Prune picking—
and other tales
of days gone by

Bureaucracy is forever bumping into history. It happened in Healdsburg recently when the city staff put forth its list of possible sites for affordable housing within the city limits. "Site J," between the freeway and Healdsburg Avenue at the south end of town, is the old Sunsweet prune dryer and processing plant.

Talk about your end of an era.

Sunsweet, a grower-owned cooperative, closed down the last of its Healdsburg operations last year. But there was a time when those buildings—one of them covering at least an acre—was the hub of autumn activity in the town that was proud to call itself "The Buckle of the Prune Belt."

While there were several hundred acres of prune orchards on Santa Rosa's east side and near the Southern Pacific depot on North Street in the early part of the century, the "Prune Belt" was a ring of orchards that circled clockwise from Windsor along Eastside and Westside roads to Dry Creek and Alexander Valley. Sunsweet was only one of many dehydrators in the county. The Healdsburg plant, according to operations manager Gary Winfrey, was the largest in the state, employing some 100 workers at the peak of the harvest season.

MIGRANT workers, housewives and school kids worked to harvest the crop from some 18,200 acres of prune trees (1963 figures). Through 1975, Healdsburg schools delayed their September opening, depending on summer heat and other weather conditions, until the prunes were "in."

Virtually every teen-ager born before 1955 in the northern end of the county has picked prunes. "Picked" is actually the wrong verb. "Gathered" would be better. And "picked up" would be better yet, because prunes are not harvested from the trees, but from the ground. Now they are gathered by mechanical harvesters, but in the '50s and before, it was all done by hand.

Prune picking was back breaking. There were three possible positions from which to work—bending, squatting and kneeling. It was hard to choose. But prune money was money for school clothes—or gas for the '41 Chevy. And it was the way many young people learned that education was worthwhile.

SONOMA COUNTY'S French prunes were first planted by Warren Dutton on his Santa Rosa ranch in 1881, from seedlings supplied by nurseryman Luther Burbank. Soon the distinctive stacks of drying racks were familiar sights in the fields of the Russian River Valley. The prunes were dipped in a water-lye mixture to "check" the skin and prevent mold before they were spread on the racks. Later they were dried in dehydrators built by enterprising ranchers who offered the service to their neighbors, or in co-ops. Sunsweet built hot-air dehydrator tunnels at their Healdsburg plant in the 1960s—72 tunnels with a drying capacity for 12,000 tons of fruit.

Elmer Berka, retired from his own prune ranch on Hoen Avenue in Santa Rosa, became the spokesman for the industry in the 1950s, writing annual reports on the economics of prune ranching, which were published regularly in The Press Democrat. While prunes never achieved the mythic status that hops were granted by the citizens, they were nonetheless recognized as a very important part of the agriculture which was the wealth of Sonoma County.

Robert Young, who had some 300 acres of prunes on three Alexander Valley ranches, recalls that the Santa Clara Valley was considered the best prune-growing region in the state. "And when that area developed (mid-1950s), we moved into the top spot. There was a time when buyers paid a half-cent or a full cent for our fruit."

Young, who is now at the top of Sonoma County's list of premium grape growers, began the change to vineyards early. "I planted my first grapes in 1963, which was actually the peak year for prunes. Prunes were going full blast, but then I saw the light."

The "light" showed him a market declining through competition with an increasing amount of imported fresh fruit. It showed him the acres of young orchards with closer plantings in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys where the weather was hotter and water for deep irrigation was more plentiful.

In going to grapes, Young was marking another position in an agricultural cycle for the Russian River Valley—grapes to prunes to grapes. Much of the land that was in prune orchards from the 1920s to the 1970s had been vineyards at the turn of the century. Two events—World War I, which created a market for dried fruit in battle-torn Europe, and Prohibition, which forced the grape growers to look for other crops—contributed to the prune boom.

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IN WINDSOR, the DuVanders were part of that boom. First George DuVander and later his son, Don, grew prunes on their Jansen Lane ranch, most of which is now Lakewood Hills subdivision and Raley's shopping center. Don and his wife, Irene, had about 60 acres of orchard until 1972.

"Most years we made a good living on prunes," Irene says. "We raised six kids and they all picked prunes. Don was good about teaching the kids to work. They could drive the tractor when they were still little guys."

Irene met her husband picking prunes on the DuVander ranch. She can still recite the growers' calendar year. There was the harvest season, of course, when the prunes were dipped and dried at the dehydrator on the ranch then hauled to Healdsburg to Sunsweet for processing. There was pruning in winter and spraying with a "winter spray, a clean-up spray" of bluestone and lime, then "hoping it doesn't rain when they blossom. And frost. We worried so about frost when the prunes were forming. In 1952 there was a tremendous late frost, in April. The prunes were as big as my little finger. We lost the whole crop. Don had to go out and get a job. Farmers are the biggest gamblers in the world, they say. And I believe it."

GEORGE GREEOTT, 84, farmed prunes for more than 50 years, on several orchards on Chalk Hill Road. He hauled plenty of prunes to Sunsweet, he remembers. "We used to deliver them in burlap bags, 100 to 120 pounds a sack."

"I was 20 years old when I started operating a dehydrator on my Dad's place," George says, "and I ran it until the day we quit, 30 years later." When the harvest outgrew the capacity of the existing dryers, Greeott recalls, "the harvest season was extended, sometimes picking the orchards three times over. In a good crop, the harvest could run to five weeks. One year, in the early '40s, I kept the dryer going 42 days, the longest drying season I've heard of."

Greeott has only three small prune trees now—"just to remember what they look like." Mario Blasi, an organizer of the Sonoma County co-op, south of Healdsburg, has only 10 acres now. Most of the prune orchards left are between Windsor and Healdsburg. Sunsweet's Winfrey says the Yuba City-based company has only 14 grower members in Sonoma County now. And they must haul their fruit to Winters or Colusa for processing.

The crop report for 1993 shows the acreage has plummeted from the near-30,000 of the early '80s. Despite a healthy market for California prunes, there were 1,051 acres of prunes harvested in Sonoma County last year.

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