



RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

SUMMER 2013 • ISSUE 121

An Official Publication of the Healdsburg Museum & Historical Society



Farm to Table

Northern Sonoma County's Agricultural Heritage

In This Issue

This issue is devoted to local agriculture in connection with the Healdsburg Museum exhibit, "Farm to Table," (on display August 7th to November 10th). Although the grapes planted around Healdsburg and the surrounding valleys seemingly define this area today as "Wine Country," this fertile region has enjoyed diverse abundance in its farming and crop history. In this issue, we explore that history. We have gathered a range of articles to highlight local farming, including personal remembrances, historical research, reprinted historical newspaper articles and oral histories. We are aware that there is much more material about local agriculture that could be included - and *will* be included - in future publications.

The personal remembrances in this *RRR* include the late William Massoni's account of the local dry wine industry in the 1940s, so different from today—when it was still rebounding after Repeal of Prohibition in 1933; Melba Feldmeyer's 1927 humorously petulant high school description of prune picking; and Kay Schmidt Robinson's firsthand account of the intricacies of prune ranching. Kay's brother, Brian Schmidt, and sister,

Diane Carriger, contributed to Kay's compellingly detailed account of operations at their family's Dry Creek Valley prune ranch.

The largest hop ranch in Sonoma County was located on Wohler Road where the Raford Inn is today. Janet's Sbragia Pisenti has written fondly about generations of families working at the Wohler ranch in the Russian River Valley. Her Italian immigrant family is part of that history, so well documented in her book, *Thirty Eight Cousins From Italy*.

I have researched and written about 19th century canneries and the Healdsburg Grange, topics that have long intrigued me. Elizabeth Holmes and I researched the Mexican guest worker (*Bracero*) program for our Mexican heritage exhibit last year. A snapshot of local agriculture a century ago is provided in "Healdsburg Horticulture," which appeared in the *Pacific Rural Press*, 1913. An oral history interview with Tom and Barbara Baxter about sheep ranching rounds out this Summer 2013 issue.

We sincerely hope you enjoy it.

Holly Hoods, Curator



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*The Official Publication of the
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Contents

Russian River Recorder

Summer, 2013 • Issue 121

- 4 The Grange: Promoting the Art of Agriculture**
by Holly Hoods
- 8 Horticulture at Healdsburg**
reprinted and edited from Pacific Rural Press, December 27, 1913
- 9 The Wohler Ranch - Thirty Italian Families Called It Home**
by Janet Sbragia Pisenti
- 14 Fruits of Labor: Healdsburg's Turn of the Century Canneries**
by Holly Hoods
- 18 Braceros Saved Local Agriculture in WWII**
by Elizabeth Holmes and Holly Hoods
- 19 Dry Wine Industry - Some Aspects of Industry Today as Contrasted with Early Day Methods**
as told by William Massoni (Healdsburg Tribune, October 1, 1940)
- 22 Life Among the Woolies: Sheep Ranching on the White Oak Ranch
An Oral History with Tom Baxter and Barbara Baxter**
edited by Holly Hoods
- 27 Prune Harvest**
by Kay Schmidt Robinson
with assistance from Diane Schmidt Carriger and Brian Schmidt
- 32 My Experience as a Prune Picker**
by Melba Feldmeyer, February 29, 1927
submitted by Ann Howard from Harry Bosworth Collection, Geyserville, California



Gift for the Grangers, 1873

The Grange: Promoting the Art of Agriculture

by Holly Hoods

Farming and homegrown local food have recently been enjoying renewed respect and appreciation. In the late 19th Century, though, farmers struggled to have their voices heard in the marketplace and in government. In 1867, a national farm advocacy group called the Patrons of Husbandry (or “Grange”) was founded by Minnesota farmer Oliver Hudson Kelly as a farmers’ fraternal organization to share knowledge, advocate for farm-friendly policies and promote respect for farming. Farmers could find political and economic strength in unity and cooperation.

“The Art of Agriculture”

The idealistic aspirations of the Grange are

apparent in the poetic 1873 constitution of the Patrons of Husbandry:

Human happiness is the acme of earthly ambition. Individual happiness depends upon general prosperity. The prosperity of a nation is in proportion to the value of its productions. The soil is the source from whence we derive all that constitutes wealth; without it we would have no agriculture, no manufactures and no commerce. Of all of the material gifts of the Creator, the various productions of the vegetable world are of the first importance. The art of agriculture is the parent and precursor of all arts, and its products the foundation of all wealth...

The ultimate object of this organization is for

mutual instruction and protection, to lighten labor by diffusing a knowledge of its aims and purposes, expand the mind by tracing the beautiful laws the Great Creator has established in the Universe, and to enlarge our views of Creative wisdom and power.



Ceremonial symbols of the Grange - Healdsburg Museum

Organizational Structure

Membership in the Grange was open to “any person interested in agricultural pursuits, of the age of 14 years (female) and 16 years (male),” who were proposed and elected according to the bylaws. Meetings were held once a month; state and national grange meetings were held once a year. Organization consisted of Subordinate Granges (local), State Grange, and National Grange. Within each level of grange there were ranked degrees of office. The early Grange meetings involved Masonic-tinged rituals and symbolism to strengthen the bonds of fraternalism among the members.



The Grange logo



The Granger in Training for Congress, 1873

Ideals and Causes

The Grangers promoted many progressive ideas, including opposing “fraud and adulteration in human foods.” At meetings in the late 1890s, they circulated Anti-Trust and Pure Food Law petitions, noting that they would be sent “to our Representatives in Congress, with the hopes of securing unadulterated food and protection from the various trusts of the land.” Grangers believed in equal taxation. They also launched initiatives to have agriculture taught in schools and colleges and obtained government funding for agricultural extension and demonstration work. They fought for, and eventually obtained, free rural mail delivery.



The Granger movement against high railroad prices

The Rise of Healdsburg Grange

The Healdsburg Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry was organized May, 1873 at a meeting at the Masonic Hall. This chapter was the 18th in the state. Charter members were Thomas H. Merry, Master; Charles Alexander, Overseer; Ira Proctor, Lecturer; William H. Moss, Steward; P.S. Peck, Chaplain; L.N. Stapp, Treasurer; L.M. Holt, Secretary; Robert Finley, Gatekeeper; Miss Nettie Tubbs, Stewardess, Mrs. P.S. Peck, Ceres; Mrs. Charles Alexander, Pomona; and Mrs. T.H. Merry, Flores.

Filling an obvious need, the Grange movement spread quickly. According to the *Pacific Rural Press*, there were 1,105 Granges in the United States in 1872. By 1873 that number had more than quadrupled with 69 of them in California. The first Grange in the state met at Pilot Hill in 1870.

At an August, 1873 meeting of the state Grange, Healdsburg Master Thomas H. Merry was appointed a state lecturer and empowered to establish granges throughout California. That same month, Merry and A.J. Spoon of Healdsburg established a new Grange of 30 members in Cloverdale. At Windsor, A.B. Nalley was elected Master and J.H. McClellan, Secretary.



Healdsburg Grange, c. 1875

A Flourishing Grange Hall and Store

In October, 1875, Healdsburg dedicated a beautiful new Grange Hall at the northwest corner of Plaza and Center streets.

The *Pacific Rural Press* enthused:

It is a fine brick building, two stories in height; 60 feet front by 130 feet in depth. The lower story is occupied by the "Healdsburg Grange Business Association," a corporation of Patrons

doing a very large local business. They keep a general country store, and buy or ship farm produce. A butcher shop, owned and conducted in the interests of the Order, occupies the corner of the lower story. The entire front of the building constitutes the Grange hall, with ample ante-rooms. The rest of the upper part is rented and occupied by the Russian River Flag, a local newspaper.

The Grange store dealt in wheat, wool, dairy, fruit and dry goods. On each side of the building were three heavy double doors. The storage capacity of the building was 3,000 tons with a substantial warehouse, "both fire-proof and burglar-proof."

By July, 1876, the Geyserville and Windsor Granges had consolidated with the Healdsburg Grange, swelling its ranks to 300 members. By December, Geyserville farmers had taken a leading role. C.M. Bosworth was elected Master and Alexander Stites overseer of Healdsburg Grange #18.

E.J. Kraft of the State Grange reported on the Grangers' Store in Healdsburg in Jan. 1879:

The store is in a more nourishing condition than ever before...The store comprises a well-selected stock of dry goods, groceries, boots and shoes, chinaware, agricultural implements, grain, feed, etc. The merchandise sales average \$10,000 per month, and are slowly but surely increasing. The town prejudice is fast dwindling away and the citizens of Healdsburg are learning that the Grangers are their friends. A wide reputation is already gained and people from other towns, and even adjoining counties, purchase large bills of goods at the Grangers' store. Doubts were entertained by many as to whether a warehouse could be made to pay or not; but these doubts have long since been removed. Nearly all the shipping, last season, from northern Sonoma County passed through the Grangers' warehouse. The shipments of fruit alone amounted to 50 tons. A cleaning mill is kept at the warehouse and all trashy grain is screened before leaving for the market.

J.V. Webster, Worthy Master of the State Grange, visited Healdsburg for the consolidation dinner with Geyserville in July, 1876. He noted the heat-damaged grain crops in Windsor and Mark West areas on the way to Healdsburg. Near Healdsburg, corn fared much better. He commented, "In and about this town is the ideal of a Granger's country,

for each Patron appears to have a "little farm well tilled and a little wife well willed."



Women of Healdsburg Grange, c. 1900

Role of Women

From the beginning, Grange principles of fair dealing granted women equal voting status with men and parallel roles within the organizational hierarchy. However, the women did prepare and serve all the food and cleaned up at the many bimonthly Grange meetings. Most took pride in this, but one female Granger wrote candidly to the *Pacific Rural Press* in 1876:

I often wonder, will the millennial ever come, when we can work our eight or ten hours a day and then rest? O, I wish that some bright soul would devise a plan by which our farmers' wives and daughters could do the necessary work and also get the needed rest which so many pine and suffer for.

The weary Matron continued:

I do not so much wonder that our daughters seem to prefer husbands from other walks in life, or that they should prefer other occupations to housework, especially housework on a farm. They have not kept their eyes open if they have not observed the difference between housekeeping in the country and town. I am frequently reminded, of late, of my absence from the Grange Saturday meetings. I answer, as I presume many another Matron can, because the Grange meets Saturday. Our children are in school during the week and when Saturday comes, want, and, indeed, need mother. If we wish to have our house in order for Sunday that we may either rest quietly at home or go to church, it rather necessitates our being home Saturday. If the Grange could meet on any day between Monday and

Saturday, I should be a much more regular attendant. How many of my good sisters can say the same?

L. J., Santa Rosa, Cal.

Fizzles and Fanfare

It is challenging to present a complete local Grange history, since there were at least three Granges that rose and fell in Healdsburg. Each time they seemed to just fizzle out. Years later, a new Grange would appear to great fanfare, bearing a new number and seemingly no connection with the past (in 1899 and 1924). The 1873 Grange was certainly the most active, yet it faded by the early 1880s. A Sonoma County representative for the *Pacific Rural Press* commented in December 1887:

There is some talk of reorganizing Healdsburg Grange. It is surprising that in a community so thrifty they should not have maintained their organization.



Geyserville Grange, 2013

Today the only active Grange in northern Sonoma County is in Geyserville. Still celebrating rural bonds of farming and friendship, this organization meets regularly at the Geyserville Oriental Community Hall.

Sources:

Howard, Ann. Geyserville Grange history notes *Pacific Rural Press*, Jun. 1873 - Feb. 1924

Tuomey, Honoria. *History of Sonoma County, California, vol. II*

Zunino, Kathy. History of the Geyserville Grange, Geyserville Chamber of Commerce presentation, 2013



Promotional art from 1910s - "The Healdsburg Triplets - Prunes, Grapes, Hops"

Horticulture at Healdsburg

reprinted and edited from Pacific Rural Press, December 27, 1913

Healdsburg is in the Russian River Valley in northern Sonoma county. Practically all of the valley near Healdsburg has long since been planted out to fruit, vines or hops and only the limited area prevents this district from being one of the leading fruit districts of the state in quantity, as it appears to be in quality. In spite of its limited area the production of all tree fruits outside of apples from Healdsburg is approximately equal to the production of the rest of Sonoma county.

Of the fruits prunes are grown much in excess of other varieties, French on the floor of the valley and some Imperials around the edges. Pears are grown on land too heavy for prunes. Wine grapes are also produced in large quantity in the district though the value of the output is rather less as a rule than the value of prunes. The third great crop is hops, which are grown on rich bottom land. This is the leading hop district of Sonoma county and Sonoma produces a third of the hops of California. Nothing else approaches either of these three in value of acreage.

Prune Quality – From the value per acre standpoint prunes merit a high regard. Such a thing as a crop failure is practically unknown; the yield is very large, the quality exceptionally good and sizes large. As far as quality goes, it is a fact that no better prunes are produced anywhere, not saying that others may not be as good, and full price is secured.

The quality and quantity are usually attributed to soil, though climate must share much of the credit for quality at least, as wonderful soil can be found in

almost every district in California and good prunes do not always come from good soil. The soil is, however, just what prunes like. It is a deep, rich sediment, mostly a medium or a heavy loam, well supplied with moisture and humus.

Hops – Owing to the way that hop prices dance up and down this crop is not always popular, though prices the last few years have made them better liked and they would have much of the average now given to fruits if prices were more uniform. Only the best soil is worth using for hops and this is best for prunes too.

The cost of getting hops into bearing is about \$100 per acre and as a rule the larger the acreage, the better. With prunes it don't matter how few a man has, his acre profit will be the same.

Although prunes, hops and wine grapes are the standard crops and take up practically all the acreage, other crops do as well as these. Alfalfa, grown without irrigation, is produced here and there for the farm stock, as is corn, which is well suited to the climate and soil and commonly goes in while an orchard is being started. As fine, meaty tomatoes as can be found anywhere are occasionally grown.

The only thing that keeps the district from being more noted is its moderate size and its merits are indicated from the fame already achieved in spite of restricted area. It is a region of small farms and the standard of farm practice is high and the fertility of the soil is being largely retained. In every way it is one of the best California farm districts.



The "big white house on the hill" was a focal point of the Wohler Ranch.

The Wohler Ranch

Thirty Italian Families Called It Home

by Janet Sbragia Pisenti

The Wohler Ranch, over 1,500 acres in size and once part of the El Molino land grant, no longer exists. It was located south of Healdsburg and west of Santa Rosa with the Russian River running through it. It had a Healdsburg address and was a big economic force in Sonoma County. Many Italians, including the grandparents of several of us in Healdsburg, began their life at this special place. Even though few people still exist who lived on the ranch, some of us can hear our ancestors discussing those times.

This story is a vivid example of European immigrants settling in the United States near others from their native country. They arrived in New York by ship, boarded a train the same day and arrived a week later at the port of Oakland, California. From there, they made their way up to Sonoma County. It was the late 1800s or early 1900s. They found employment at the Wohler Ranch in a county that actually resembled the place they left behind – Tuscany, Italy.

The Italians in this story came from two tiny towns in the Appenine Mountains – Fornovolasco and

San Pellegrinetto northwest of the ancient city of Lucca. Several of the families came from other nearby towns. Opportunity for advancement did not exist in those little towns, and rather than live in another part or in the big cities of Italy, our ancestors thought they could do better by leaving home altogether with California as their intended destination. They wanted land!

Clustered together in one place were people with the following surnames: Baldi, Bellotti, Benassi, Benelli, Bertolucci, Bertoni, Bertozzi, Cecchi, Cia, Cinquini, Corsi, Di Regolo, Franceschi, Frati, Giannchini, Giannini, Giusti, La Gioia, Lopera, Macchiarini, Magri, Mancini, Moretti, Mori, Papera, Pelletti, Rochioli, Spadoni, Venturacci and Vichi. Many were related.

The De Regolo family had immigrated first to Brazil where they were hired to work in orange groves or in the making of charcoal. Michele "Mike" Rochioli worked in South America and in Pennsylvania at a brick factory. Massimo Vichi worked in New Mexico for the Santa Fe Railroad. They all came to America during The New

Immigration period as opposed to the First Immigration of English, German, and Swedish people.



Raising dust on a hot summer day, four mules pull a load of bulging hop sacks to the Wohler Ranch kilns.

History of Wohler Ranch

It began with John B. Rogers Cooper, who received the El Molino land grant. He gave his two daughters each 1,500 acres of land. His daughter, Anita "Ana" Maria Guadalupe Cooper, received the Wohler Ranch property. Ana's mother, Guadalupe Encarnacion Vallejo Cooper, was the oldest sister of Gen. Mariano Vallejo. John Woolfenden and Amelie Elkinton in their historical publication, *Cooper*, recall that Ana managed all of her father's properties before she was married. After her marriage to politician/entrepreneur Hermann Wohler, it became the Wohler Ranch.



Raford Peterson on the steps leading to his home together with his bookkeepers, Ethel Sullivan and Ethel Maddocks.

The next owner of the ranch was Raford Peterson. He was the second of eight children of Andrew Jackson Peterson and Ludencia Sebring. He became very interested in the ranch after his parents

had settled in Sonoma County. Eventually he and his partner, Charles R. Farmer, bought the ranch from then widowed Ana Cooper Wohler and her family. It legally became the Farmer and Peterson Ranch; yet most people continued to call it the Wohler Ranch.



The Wohler Ranch hop kilns located across the road from the house were ultimately destroyed in a 1943 fire.

Raford was among the first to plant hops in the county; hold patents on a horse-drawn hop-picking machine operated by pulleys; invented the first four-wheel drive gasoline-powered tractor; earned the title of First Vice-President of the former Santa Rosa Bank; and owned a hop brokerage and insurance company.

It was during this time that "the big white house on the hill" was built for Raford Peterson as a summer residence for his family. It is still visible from River Road, where Westside Road and Eastside Road come together at Wohler Road. The three-story plantation style Victorian house featured a long series of steps leading to the entrance, with rock walls and stately palm trees in front. Six hop kilns in a row were located across the road from the house. The house and kilns became the focal point of the Wohler Ranch. Only the house remains today and is an important part of this story right to the end.

During that time, posters were placed around the area and advertisements in the *Press Democrat* indicated a need for more workers, sometimes up to 1,000. The sizeable harvest, particularly of hops, plus the cash paid to the pickers, made news every summer. "Big sacks of money," one article related, "were taken from the Santa Rosa Bank Thursday to the Farmer and Peterson Ranch to pay off the hop pickers. Something like over \$15,000 was paid out." The Italians earned most of that money and saved some of it!

Raford was married to Nellie Peterson. They had two children, Wilson and Wesley. After Raford's partner, Charles Farmer, died, Raford bought out the interest of Mrs. Dorothy Farmer and her heirs and became sole owner. Hops continued to be formed into bales, shipped and sold to Uhlmann & Co. of New York. One newspaper account reported as many as 900 bales for \$73,000.

Raford Peterson's health began to decline and in 1914, at age 58, Raford died. His son, Wilson Peterson, carried on in his place. Wilson and his wife, Mabel Ann Robinson, had two sons, Raford and William. The ownership and management of the ranch continued...plus the name "Raford."

The Italians Arrive...Their American Life Begins

Old photos show some of these new immigrants settling in tents in a grove of trees; while others settled into cabins and houses scattered around the ranch. Those who were fortunate to live year-round on the ranch were put to work taking care of other crops, such as alfalfa, hay, potatoes, grapes and apples. They began to plant vegetables, onions and garlic around their little houses for their own tables. They had to live in a very frugal manner, but were used to that "back in the old country."



Hop drying time on the Wohler Ranch finds this hearty bunch of Italian immigrants mixed in with some of the locals.

They began to learn the English language, but it wasn't easy. Milton Cia recalled his parents' struggle with local place names. Guerneville became *Gurneh-veel-eh*; Forestville became *Fores-vee-leh*; and Healdsburg became *Eel-ees-burgo*.

Even though they sent letters back to their families in Italy, they became more and more attuned

to their American life, becoming aware of American politics mainly by listening to the radio, as various presidents including William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt took office. They studied and became American citizens and began to vote. They also managed to interject some humor into all the political stuff.

In their day to day family affairs, transportation to Santa Rosa and Healdsburg was by horse and buggy at first, then various automobiles of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. They could also take the train to Santa Rosa. Some of the children were baptized at St. Rose Church. Shopping for food took place at various Italian markets. Groceries could be purchased on credit and payments made after they received their paychecks at the ranch. Bread was delivered from the Franco-American bakery by Mike Rossi, who also played the accordion in a small band. He and Nello Bassignani, who played the drums, entertained many people from the 1930s to the 1960s. As Mike would say, "We sure kept those *paisanos* hoppin'!"



Nello Bassignani and Mike Rossi (left to right) played for many of the Italian social affairs.

Even though money was scarce, the Italians knew how to have a good time, especially at the Mt. Jackson Resort, Mirabel Park, Hollydale Park, the Druids Hall at Trenton or in someone's basement where the sound of the accordion could usually be heard. Basements were not just used for parties, but for curing olives, drying mushrooms, making cheese, fermenting wine or making sausage. They say if you see sausage being made, you would not eat it again. That did not stop anybody in this story.

During the 1920s, the Peterson Russian River Hop Ranch was sold to W.C. "Billie" Chisholm for \$350,000. The Italians got acquainted with new owners and new arrivals from the old country.

Rochiolis at the Ranch - A Story Similar to Others

It was the late 1800s, when Michele Rocchioli (original spelling) married Assunta Catelani in a small village in the Appenine Mountains of Italy. They had two children, Angelina Rocchioli and Joe Rocchioli (Sr.). Unfortunately, Assunta and their next infant son both died during childbirth. Sometime later, Michele married Domenica Viviani, who eventually became my grandmother.

Michele left Italy several times and took up residence in Niles (now Fremont), California while he awaited the arrival of his young family. In Niles, two more children were born: Americo (Henry) who lived and Aladino (Dino) who died. It was a sad time, yet sadness disappeared when family members were hired as "extras" in a movie called "The Making of Broncho Billy." Niles Canyon was a great location then for Hollywood westerns.

It wasn't long before this little family began hearing about a place called the Wohler Ranch, where a man could make as much as \$100! So, in 1914, they arrived at the Wohler Ranch. Trisa Rocchioli, my mother, Nellie Rocchioli, and Harry Rocchioli would be born next in the West County area. Joe Rocchioli (Sr.) became foreman of the ranch at a young age and would later alter the name "Rocchioli" to "Rochioli."



Joe Rocchioli Sr. supervised the fieldhands including his sister, Angelina, shown here picking grapes in the vineyards of the Wohler Ranch.

Friendships were made at the ranch and at the Lafayette and Vine Hill Schools that would last a lifetime. School photos give an indication of the other settlers who arrived before the Italians, like the Kimes, Ballards, Adelmans and Hicks families. The young little faces also indicate the presence of Mexican and Japanese families.

During the 1930s, the young women who were reaching marriageable age began falling in love with young men who worked on the ranch or they began meeting other young men who visited the ranch on Sundays. Often those young men had heard of all the Italians there, including their parties and their beautiful daughters.



Classmates at Lafayette School during the 1920s included (front row sixth from left) Trisa Rochioli (Sbragia)

My father, Italo Sbragia, from Lucca, Italy, arrived in Healdsburg in 1906 with his mother to meet his father and uncle who were already working on the Paxton Ranch (now Madrona Manor). Americo and Gino Sbragia, Italo's two younger brothers, were born on the Paxton Ranch with the help of Healdsburg's Dr. Swisher. The whole family returned to Italy in 1909, leaving my grandfather's brother behind. During the 1920s, the three sons returned to be with Uncle Fedele and Rosina Sbragia, and daughter Julia. Many of their Sundays were spent at the Wohler Ranch.

My parents, Italo and Trisa Rochioli Sbragia, were married in 1935. Her sisters' and brothers' marriages included: Joe and Angelina Rochioli Guidotti, Joe and Neoma Baldi Rochioli, Henry and Olga Viviani Rochioli, Charles and Nellie Rochioli Sumpter and Harry and Joyce Rossi Rochioli.

Sundays and holidays were often spent at Joe

and Neoma Rochioli's house at the ranch called Fenton Acres (now J. Rochioli Vineyards & Winery). Her sisters' marriages included Andrew and Jennie Baldi Sodini, Harlan and Lena Baldi Howard and Jake and Marie Moretti Boatman. Other Wohler Ranch marriages included Massimo and Della Bertozzi Vichi, John and Mary DeRegolo Pedroni and Paul and Alma Ferrero DeRegolo. There were countless other marriages during those times, but these are the couples who settled in Healdsburg.

The Chisholms Leave - The Petersons Return

During the 1940s, most of the Italian workers began leaving the ranch, many of them because they had bought ranches of their own. The Chisholms were coming to an end of running the ranch and the Petersons regained ownership. Billie Chisholm died in 1953 and his wife, Mona, continued an active life, trading in cattle and eventually becoming a famous cattlemaster. She died in Santa Rosa in 1986 at age 90.

After the Petersons regained the ranch, the grandson of Rafor Peterson (also named Rafor) and his wife, Lillian, took over its management. Eventually, the hop business began to suffer, due to the use of nitrate fertilizer and irrigation which caused mildew. Further advancement in the mechanization of the hop-picking machine by Florian Dauenhauer of Santa Rosa allowed the harvest to be carried on more productively in the broader land tracts of Oregon and Washington. Florian had also married one of the Italian daughters at the Wohler Ranch - Edith Venturacci.

Meanwhile, parcels of land at the Wohler Ranch were being sold. The first parcel was 40 acres sold to Joe Grace of Santa Rosa, a partner in Grace Brothers Brewery. Next, 500 acres were sold to Fred MacMurray, a Hollywood actor and Sonoma County ranch owner. The U.S. Government then purchased MacMurray's 500 acres and a 90 acre apple ranch for a monitoring station. That land was later given to Santa Rosa Junior College for its agricultural education and the Indian Youth Center, Ya-Ka-Ama.

Rafor and Bill Peterson divided the remaining land into 225 acres each. Little by little, the Wohler Ranch diminished in size. Properties were sold until all that was left was the large family home owned by Rafor and Bill Peterson and their mother, Mabel Peterson. A pattern of early deaths in the Peterson

men continued and eventually Bill's wife, June, and her six children, inherited the large family house.

The Big White House Becomes Rafor Inn

In 1980, June Peterson sold the family home to Beth Foster and Allen Baitinger, who converted it to the Rafor House Bed and Breakfast Inn. The home continued to be impressive as it sat on the last four remaining acres of the ranch at the junction of Eastside Road and Wohler Road.

Fourteen years later, in 2004, Dane Pitcher and Rita Wells, realized their dream of becoming innkeepers and purchased the inn. It became the Rafor Inn Bed and Breakfast and they are the present day owners.

Dane and Rita have shown a great interest in the history of the ranch and of the historic Peterson house at 10630 Wohler Road. It is now rated a 5-star inn and an officially designated historic landmark. Dane farms Rafor's estate vineyards and makes award winning wine, while Rita manages the inn's upkeep and serves a delicious breakfast, while keeping up her career as a hypnotherapist and wellness counselor.

The Rafor Inn is furnished with period furniture and has six guest rooms, all with private baths. The dining room and two guest rooms have wood-burning fireplaces. Descriptions of the inn include: fresh white fabrics, French doors, hurricane lamps, old-fashioned gardens and a host of hummingbirds, orioles, and swallows...in Dane and Rita's words: "*Where Dreams Spring Forth from Yesterday.*"

We, the Italian descendants, continue to live very close to that "yesterday kind of place." We have furthered our education, enjoyed various careers and raised our own families. Yet, when we drive past the Rafor House on any given day, we look up at the big white house and are instantly reminded of our ancestors' first years in America . . . hard work, yet good times . . . at a place called the Wohler Ranch.

Sources:

Janet M. Pisenti, "Thirty-Eight Cousins from Italy," 1989
Carole Peterson Edmunson, Peterson family photos and stories

Dane Pitcher & Rita Wells, The Rafor Inn proprietors



Cannery "operatives," c. 1910

Fruits of Labor: Healdsburg's Turn of the Century Canneries *by Holly Hoods*

The arrival of the San Francisco and North Pacific railroad in 1871 put Healdsburg on the map and facilitated the distribution of its produce across the country. In the 1870s, farmers in Sonoma County, appreciating the fertility of their soil and climate, began to look beyond the familiar grain crops that they had brought from the Midwest. Wheat, oats, barley, alfalfa and corn were still planted, of course, but in the Healdsburg and northern Sonoma County region, many farmers began planting orchards and cultivating berries. The marvelous productivity of these crops exceeded expectations and soon made canning practically a necessity to avoid wasting the excess produce. Yet production of fruit was one thing; successful packaging, marketing and distribution of it was quite another. The 1880s saw the rise of canneries.



Magnolia Cannery and workers, 1892

Productive Industry

The first cannery north of Petaluma was the Windsor Fruit Packing Company, established in 1886. Within the next five years, Healdsburg boasted three canneries of its own, each of them conveniently situated adjacent to the railroad tracks. An 1891 state report on the agricultural products of Healdsburg

praised the productivity of the fledgling industry:

At Healdsburg and vicinity there are about 12,000 acres in peaches, about 10,000 acres in prunes and about 800 acres in other varieties, such as apples, cherries and apricots. The industry has taken good foothold and three large canneries, the Magnolia, Van Alen and Russian River canneries are established here. These companies employ from 1,000 to 1,200 people, and a great many families come from Mendocino and Lake Counties to camp near these factories to get employment during the season. A large quantity of fruit from other sections of the county is shipped to Healdsburg to be canned.



Cannery operatives outside of Van Alen Co, 1890s

Van Alen Cannery

The Van Alen Packing Company was established in 1887 by William Van Alen. Its main building was located on the railroad tracks to the south of Healdsburg Avenue and Mill Street, approximately where NuForest Products is today. Specializing in fresh fruit, a labor force of approximately 250 worked 10-hour days during the season. Workers packed 5,000 cases (or 15,000 cans per day) of fruit the first year. Two hundred women and girls made up the majority of the work force with only 40 men and boys. There were 10 Chinese men employed, who labored in a separate area from the women and girls. Between 20,000 and 25,000 cases of fruit were packed at the Van Alen cannery in 1891, of which about 75% were peaches. About 3,000 cases of cherries, 1,500 of pears, 2,500 of plums, 4,000 of apricots and 200 cases of berries were processed. A large drier was erected near the cannery in 1891 and approximately 35 tons of prunes were dried that first season. In the 1890s, the company spent \$25,000 on fruit in a single year.



Interior of Magnolia Cannery, 1890

Magnolia Cannery

English-born entrepreneur Thomas S. Merchant founded the Magnolia Cannery in 1888. A prominent businessman (or "capitalist"), active in civic affairs, including city politics, T.S. Merchant became a City Trustee, then Mayor.

At his cannery, Merchant touted his scrupulous hiring of "only white labor," which apparently was a selling point for some customers.



Magnolia muscat grapes label, note "white labor"

At Magnolia Cannery, the season began in May with cherries. In the first year, 3,000 cases of cherries were canned; 1,600 cases of blackberries and 22,000 cases of "standard fruits" were packed, totaling - including jellies and jams - about 45,000 pounds. Between 400 and 500 hands were employed and over \$50,000 was spent annually procuring fruit. Fifteen different kinds of jellies and 12 different

kinds of jams (about 6,000 cases) were packed in 1891, according to the State Board of Horticulture.

Merchant sold his company to Healdsburg Canning Company in 1896. Longboard Cellars is located today where Magnolia Cannery (and later Healdsburg Canning Company and California Fruit Canners' Association) once stood. This venerable fruit packing plant was torn down in 1976 after sitting vacant for 20 years.



Sketch of Russian River Packing Co

Russian River Packing Company

The Russian River Packing Company was founded in 1891 by J.R. Miller and W.J. Hotchkiss. Miller and Hotchkiss became leaders in the fruit packing industry. Located on a spur track across the railroad tracks from the Healdsburg depot, the main warehouse buildings and yard extended over an acre. Their special equipment included a rotary soldering machine to make their own cans.

The Russian River Packing Company employed about 300 people on average; the workforce might double at the peak of the season. The cannery tried to promote appealing working conditions, advertising in 1892 that "the rooms are all well lighted and ventilated, there are convenient cloak-rooms and altogether great pains have been taken to provide for the health and comfort of the employees." The 1897 *Sonoma County Atlas* proudly promoted the racist hiring practices as a virtue of the company:

None but white labor is employed, and during the operating season from 500-600 hands are kept busy hauling and preparing the luscious ripe fruits which come from the orchards immediately adjacent to the cannery. The fruit is all packed by white men and women who are required that neatness and cleanliness shall characterize all their work.

The Star Dried Fruit Company was a related

side business of Miller and Hotchkiss. In 1896, this firm shipped 90 cars of dried fruits, prunes, peaches and pears (or 2,160,000 pounds of dried fruit) to Eastern markets. The business employed between 50 and 75 hands when running at full capacity. The drying season lasted 10-12 weeks.

Enterprise Cannery

Another successful cannery in Healdsburg was the Enterprise Cannery, founded in 1895 by Pete Dirvin and his wife with three employees. This cannery differed from the others in that, in addition to commercial fruit packing, it offered canning services to individual families to preserve their surplus produce. This concept proved very popular.

Growth of Canning Industry

By the turn of the 20th Century, agriculture, railroads and mining had become the major industries in the state. The market for canned produce grew wider; packing companies merged, consolidated and grew larger. Fruit ranchers felt increasing pressure to participate in fruit growing associations. These associations, called "syndicates," assured farmers a steady market for their ripe produce, but frequently the guaranteed price paid was far less than the farmers wanted.

In 1900, the *Pacific Rural Press* touted Healdsburg as an important fruit center:

The most notable enterprise [in Healdsburg] is the cannery of the California Association, or the Fontana concern. At the time of our visit, it was giving employment to 600 operatives and it will pack for the season 100,000 to 120,000 cases of peaches, pears, plums, apples and tomatoes. . . With the exception of cling peaches—which were the best ever packed—the fruits this season have not been entirely satisfactory. Many think, however, that the prunes grown in the Russian River Valley are equal to anything in the State, not excepting Santa Clara Valley. . .

Porter Brothers have completed a large 3-story and basement addition to their packing house at Healdsburg. They have one of the largest prune graders in the State, being 40 feet long and separating fruit into eight grades. By the use of elevators, etc., run by power, most of the work will be automatic. Miller and Hotchkiss have a large dry yard for prunes and peaches near Porter Brothers'

packing house. They will pack for the association in the buildings of the old Russian River Canning Company, which will be adapted to the purpose. They expect to pack two carloads per day.



Porter Brothers Cannery, 1890s

From 1890 through the 1920s, the scope of canneries and their relative importance to the regional economy is comparable to the influence of the wine industry today. In the April-to-October season, workers processed a wide variety of crops, delivered by train — pears from Lake and Mendocino counties; apples, berries and cherries from Sebastopol; and peaches and plums from Geyserville and Cloverdale. Berries were the most fragile crop to handle, and that short season often meant 16-hour days to get the fresh fruit washed, sorted and canned. By 1917, the new companies included: Sheriffs' Brothers Cannery, Lee Less and Company, B.E. Grant, Zerrillo and LaFata, Wann Brothers, Miller and Gobbi.

Working Conditions

Inside the canneries, working conditions could be harsh. For cannery workers, known as "operatives," long hours on their feet - sometimes standing near steam or in puddles of water - were the norm. Workers were paid by the piece, so wages depended on how many apricots they pitted or peaches they sliced. Canners employed mostly unmarried women and young girls; although sometimes entire families were employed. Surviving photos show elderly women among the work force, as well. By the mid 1890s, as more married women joined the seasonal work force, canneries began to improve accommodations. Operatives brought their children to work with them, since the canneries provided child care at onsite "kindergartens." These kindergartens (open to young children and infants) enabled women to support themselves and help provide for their families. As soon as they were old enough to learn the tasks, daughters worked alongside their mothers, peeling and sorting fruit;

boys helped their fathers in the box-making department or maintaining the machinery. In September, 1922, the *Healdsburg Tribune* reported:

Opening dates of both the grammar and high schools have been set back a week... Postponement of the opening date was decided on by the trustees of both schools, informally, when prune growers pointed out to them that a tremendous loss face the prune industry unless the school children were allowed to work the harvest. At the present time, it is said, the prune crop is less than one-third harvested and practically no labor except that of children of school age is available.

Rise of Fruit Syndicates

Until the early 1900s, most of the canneries were owned by individuals or by a group of growers. Healdsburg Canning Company on Matheson Street was owned by the California Fruit Packers' Association, the largest canning corporation in the state. It was founded by Marco Fontana, an Italian immigrant living in San Francisco, who had realized that the local market was limited and the largest market was the cities in the east. Fontana feared that the market would be saturated if too many canneries were started in California. To combat this problem, he created a syndicate, the California Fruit Canners' Association, in 1899, which eventually controlled nearly all of California's output. In 1916, to consolidate his dominance in the canning industry, Fontana formed the California Packing Corporation by merging four packing companies that had interests throughout the U.S. The new firm, known as Del Monte, became the largest seller of canned produce in the country.

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Braceros at work on Healdsburg farm, 1940s

Braceros Saved Local Agriculture in WWII

by Elizabeth Holmes and Holly Hoods

The Second World War created a tremendous farm labor shortage in California. The state had always produced food for civilians, and with the outbreak of war, farmers stepped up production to supply troops and European allies as well. In 1942, Congress enacted the Emergency Labor Program. The U.S. government negotiated with the Mexican government to hire Mexican workers to come to the United States to work on American farms. This action approved the temporary legal immigration of thousands of Mexican workers to replace the American men who were serving in the military. The workers were called *braceros*, from the Spanish term “brazo” (arm), a poetic acknowledgement of the difficulty of the manual labor they provided.

The *Bracero* Program grew out of a private labor program that began during World War I and ended badly during the Depression in the 1930s with thousands of stranded workers unable to return home to Mexico. To insure better treatment and organized repatriation of Mexican citizens, the Mexican government insisted that the United States government be the labor contractor for the new program which officially ran for 22 years.

Northern Sonoma County farmers benefitted from the *Bracero* Program with essential farm help from workers who arrived in the spring and left in the fall. Hundreds of Mexican workers arrived in Sonoma County. During the war years, approximately 700 to 800 workers per season resided in Healdsburg and the surrounding valleys.

The average wage was between 70 and 85

cents per hour. Some workers were paid by the hour; some on a piece-rate basis. Wages sometimes included access to the rancher’s vegetable plot, prepared food and/or housing. Housing arrangements for the guest workers varied greatly. Some ranchers provided rustic cabins without running water or electricity. Some workers slept in cars or tents. Larger ranches set up separate bachelor camps and family camps.

Many Latino residents in the Healdsburg area arrived as seasonal laborers, then applied for citizenship and stayed in the area. They put down roots, raised families, started businesses and became respected community members.

During the 22 years of the *Bracero* Program, more than 4 million Mexican workers left their families behind and came to work in the fields of California. Their service in agriculture on the U.S. home front during WWII contributed to the war effort and virtually saved the local economy. Over 70 years later, Mexican immigrant laborers still play a significant role in the prosperity of northern Sonoma County agriculture.

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Dry Wine Industry

Some Aspects of Industry Today as Contrasted With Early Day Methods *as told by William Massoni (Healdsburg Tribune, October 1, 1940)*

From humble beginning three-quarters of a century ago, the wine business today is one of the major industries destined to become even greater than the automobile business, in my opinion.

The wine industry has experienced its most remarkable transformation since the advent of Repeal less than a decade ago. Wine making has become an art – from crude methods under the most unsanitary conditions to scientific ways and means under the guidance of experts and clean wholesome environments.

“Believe it or not” I have never drank wine during my life nor liquor of any kind, yet I was reared on a vineyard with a background of two generations before me as grape growers and wine men in the county of Sonoma where I was born. My grandfather planted some of the first grape vines in and around Lytton Springs in the late seventies, undertaking the process of wine making, as you may imagine, in the most rude and primitive manner, passing his profession on to my father who is today active in the business, and in whose footsteps I too followed from early boyhood. I am proud to state, on this occasion that my grandfather’s original holdings are still among the assets of my family.

Early Methods Recalled

I well recall the old hand crusher, which was an improvement over even cruder methods of days before, consisting of two grooved cylinders revolving in opposite direction within a hopper into which the clusters were dumped as they came in from the vineyard.



Grape hand crusher (HM&HS artifact)

It will not be necessary to describe the transportation thereof, it being done by sled and muscular action. These rollers of a flywheel, geared to each other, driven by hand power and by an excellent heart and lungs. By such means I developed my athletic physique. Without further bringing back old memories, suffice it to say that all other cellar operations were by hand power also, equally primitive.

The process of fermentation was trusted entirely to nature and Lady Luck. Any wine drawn from the fermenters that did not call for a medical examination after drinking, was considered a merchantable product. The buyer knew a little less than the wine maker, consequently business was conducted harmoniously and in the most friendly manner. Fortunately in those days a man’s word was his bond and although transactions were mostly verbal, they were carried out in their entirety – what a pleasure to deal with such simple people yet of such high moral standards. I wonder why such sober gentlemen are so few today?

Such terms as refrigeration, pasteurization and filtration were then unknown to the industry. Fining was trusted to the hands of nature and only with progress of the industry did filtration first come into being. Pulp filters were first used. When the average wine man looks back at the days of this type of filter he immediately looks about him to make sure that health authorities cannot hear his loud thinking. The mass used in filtration was a permanent one, adding to it as wear and tear took place. About the first time it was put into service it was impregnated with germs and bacteria characteristic of the wine it was supposed to purify, that no matter how sound wines might be before filtration, it was sure to be in a state of deterioration soon thereafter. We forged ahead undaunted. Science has now taught us the way to overcome this evil.

Present Day Improvements

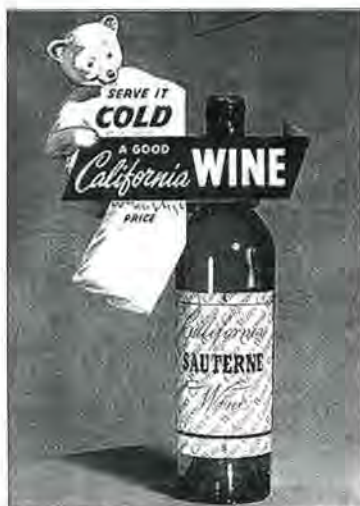
With the lapse of time came improvement and the beginning of some of the present day wineries

and in the nineties were well established. This betterment was continuous and up to the time of the great American mistake, or as some call it, the noble experiment, the wine industry was fast becoming conspicuous.

Prohibition was a death blow to the industry and during its regime it ravaged not only the viticultural interests of the state, but brought havoc to the nation as well, for be it known to you, my reader, the liquor industry of America is its best meal ticket and directly or indirectly it reaches into the homes of every American's well being. No greater farce was ever attempted by any civilized nation, with thunderbolt-like reaction.

Repeal Revives Industry

Repeal revived a defunct industry and with its advent California and the nation flourished once more. The stimulus naturally was felt at home – California. Devastated and ruined wineries were rehabilitated to rise to pre-Prohibition status – only bigger and better and up to the minute. Vineyards for fifteen years in a state of decay once more became the beautiful landmarks of northern California. The industry expanded. Holdings increased and new vineyards sprang up in the southern part of California, destined to become famous for sweet wines if properly handled and matured. However the three northern counties of Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino are, and will always be the only section of America for famous dry wines. Sonoma County is today the largest dry wine producing county. Let no one dispute my statement in this respect.



This ad was designed to promote sales during traditionally slow summer months.



A generic ad for California Wine

The wine advisory board was instituted in 1939 and there took form an advertising campaign of three year's duration at a cost of two million dollars to be financed through a state marketing assessment of $\frac{3}{4}$ cents per gallon on all dry wine sales and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cent per gallon on all sales of sweet wines. Immediately upon the invocation of this program sales were increased and gains have been small but continuous month by month. Education, through the program, of the American public to the use of wholesome wines at meal time and sweet wines for appetizers and after meal drinks will bring consumption in America to many times its present level. We must not however lose sight of the fact that only better wines will win public appeal and demand, and any vintner who deviates from this thought and sacrifices quality for volume will be a monkey wrench in the wheels of progress. The public should also cooperate in maintaining this advance toward better wines by insisting that the goods be from the location which the better wines are made. To be frank and explicit – dry wines from the north and sweet wines from the south of the state.

There is no reason why the consumption of wine in America cannot be increased to several times its present consumption of European countries and assuming that the American people can be made wine-minded within even a fraction of that consumption, the demand for our wine would be so great as to render it impossible to supply the trade without increased production beyond surmise.

Lose not, however, sight of the fact that industry still has many obstacles to overcome. The business is young and that was accomplished before Prohibition is now past history. Consequently the wine business of America is only in its infancy. In order to accomplish our objectives, state barriers will necessarily have to be torn down. To cite you an example to what I refer, the state of Michigan

imposes a state tax on all wines entering from California of fifty cents per gallon. This is discrimination and interference with free trade. It is a vicious tax and certainly one that merits retaliation. Would the state of Michigan enjoy a California state tax commensurate with their tax on wines, on all automobiles that come into this state? I would say, "No." This might be restriction of commerce between free states, but I am a firm believer in socking the other fellow when he socks me.

Federal and state restrictions on the sales of wines in most of our states should also be modified. For instance, before being able to do business or even solicit business, in the state of Colorado it is mandatory that a license of 1000 dollars yearly be obtained. For the privilege of soliciting in Massachusetts a license of 300 dollars annually is likewise necessary. These are only some of the instances of state restrictions and barriers. What about state liquor boards in state controlled states. Would you like to know? We were given Repeal, yet we are still hamstrung and free traffic is limited to only a few states of the union. However, we are patient and with perseverance will come success.

A demoralizing factor of grave concern to the dry wine interests, especially, is the abused privilege, accorded each head of a family to concoct 200 gallons of half-baked wine per year, a Prohibition time measure that has never been repealed, breeding bootlegging galore, violation of the revenue act, destruction of price structures for the legitimate dealer and a drawback to the educational program for lean, wholesome wine that is finally being placed on the markets by most of the larger wineries.

These grapes are shipped fresh from the Lodi and Fresno areas direct to the eastern markets and metropolitan cities elsewhere such as Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, etc. These grapes are pear dry wine grapes to begin with, grown in irrigated districts where the tonnage is excessive and the fruit lacking the proper ingredients necessary to make a palatable and suitable wine for aging. Contrast these grapes with those grown in our northern counties without irrigation, on rolling hill land and kissed by the summer sun, producing the superb wine that has finally gained world-wide recognition.

The average city family knows less than nothing about wine making. Naturally, according to these so-called Prohibition time vintners, they are

experts in the business and are in a position to instruct in the art of wine making – if what you see in their basements during October and November can be called by that name. On arrival from California to the east coast, the grapes have suffered in transit from exposure, and decay is rampant. Then, is there any reason why the fungus growth and bacteria should not be present in the finished wine? The grapes are crushed in the most primitive manner in many cases, and the process of fermentation left entirely to nature. Most of these wines are drawn in a state of incomplete fermentation, containing small quantities of unfermented sugar sufficient to revive a secondary fermentation which in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred develops acidic acid and spoilage. This class of consumer becomes so accustomed to his wine that in a few months when the wine should be ready for their table it is no more and no less than good vinegar. You can well imagine what attention is given the cooperage in which it is stored, so that taking all into consideration, the finished product should be condemned by the health authorities, or better yet, the grapes processed in California for distilling material and other by-products.

Much of this wine is made on a large scale for commercial purposes and finds its way to market in competition to pure wines out of California wineries. The producers of these so-called eastern delicacies have no revenue tax to pay. They are not licensed by Uncle Sam, nor the state, and are not called to file dozens of monthly reports and go through red tape such as the legitimate wineries do, consequently, their per gallon cost is very small. They can undersell us, and to make their wines half-way marketable, they are blended with California wines in their expert fashion, producing a cheap wine for cheap buyers. In the meantime, California wineries are deprived of legitimate business at the hands of their own grape growers. To top all this, these grapes are shipped on consignment, returning red ink to the growers who nevertheless do the same thing the following year.

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Tom and Barbara Baxter marking sheep, 1966

Life Among the Woolies: Sheep Ranching on the White Oak Ranch

*An Oral History with Tom Baxter and Barbara Baxter
edited by Holly Hoods*

Introduction

Holly Hoods interviewed Thomas F. Baxter III and ex-wife Barbara Lyon Baxter in September 2005 at Barbara's home on a portion of the Baxters' former 8,000-acre sheep ranch. Tom's grandfather, Thomas F. Baxter Sr., purchased the Rockpile Road/Skaggs Springs area ranch in northern Sonoma County with a partner in about 1915. The Baxters' White Oak Ranch -- which includes the Moffet ranch -- was one of the largest sheep ranches in Sonoma County. Barbara was born in 1925 in San Luis Obispo, California where her father was a Superior Court judge. She was a recent Stanford graduate when she came to Sonoma County "as a bride" in

1947, but the city girl took to the life of a sheep rancher as if she were born to it, like Tom. Tom and Barbara lived on what is now called "Old Sawmill Campground" on Lake Sonoma. They raised thousands of sheep on the White Oak Ranch. Eight hundred acres of Baxter property was preempted by the government and flooded by the Army Corps of Engineers to create Lake Sonoma in the early 1970s. The remaining 7,000+ acres were divided between Tom and Barbara in their 1992 divorce settlement, Tom being on the White Oak and Barbara being up on the Moffet. Tom Baxter was killed in an accident three months after this interview.

Baxter Ranch Beginnings

TFB: My grandfather is instrumental in the history of this ranch because he bought the ranch with a partner, Herbert Montgomery in about 1915. It was already a sheep ranch when they bought it from Cap Ornbau. Montgomery wasn't a sheep man; he was an attorney for the Caterpillar Company when they were in Stockton. My grandfather was the general manager of the company and that was how they got together.

My grandfather grew up in Boston and he had a stock and bond trading business in Boston. In 1915 he came out to San Francisco to the Pan-Pacific Exposition -- the World's Fair -- he and my grandmother. My dad was 19 years old, his sister was a little older than he was, and there was a brother, younger. They all moved out because they liked what they saw in California.

My father wanted to farm. Actually he was a student at Harvard. He came out here, and my grandfather put him up there with Montgomery and just let him work. I remember my grandfather told my dad after he had worked here a couple of years that it was no good. (laughs) Not a good yield on the investment. He was wrong -- well, we lived on it, but it was pretty tough during the Depression.

BLB: Your dad butchered lambs and sold them locally, right, Tom? During the Depression?

TFB: He butchered lambs, sold them everywhere. He killed 'em on the ranch; sold them to people down at Dry Creek. If he butchered you a lamb, he cleaned it -- ready to eat -- for a dollar and a half. This happened in May and June. Lambs are at the best about the first of June. He could butcher one in about 30 minutes, but we were actually in the wool business at the time. The sheep we raised were Merinos -- bred for their wool and their gregarious instinct.

BLB: Merino sheep have the finest wool. They're known for their wool. When I first came here [in 1947], wool was the moneymaker.

TFB: Merinos yield 8 or 9 pounds of wool. In World War I the wool was probably over a dollar a pound, but back in the Depression, wool was ... well, you couldn't even sell it. Some people held it for three years and then took less than what they offered the first time: like ten cents a pound for wool. Barbara can verify that. She's got all the books. My dad kept his own books. You won't believe what the

numbers were! My dad, I'd say he moved out to the ranch in 1922. He would have been 23 years old.

BLB: You were born in '26. He married [Helen] in '25.

TFB: Right. He worked here a couple of years before he got married. I remember them telling me that the house that they built down there at the White Oak [Ranch] burned in 1929, but they rebuilt and that's where Barbara and I first lived. This was all the White Oak.

One Sheep per Four Acres

TFB: What was it like on a sheep ranch? Well, the season starts in August. We'd have two or three hundred sheep in a pasture. You put the rams in the pasture in August and you start having lambs five months later. I only needed four rams to the hundred sheep. Barbara and I ran a couple of thousand sheep on our ranch; we had to. One sheep per four acres is what we figured. In New Zealand they run one sheep to the acre. They have the same kind of land, but it rains all the time, so they've got green grass all year. We fed the sheep cottonseed pellets about this time of year. There was still plenty of grass, but it's good to give protein supplements when they're making a lamb. Sheep are kind of like goats. They eat brush and leaves, not just grass. They keep the brush from taking over your ranch.

BLB: We bought rams wherever we could get them. The rams are very important to the wool you'd get and also for your market lambs. When I first came here to the ranch, Tom's father had all Merino rams and then later we used black-faced rams to produce market lambs.



Tom working the sheep with dogs, 1974

Shearing the Woolies

TFB: At shearing time, there was always a shearing crew of four men. They'd come and camp on the ranch. During my time, a lot of them came from Boonville. They had small ranches in Anderson Valley with sheep, but not enough to make a living at it. They went out a couple of months a year and sheared sheep. There was a sheep shed at the Moffett and one on the White Oak. All the sheep on the ranch were sheared at one shed or the other. And after shearing, just turn the sheared sheep out and they'd go back to their home pasture. The next job after you sheared the sheep was to shift the lambs for sale. Also my dad would go out on his horse, and if he found some woolies that hadn't been shorn -- that's what you call 'em: woolies -- he'd put the dogs around them and stay out there all the rest of that day, shearing those woolies with hand shears. Anyway, he'd tie [the fleeces] all up with wool twine, load 'em on his horse, and would come back with his horse just loaded down with fleeces piled all around him.

BLB: To tie a fleece up is a special job and an art.

TFB: Barbara's good at it.

BLB: I can tie wool, but I had to learn it. You have to learn how to tie it in a tight bundle and it's hard to do. [Tom's father] Pa could tie a nice tight fleece; he had to get it on the horse.



Sheep shearing 1975

TFB: (Demonstrating) You shear the belly out first, then you start up the neck; then just go right around the side of that sheep, leg down, going along one side, then go on the other side. I'm simplifying, but a real sheep shearer can do it in a very small number of blows -- that's what they call each pass, it's a blow. A good sheep shearer doesn't overlap. They can shear a sheep in a couple of minutes. They shear 200 a day. Do the sheep fight it? Oh yes, you have to

hold 'em a certain way, that's the key. First you set 'em up on their butt so you're behind them. You squeeze them with your legs. The machine (electric sheep shearer) is hanging up here over your head -- it's got a little gas engine and it's got a flexible shaft. To pull a sheep out of the pen, you grab one by the hind leg, tip it over, hold it there and start to take the belly off. The wool buyers don't really like the belly wool, because it's usually full of stickers. The best wool is all over the back. You'd shear once a year. More than that isn't good for the wool clip. They want a certain amount of length at the mill. If you shear them twice, you don't get that length for the fibers.



Feeding sheep north side Moffett, 1971

So after shearing a fleece, the wool tier would toss the fleece to somebody in the wool sack, who was tromping it down tight. The wool sack is seven feet long, three feet wide. It's up in a rack and it's got a steel ring that holds it. Barbara's done that too. When you're shearing sheep, you hire a crew. We hired a wool tier a lot of times, but we sacked our own.

BLB: I would do it sometimes ... or Hay Petersen. The kids also used to love to get in there.

TFB: It sounds easy, but it's just like anything else: you have to know how to do it. You can stomp on the wool all day and it's not gonna stay in that bag. You have to go right down the edge, and the bag is burlap, and then the wool sticks to that burlap. You can put 300 pounds of wool in a sack if you get it right.

BLB: You have to keep going around the edges and pushing it in. A good wool tier can get a real tight sack. Hay Petersen was really good at tying the wool and sacking it.

TFB: The sheep shearers would be racing all the time. If they'd get to racing too much, they'd start

to cut the sheep and you'd have to talk to them. Most of them were professional. What would they call a scratch? A scratch could be 3 inches long. If it was longer than that, it was a cut. So it got pretty bloody sometimes, but a real good sheep shearer would take care of his cutters by dressing the points so it will pick up the wool but not the skin.

BLB: You'd always have a needle, and sometimes you'd have to stitch 'em up if they got cut. A good sheep shearer doesn't cut them at all.

TFB: Machine shearing is quicker than hand shearing. It's like a barber shears; it can go as fast as you can push it. After they're shorn, they're just white, white skin. They're vulnerable. They'll die if it rains too much. That's why you'd shear your sheep in May, because most of the rain is behind you. You have to shear them ahead of the stickers and behind the rain. How do you do that? It's pretty hard. There's filaree in this country; and its stickers are one of the first things that you get in the wool, and it's pretty hard to get out.

Tagging, Marking, Gathering, Hollering and Legging Out

TFB: In the fall you tag your sheep. From May to October, the wool gets longer. Winter is coming; the grass is gonna be green and they're gonna start getting manure on their back end. Barbara was good at tagging sheep. We did this with a hand shears. Some people think we were crazy, but we could do it pretty satisfactorily.



Barbara at top of White Oak from above fig tree, Spring 1972

BLB: We rode horseback all the time and always Tom had four or five dogs. We'd go out and gather the sheep by pastures and put them in corrals. Then we'd leg them out one by one and tag them.

Shear around the butt. Clean around their eyes so they can see. A wooly sheep is pretty wooly everywhere. On this part of the ranch there were four fenced pastures: the south side, the north side, the east Moffet and the Sentiny. They each had gates and you could close the pastures off.



Marking lambs 1974

TFB: For instance, when you wanted to work your sheep, even just tagging them, you wouldn't get them all in, so you'd shut the gates up there and get 'em in pasture by pasture. You'd have to have somebody to help you tag 'em. After my dad died, Barbara did it. But the idea is to have a big corral and it progresses into smaller corrals. Then you've got 'em pretty tight. That's when you can just walk into a little wad of sheep and just leg one out. Give it a little twist and she's on her back. To mark the lambs, you have an alleyway to run the sheep and ewes together up this little alleyway; it's tapered in so they just go through there one at a time at the upper end. The boss is standing there and he's cutting them out so the lambs go this way and the ewes go that way. Then you've got all of the lambs in a little marking pen. You'd have a table and a helper would pick the lambs up and get the four legs together like this (gestures).

BLB: Pick 'em up this way in a sitting position and take the hind legs and pull 'em up to the side of the head. Then you've got their tail and the nuts if they're a male. This is a pretty small lamb—a 10 pound or 15 pound lamb. Marking lambs is three procedures: castrating, ear marking and cutting the tails off.

TFB: At the time you castrate them, you also cut the tails off. Every sheep has a long tail when it's born. The problem with having a long tail with wool on it is that it gets manure on it and urine, which is an

invitation for blowflies. I'll bet you didn't know they cut the tail off. It's a bloody mess too. Everybody had some medicine that they put on it: fly repellent; we used KRS. But they stopped bleeding pretty fast.

BLB: And we'd also put our ear mark. The ears bleed a lot when you cut the ear mark. There's a lot of blood. Every rancher has their own special ear mark for the sheep. If you've got the sheep in a corral, you can spot a stray. Our ear mark was an upper half on the right, swallow fork on the left.

TFB: Merino sheep are a gregarious breed and their natural instinct is to go up to bed at the highest ground. So evening is the best time to gather them, because they're going for the bed ground. We'd come along the bottom of the pasture and holler the sheep up to the top, and then get the dogs around them before they got away, and then take them to the corral. So it really was pretty simple, I mean, unless they got away... (laughs)

A Sheep's Got a System

TFB: Another way you could gather sheep was to go to their shade ground. Shade ground is different than a bed ground. A sheep's got a system; it does it every day. A cow, you don't know where it's gonna go; a cow just goes anywhere. A sheep goes to where there's a spring and shade under the trees close to a spring. And you can just go out with your dogs, if you've got pretty good dogs and they know what you're thinking, you don't have to tell them anything. They'll just get around the sheep.



Lucy and Fitzroy gathering sheep, 1970

BLB: What kind of dogs did we prefer? McNabs were the best: good with sheep and good pets. You'd be lost without dogs.

TFB: I didn't really train my dogs; I'd just take them out with other dogs and they would

instinctively be good workers or not. I was a dog collector, but if something happened to one, I always had another one to step in. We'd keep sheep 7 or 8 years. Then we'd sell off old ewes to somebody down in Tomales or someplace else with nice grass, easy winters and they don't have to climb like they do around here; they could get a couple of more years out of them. That's the way we did it, we'd cull them. There was no use letting them die out on the ranch.



Tom (foreground) the left handed sheep shearer and his father Tom II, the traditional right handed shearer

End of Sheep Ranching

BLB: The coyotes very definitely are what put us out of the sheep business.

TFB: In 1980 I had a 50 percent lamb crop—that's pretty bad. That's not enough lambs to sell; you just can't justify it. Then everything we thought of to fight [coyotes], the environmentalists thought of and made it illegal. All you could do is shoot them. And you know how much wool is selling for now? Twelve cents a pound! You've got to pay the shearer, and the shearer won't take the wool. He can't sell it. It's too bad. Wool is a good product. But I had to get out. I sold my sheep all at once to a guy in Yolo County. But no doubt about it, before it went down, sheep ranching was a good life. I can't complain. I never saw a prune grower or grape grower I'd trade with.



Prune Tree, 1957

Prune Harvest

by Kay Schmidt Robinson

with assistance from Diane Schmidt Carriger and Brian Schmidt

The smell and look of prune blossoms in March, rising too early in the morning, getting sore knees, throwing dirt clods at bats, marking my boxes with chalk, the smell of the hot moist dried prunes, brown bath water at the end of the day, making out shopping lists for school clothes from the Sears catalog. These are a few of the things I remember growing up in Dry Creek Valley on a prune ranch in the 1950s and 1960s. Many long-time Healdsburg residents will have similar memories, but they will differ for each family. Every ranch had its own system, its own equipment, and a variation of the following story.

The best thing about growing up in agriculture was having my dad, Don Schmidt, around most of the time. I could usually find him working in the orchard or at the dehydrator. There were busy times and there were times when work was in a lull. We could usually eke out a two week family vacation during the summer. His year revolved around

spraying, disking, laying (and then taking up) irrigation pipes, pruning, propping and, of course, harvest.

Harvest would begin as early as the first week of August. The start of school was always determined in late summer when the conclusion of the prune harvest could be estimated. Often school was delayed until the second or third week of September. We grew two varieties of prunes (note: prunes, not dried plums!). French prunes are smaller, more olive shaped, about 1¼ to 1½ inches long. The Imperial variety is bigger and plumper. They are still oval, but more round and about 1½ to 2 inches long. Imperials are a deep purple-blue, but had a light, whitish "bloom" on them.

Around mid-summer, the crop would become so heavy that the process of propping would begin. Eight to twelve foot long props, three to six per tree, would be used as 'crutches' to help the tree bear the weight so that the limbs would not break. It was a

laborious process done by my father and his workers.

Determining when harvest would begin was decided by the farmer, not the buyer as in today's more common practice of grape picking being decided by the winery.



Harvesting prunes off the ground, 1957

For those unfamiliar with prune harvest, picking prunes means picking them up off the ground, not directly from the tree. How they got to the ground varied in the fifteen years I participated in harvest. My earliest recollection was of a worker who would go from tree to tree with a shaker – a long aluminum pole with a hook on one end. One by one, he would shake each limb as the prunes fell to the ground. It took perhaps three to five minutes to do each tree. This task was done with the props in place. The supports were eventually removed, gathered together and stored for use the next year.



Diane [Carriger,] Kay [Robinson] and Brian Schmidt, c 1958

Picking prunes was the occupation of many a Healdsburger, at least during our youth. My first job was at the age of five. I remember being next to my

brother Brian and sister Diane on my knees, picking prunes.

Imperial prunes were easier to pick since they are larger and it took fewer to fill a box. First, we would put the prunes into a metal bucket and then dump the full bucket into a box. A box measured 24" x 15" x 8.5" and weighed about 40 to 50 pounds when it was full. Each box was marked in chalk with our assigned number. We were paid 25 cents per box.



Working the shaker machine, 1962

Later in my "career," we had a mechanical harvester. This machine was towed behind a D2 Caterpillar tractor (tracklayer, not wheeled.) It was connected hydraulically to the tractor for power. This machine had a boom about twelve feet long with a claw-like grip at the far end. A man walking at the rear of the machine held onto the boom as the tractor moved from tree to tree. From his position he could swing the boom right and left and hydraulically clamp onto a tree. Some shaker machines were butt-shaker types, grabbing the tree about three feet from the ground. Ours was a limb shaker; each limb was clamped and shaken individually about five to six feet from the ground. Using hydraulic hand controls, the worker would shake each tree for about 30 seconds, loosening all of the prunes. Harvest was usually a once-through affair, although occasionally was there a "second crop" or later pick.

A major improvement after the advent of the mechanical harvester was the use of a canvas drape. It ran horizontally alongside the boom at a lower

level. When the harvester came to rest at the next tree, two men would pull a bar and unwrap the canvas sheeting, draping it around the base of the tree. Once the tree was shaken and the prunes had fallen onto the canvas, the canvas would be hydraulically rewound, pulling its load of prunes with it to be deposited into a conveyor belt system. Then the prunes were moved via conveyor belt into large bins about the size of today's macro-bins. The use of drapes significantly decreased labor costs.

Prior to the use of bins, when on-your-knees-picking was the common practice, loads of empty prune boxes were dropped at regular intervals throughout the orchard so that they were readily available. When they were full, the boxes were placed in orderly stacks, usually two or three boxes wide and stacked four to five boxes high. Once the flatbed truck (doorless to make it easier to jump in and out of the truck in the orchard) had dropped its load of empty boxes, it would circle through the orchard once again picking up the loaded boxes. It usually took three people to do this: a driver, a worker on the ground hoisting the boxes up to the flatbed and a third worker on the bed stacking the boxes against the headboard of the truck.

Once the boxes were on the truck, the load was strapped down with hemp ropes using what I call a "prune-box" hitch, but what might more appropriately be called a trucker's hitch. I can still do that hitch today! It's a remarkably sturdy and useful knot. The truck was then driven to the dehydrator next to my grandfather's house. Sometimes we would ride back to the "home" ranch on the back of the truck with less than a foot of space to stand, grasping the ropes that tied down the boxes. Other times, we rode on the tailgate of the pickup. Off we would go, down the county road. What fun! What would OSHA have to say about that?

When I was a youth, my grandfather, Harold Phillips, and my father operated three properties. Two of them belonged to us and the third belonged to cousins who did not live locally. The "lower" ranch was one mile south of us; the "upper" ranch was one-half mile north of us. Our residences and the dehydrator were on the "home" ranch in the middle. We farmed a total of about 75 acres of prunes.

Whether the prunes were brought in by boxes or by bins, they were essentially handled the same way. The grader at our dehydrator was designed and

built by my father, a jack of all trades who created much of the machinery we used. The truck pulled up parallel to an elevated platform. The prunes were dumped by box (by hand) or bin (hydraulically) onto the grader. As the prunes bounced their way down an inclined tray, leaves were blown away and the prunes passed under a hot-water lye bath. This was done to soften the skin and hasten the drying process. The design and motion of the grader caused the prunes to spread equally across and be dropped onto wooden trays that measured about three by six feet. Each empty wooden tray was fed onto the grader by a worker in time to receive the lye-dipped prunes.



A prune grader at work. Quality control was handled by Don Schmidt and his father-in-law, Harold Phillips. c. 1965

Next was "quality control" – my father and grandfather stood on opposite sides of the tray watching for bad fruit and assuring that the prunes were arrayed in a single layer and free from debris. The next step was an ingenious design for stacking the trays onto cars. The "car" was really a flat metal carrier with the same dimensions as the trays and made of angle iron with swivel casters at each corner about five inches high. The goal was a metal "car" with 24 trays of prunes stacked on it. The last mechanism of the grader was a pit into which the car would sink one tray-depth at a time. As each tray moved forward it struck a lever which would lower the car and its trays about three inches, allowing space for the next tray to be placed on top. When 24 trays had been loaded, the car was raised from the pit and pushed away to await entry into the dehydrator.

In a typical day, we would process about 15 cars of fruit.

Our operation had three drying tunnels and they were the actual “dehydrators” even though we called the entire barn-like place, including the grader, the tunnels and the fruit storage, “the dehydrator.” (We still call it that today even though the tunnels are long gone and the barn has been replaced by a cavernous steel-frame building.)

Six cars could fit into each tunnel at one time. They would enter the dehydrator guided by steel rails two at a time, side by side. The French prunes would require 18 hours of drying time; the Imperials about 28. Six hours after the first two cars of French prunes started drying, another two cars of French would go in. Then six hours later another two cars; six hours after that the first two cars would come out and another two cars would go in. Imperials were treated the same, but with longer intervals.

The dehydrator required constant attention. The heat source was diesel fuel. Humidity was checked periodically with the use of a psychrometer, two thermometers - one dry and one kept moist with water on a sock. The two thermometers are called the dry-bulb and the wet-bulb. They were viewable through a small window from outside the tunnel.



Psychrometer

Relative humidity is computed from the ambient temperature as shown by the dry-bulb thermometer and the difference in temperatures as shown by the wet-bulb and dry-bulb thermometers. Relative humidity can also be determined by locating the intersection of the wet- and dry-bulb temperatures on a psychrometric chart.

My father, grandfather or brother would sleep on a cot in the dehydrator barn every night during harvest to check the heat and humidity and to push in

cars of fresh prunes and pull out cars of dried fruit.

As I grew older and taller, I was promoted from prune picker to “scraper.” This was handled on the buddy system. My sister Diane and I scraped dried prunes off the trays. It was hot, dirty, sticky and tiresome work, but it was better than picking prunes! When I first began, at age 11, we did it by hand using a length of rebar that had been fashioned into a scraping tool. Fabric was wrapped around the scraper handle as padding for the user’s hand. With one of us standing at each end of the tilted tray, we pushed and scraped off each prune. The prunes fell onto the concrete floor and were eventually pushed into a pile, shoveled into bins and trucked away.



A prune scraper in operation. Diane Schmidt [Carriger], left, Kay Schmidt [Robinson], right. (Note the doors of the dehydrator tunnels in the background.)

Prunes piled three to four feet high on the concrete floor needed to be turned every so often with scoop shovels to prevent moldy fruit. That was a hard job. Luckily, Diane and I didn’t have to do that!

A few years later, my father invented a mechanical scraper. The car with 24 trays of dried prunes was placed parallel to the scraper. Each tray was brought down onto the frame of the scraper and turned upside down over an auger. The electric auger spun and each of the prunes was flicked off as the tray was pushed across it. A blower moved the prunes from the catchment bin below into a concrete stall or directly into bins. The cleaned tray was then removed from the scraper, hoisted over the car loaded

with dried prunes and put onto a waiting empty car. Once we finished with 24 trays, the car loaded with the empty trays was moved back into position near the grader to start the process all over again. Our production rate had to match the cars going into and out of the dehydrator – about 15 cars a day.

Our ranch had been in prune production since the 1920s and had used the sun-drying method until about 1955. Many in the valley continued sun-drying well into the 1950s. Eventually most ranchers built their own dehydrators or hauled fresh fruit to a commercial dryer such as Sunsweet. Sunsweet was one of several commercial dryers in Sonoma County which processed prunes. (The old Sunsweet dryer is now Sun Industries storage facility.) Metal rails in the concrete are remnants of the tracks in the dehydrator tunnels that were used from the late 1950s to the late 1970s.



*Men tending to prunes drying on trays.
(Photo courtesy Redwood Empire Association)*

The sun-drying method was more economical because it used the sun's natural heat and drying power. However, it was a much more laborious and time-consuming process. It required each tray laden with dipped, fresh prunes to be set out in the sun. The length of time for drying was greater and the space needed for laying out the trays was greater. The trays also needed to be laid out (and retrieved) one by one. If rain was expected, all those trays laid out on the ground had to be picked up, stacked and covered.

My brother and sister remember one season when it rained one night. My brother, father, grandfather and the laborers had to stack all of the trays and cover them with heavy oiled tarpaulins. And laboriously lay them out again the next day.

Our help came in the form of family, friends,

braceros and Mexican-American families who returned year after year to our ranch. I remember Victorino Ascunción Campos, a bracero who alternated between his home in Mexico and his work on our ranch. Another family was the Arredondos from Corcoran. A large family, each year they arrived with one financial goal in mind such saving for a car for a son. Friends of my brother often helped, although it was usually just for one year, never to return again.



Don Schmidt, third from left; Victorino Ascunción Campos, third from right; Salvador on right and other braceros

Hindsight is glorious. It seems an idyllic childhood with lots of family and friends. The perks and memories were: being a close-knit family; huge leafy trees providing blessed cool relief from hot days; warm summer nights and trying to hit bats with dirt clods (I know, not politically or environmentally correct) and always missing; standing by the dehydrator vent door to keep warm on cold mornings; planning what to do with the proceeds of my labor in the harvest. My sister's memories include: waiting in José and Maria Gonzales' house for picking to start and watching Maria make homemade tortillas. The first purchase that I made at age 5 was a small blue and white record player along with a 45 rpm record, Elvis Presley's *Hound Dog*. Brian's first prune money was for a Tonka logging truck. In later years, my earnings were spent on school clothes. Did I like prunes? Heavens, no! But do I get nostalgic when I think of the prune blossoms or smell the aroma of drying prunes (rarely nowadays) or do I eat prunes now? You bet!

My Experience as a Prune Picker

by Melba Feldmeyer, February 29, 1927

submitted by Ann Howard from Harry Bosworth Collection, Geyserville, California

Melba was born April 17, 1909, in Cloverdale to Clemens Alexander Feldmeyer and Pearl Isabelle Suttan Feldmeyer. She was crowned Queen of the May at the May Day Festival in Geyserville on May 3, 1927. Melba graduated from Geyserville Union High School in 1928, attended Santa Rosa Jr. College, and graduated from UC Berkeley in 1932. She married Malcolm Goddard Coombs, and died on October 29, 2001, in Garberville, California.



This story was written as a school project with corrections made in blue pencil. Melba received a "-1" grade.

Prunes, prunes, prunes, soft prunes, hard prunes, hot prunes, mushy prunes, green prunes, and ripe prunes ---- oh, how I hate them!

The hot sun beat down on my tired aching back in those sultry September days. My poor sore

knees felt as if they had come in contact with every hard clod and sharp rock in the orchard. The hot breeze brought the sickening odor of drying prunes. My hat brim kept time with the throbbing of my heart. I tarried as long as possible on the shady side of the tree, crawling, rolling, and lying on my stomach in the dust and dirt. I stretched and reached to get every prune I could before I moved my bucket and dragged my weary carcass to the sunny side of the tree.

After sitting, sliding, crawling and getting every prune within reach, then, Oh! Dear, what an effort to get up and chase here and there after the scattered ones. I stooped over until my head throbbed and whirled ---- those horrid sticky prunes. The juice oozed out and gummed my fingers together. The prunes just seemed to settle down out of sight when they were poured into the boxes, and it seemed that the boxes never would fill. This was my first and last experience in picking prunes, and I hope it will be the only one.



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