an old must pump on it, and you'd pump it through the cast-iron pipes. Today you wouldn't even think about doing that, but in those days that's all you had; stainless steel wasn't even around. You pumped through the cast-iron pipes in these open fermenters.

We punched it twice a day, in the morning and the afternoon. They were open, and you'd stand up there with a board. You had two men, and that's all they did. The pressing was unbelievable. You'd have to get in the tank and shovel it out over the top. Then you had baskets on little carts that were on tracks, and you'd push that down. The press was run by hydraulic water. You had a pump that would pump it up, and then you had the big cheese [the top of the press that pushed against the grapes] on top and pushed the basket up. Oh, it was work. It wasn't easy. When I look at these fellows today—they have a thermostat and stainless steel. They set it at fifty or sixty degrees, whatever temperature they want to ferment the wine, and then they go away and leave it. But in those days, two or three times a day you'd test to see what the heat was in that tank. There was not much you

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could do with it, but you would try.

[After we got the grapes pressed and fermented], then we pumped it into big storage tanks and let it sit there until about December. Then we would rack it. You'd have the lees on the bottom, and then we'd take the lees out--separate the lees. We'd send that lees to a still. There were several little stills; Simi had a batch still, and they would take the lees and make brandy out of it. Italian Swiss and Sebastiani were others that we sold lees to. They would take it and add water to it, make it a little thin, and then make high-proof out of it.

We sold the wine in fifty-gallon barrels. In those days, you never bottled. I don't know if even Italian Swiss bottled. They'd put a spigot in the fifty-gallon barrel and take them into stores. You'd come in with a gallon and fill it up, go home and drink it. Oh, there were some wineries over in Napa Valley, some of the older ones like Inglenook and De LaTour, that probably bottled and sold to the restaurants. There was a big wholesale wine business in San Francisco that sold to the stores. They bottled it and sold it in gallons to stores, but we didn't bottle. We never thought of bottling.

Prohibition and Repeal

We planted Alicante when Prohibition came in, because that was the grape that was the grape that the New York people wanted to buy because it had color. They'd ferment it, draw the wine off of it, and then they'd put sugar and water back in and ferment it again and make more wine. It wasn't good wine, but they drank it and sold it. These families would sell it to their neighbors or to some speakeasy. It was lucrative when Prohibition first started, but after four or five years, the price of grapes went down on the New York market, and then it wasn't too lucrative anymore. Everybody was shipping grapes East. They planted a lot of Alicante because the price was good. Just like today, Chardonnay is a big seller, so you plant a lot of Chardonnay. That's what happens.

[During Prohibition] I know what was going on. There were stills around here, and they made alcohol just about anyplace in these hills.

I knew of seven or eight stills around here. They'd make it and put it in five-gallon cans, and then they'd sell it to the speakeasies in the city. They'd put a little oak or caramel in it and sell it to people. It might kill them, when you see what it was made of.

Oh, they captured a lot of stills. If you paid the sheriff or somebody who knew when they were coming, he'd tell the guys, and they'd clean that place up in four or five hours and move out. The IRS would go in, and there was nothing there. Every once in a while, they'd get a still.

We started out with Alicante at around a hundred dollars a ton. Then it dropped to fifty and forty. At the end, when Repeal came, it got down to around thirty or forty dollars a ton.

In '32, I started to make wine. I knew as much about making wine as sending a spaceship to the moon. I knew nothing. There were a couple of old winemakers around from pre-Prohibition. Bill Massoni was one, and I forget the name of the other fellow we had. I would pick their brains, and they were good to me. They would tell me, and if I had a little problem, I'd go ask them what to do. That's the way I did it. I didn't have any schooling, because there was no schooling in winemaking in those days.

The winery was in pretty bad shape. It had been closed since '16--fourteen or fifteen years. The cooperage was in bad shape, but I made wine. I don't know how, when I look at what you do today. You wonder how you did it. The presses were all down. We had a good man around who knew about equipment, Abel Ferrari.

Vineyard Work and Workers

During the war (WWII), we first had German prisoners. I used to get twenty or twenty-five to do our pruning and our picking. I was on the board for getting the help, because we had no help; all the boys were in the army, and then everyone went to defense--Mare Island and Kaiser [Shipyards]. The first help we got was German prisoners, and we had them right down here at Windsor. They came off the submarines, and boy, were they ornery!



Matilda Foppiano with Louis J. at right and two workers, circa 1930's

They were a tough bunch of boys--well, the submariners, you know, and they were winning the war, too, at the time; we weren't winning it, that's for sure.

They sent a soldier with a rifle, and he watched them. He watched them pretty close. We had a prison camp four miles down the road here. They were young boys, eighteen or twenty, and they were tough.

When our country went to Africa during the war, we captured all the African group--Rommel's group. They were a different class, and we had them for a year or so. Then the war was over, and they took the Germans away. We were still short of help, so then we got the Mexicans. We formed a group and decided how many workers we wanted for picking or pruning. They'd come up on a bus, and you'd go in and pick which ones you thought were good. For this district in the county, we'd bring in about 240 for the crop or the pruning.

If we didn't have the Mexicans now, we couldn't get a white man out here. I've got forty pickers out there, and if you can find a white man amongst them, you're doing better than I can. People say there are too many Mexicans, but if we didn't have them, I don't know how we would pick these crops today or do things. We could do the tractor work, the cultivating, but for the picking and pruning we had to get help. We just couldn't do it all ourselves.

ARTIFACTS: FASHIONS OF THE PAST



HMC #229-21

Women's clothing in the late 1800s was a study in contrasts. Ready-to-wear items were not widely available to women before 1880. Those with money could always commission a tailor or seamstress to make custom clothing based on the latest European fashion. Women of limited budgets did not have that option, and making their own clothes at home was a normal practice.

Dresses created for every day farm or ranch life were often constructed of simple lines and cotton fabric, and could have been altered in different ways at different times. A good example of this is the following dress:

HMC #229-21; worn by Sarah Hendricks over the plains several times between 1852 and 1865; donated by C. Leon Hendricks

Description: Beige shaded, floral background roller

print with two shades of pink/red teardrops outlined in dark brown. Dress has sloped shoulders and gathered drop long sleeves with cuffs at wrist. Waistline is round and at waist with a self band of fabric between bodice and skirt. Skirt is very full with tight gathers. Front has high round neck, buttons to waist, hooks at waist and is slit partway into skirt. Lining is of fabrics. Bodice back is lined with a beige and brown floral trail. Bodice fronts are lined with a brown, red and white checked fabric. Item area is lined with pieces of four different fabrics, basically browns and beiges with some pink motifs. This dress seems to have been altered more than once. (Description by Dawn Moser).

Many of the economic upper class women could afford to either have their clothes made by a professional, or could make their own dresses at home following the latest fashion patterns and using fine materials. Contrast the next dress with the previous. This dress is circa 1850s as well.

HMC#338-74; belonged to Antoinette Matheson, wife of Colonel Roderick Matheson, an early Healdsburg "mover and shaker"; donated by Nina Rose Estate, Nina Von Tillow.

One piece dress. Bronze/gold with printed black

dots. Slope shoulder. 1 1/8" black pleated silk ribbon rim runs from center front waist, in v shape over shoulders, back down in v shape to center back waist. Row of wide black (2 1/2") escuriel type openwork lace. Row of white pleated net ruffle at wrist.

There are eight buttonholes and six buttons. Buttons have metal bases covered and wrapped. Skirt has cartridge pleats at center back. Remainder of skirt is just on band with center front opening. The overskirt is apron shaped, longer in back than front, with rounded edges trimmed with the same pleated ribbon and lace as bodice. Overskirt is attached to waistband. Dress is lined in glazed cotton. (Description by Dawn Moser).



HMC # 338-74



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