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Betty Van Dyke: The Van Dyke Ranch

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/005138wp>

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Publication Date

2010-05-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/005138wp#supplemental>

Betty Van Dyke



Photo by Tana Butler

Van Dyke Ranch

Born in 1932 to Croatian American farmers in the Santa Clara Valley town of Cupertino, Betty Van Dyke saw her fertile home ground transformed, in a few decades, from seemingly endless orchards to unrelenting urban sprawl. As the energetic matriarch of a popular family-run fruit-growing business, she has since participated in the region's organic agricultural renaissance, overseeing one of the first California operations to grow and dry fruit organically (becoming certified in 1986), and playing an active role in the early

days of California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). And as a member of one of the region's noted surfing families, she built this thriving business while sustaining her love affair with Pacific ocean waves.

Van Dyke Ranch sits at the base of the Gavilan Mountains in Gilroy, Santa Clara County, on a southern exposure perfectly suited for growing sweet, flavorful Blenheim apricots and Bing cherries. The ranch produces fresh fruit in season and dried apricots, cherries, nectarines, peaches, pears, and persimmons throughout the year. (A rarer delicacy available to a few farmers'-market patrons are home-grown capers, the pickled flower buds of plants propagated from a thirty-year-old bush planted by Betty's mother.) Betty Van Dyke and her three sons took over from her father in the mid-1970s. While son Peter and various grandchildren now carry most of the day-to-day responsibility for the ranch, Betty still holds down two weekly farmers'-market booths, and commutes frequently to Gilroy from her Santa Cruz home to help with ranch work during busy seasons.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed Betty Van Dyke at Rabkin's Soquel home on April 16, 2008. A lively storyteller with an easy smile, Van Dyke shared memories of picking apricots on her grandfather's farm as a small child, working and playing alongside migrant dust-bowl refugees from Oklahoma and Arkansas, discovering surfing as a college student in the 1950s, and running an evolving Van Dyke Ranch.

In 1995 the Van Dyke family received a prestigious "Sustie" award from the Ecological Farming Association.

Additional Resources:

Van Dyke Ranch: <http://www.vandykeorganics.com/>

California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF): <http://www.ccof.org/>

Thomas Hickenbottom, Santa Cruz Surfing Club Preservation Society, Santa Cruz Surfing Museum, *Surfing in Santa Cruz* (Arcadia Publishing, 2009). Includes photos of Betty Van Dyke and from the Van Dyke family archives on surfing history.

Donna F. Mekis and Kathryn Mekis Miller, *Blossoms Into Gold: The Croatians in the Pajaro Valley* (Capitola Book Company, 2009).

Beginnings

Rabkin: This is Sarah Rabkin, and it is April 16, 2008. I'm in Soquel, [California], interviewing Betty Van Dyke of Van Dyke Ranch. Betty, let's start with your family's history. Can you tell me where they're from, and when and how they came to this area?

Van Dyke: They came from an island in the Adriatic Ocean, off the Dalmatian coast of Yugoslavia, the former Yugoslavia, from what is now Croatia. My grandfather came in the late 1800s, when he was eighteen, and went to Biloxi, Mississippi, where he was a fisherman. He also fished in Oregon on the Columbia River and dug for gold in Alaska. Then he went down to San Francisco. He lived there, and he was a cooper when he was in San Francisco, which is a wine barrel maker. He went back to the island where he was from, which is the island of Vis in the Adriatic in the town of Komiza, two, maybe three times. I think the third time he brought his family over. They came through Ellis Island. They're in the registry. That was right after the war, probably around 1919, 1920. He and several of the people from the town settled in

Cupertino. My grandfather's first cousin was a Swilich—her last name was Swilich; my grandfather was a Mardesich, and there were Marianis, and they were all from the same town. Mariani, of course, is an Italian name. Our little island faced Italy. We were one of the furthest islands out, so our dialect, on our island, has got a lot of Italian. In fact, my grandmother is a Fiamongo, which is an Italian name.

But anyway, most of them went to San Pedro as fishermen. A lot of them went to the Washington area—Alaska, Anacortes [Washington], up there as fishermen; Portland, Oregon, as fishermen. The farmers kind of all settled in Cupertino, from that particular island. [My grandfather] bought his first land there, his first five acres, in about 1922, and started farming with five acres of apricots. They were coopers. His first cousin, Swilich (Grandma Swilich I always called her), had settled there, and Paul Mariani, Sr., who is my godfather, had fallen in love with her. He went to Cupertino because of her. He used to ride his bike down to see her from San Francisco. My grandfather went, and then the whole island followed, basically. (laughs) So they all settled in Cupertino, relatives—cousins, aunts, uncles, all over the place. And from that five acres of land, they proceeded to buy land. Cupertino [was] populated mostly by Norwegians, and Swedish sailors that had come there, and some Spanish people that had been there, and Spanish people that were living in Sunnyvale (that came a little later), but didn't buy farms, just went to work in the canneries and the fields.

The way they progressed in their farming business was the older people that had been there before (they were always called *foresti* because they were foreigners—they were Swedish, Norwegian, etc.) would buy whatever piece of land opened

up next door to them. So if there was a two-and-a-half-acre piece they'd buy it, because it was next door, or maybe a couple pieces down, a five-acre piece, because people were older than they were, and they were the young ones. That's how we got maybe forty-five or fifty acres of land in that area. But not all in one piece. It was all spread out everywhere. That's how he got started. And from then, my grandfather worked on the farm. He had a brother that died young from tuberculosis. My aunt, and then my uncle Joe came along later, and then they sort of progressed from there.

Rabkin: And then what happened?

Development in the Santa Clara Valley

Van Dyke: [By 1968] we were surrounded by subdivisions. The biggest farmer sold out first. He owned one hundred acres, which was a big piece of land, on Stevens Creek Road. He was a banker; he wasn't a farmer. He was, I think, third-generation, because that family came in the 1840s into that area. He was the first person to sell a big piece of land. And that went to the Kaiser people, who built the Kaiser homes, the first subdivision there on Stevens Creek Boulevard. He was the first to sell. Then a lot of little farmers sold, because they couldn't make their— But usually the farmers bought the little farms. But then if somebody had the well, and they sold the property and the water was gone, you couldn't get the water, so you sold too.

And then there were problems, because you had subdivisions going in everywhere, and the property tax was going up, so that they were charging us as much money for the land that we owned, as the subdivision was going on. So in

other words, if the subdivision was split into mega-houses, all those houses were paying like three or four hundred dollars, and then they were charging us the same amount for that property. It got to the point to where the farmers were just going broke. And they said, "Wait a minute," and they had a meeting, and that's when the greenbelt situation came in. We had meetings with the county people, the city people, and all the different people that got the property tax at the time. They had to do something for the farmers or they were all going to go, which they all did anyway, you know, eventually.

Rabkin: Around when were those meetings?

Van Dyke: Those were in the '50s, because the development started right after the war [World War II]. The end of the war was '46, so '47 you started seeing— Because people had come, soldiers, sailors, people who shipped out of California from back East—no snow, no rain, good weather [laughs]. Everybody came to California. So the first subdivisions started going in, in 1946 or so. Not in our area, but say in San Mateo, Menlo Park, those areas close to San Francisco. Every Sunday one of the young men in the county that had a driver's license would take all the mothers and kids and drive around and look at the subdivisions, and everyone would go look at the new houses, because their houses were old, smelled of mildew, no central heating, all fireplaces, woodstoves. So it was a real treat for all the women to go out and look at all these houses. Eventually it took over all the areas. And that was it. In 1968 we sold the last piece, because we were surrounded by subdivisions.

Rabkin: And how did your family acquire the ranch that it now owns?

Van Dyke: In Gilroy?

Rabkin: Yes.

Van Dyke: Oh, we sold what little properties we had here and there. It was a piece of property in Gilroy that my father looked at up against the foothills. He wanted a piece of property all one piece. When you own a small piece here and a small piece there, you're always putting your tractor on a trailer and driving it there, and it's a lot of work. My father always wanted one piece of land where he could be in one place without hauling the tractor. So it was 107 acres in Gilroy that was just bare land. It had been prune orchards in the early 1900s and the late 1800s, and apricots, very good apricots. And then after that, I can't remember if Driscoll bought the piece of land first, but it became strawberries. They did strawberries during the war, and after the war. Then the Driscoll family moved most of their stuff over to Watsonville. I can't remember the Driscoll's name that was in Gilroy. He had his office in Gilroy, and he was the one we bought the land from at that time. My father planted forty acres of apricots and twenty acres of cherries, Bing cherries, and left the rest of the land bare. And then in the '80s, I planted what was left over, into another thirty-acres of apricots, and a few cherries interplanted.

Rabkin: So the ranch is still that 107 acres.

Van Dyke: Yes, that 107 acres. My father had also bought a piece of land that was fifty-four acres, about six miles away. But as he got older, it was too much trouble for him to work it. So he sold it to my cousin, George, and four other partners: Pavalina, Souza, Mardesich, and another one. My cousin finally bought

the other partners out, and then he ran into some problems because he'd over-extended himself, so I bought the land back.

Rabkin: Let's back up to your early childhood.

Growing up on the Farm in the 1930s and 1940s

Van Dyke: Oh, my early childhood. I was born in 1932 [laughs], and grew up on the farm. My first job was picking brush with my grandfather. The second job was picking apricots. You drove through with trucks, no forklifts then. Apricot trees have a tendency to shed their fruit if you don't pick them when they're really ripe. It's a very difficult crop. It takes a lot of work to do apricots. My grandfather had me picking with him off the ground. We would pick up the apricots that fell in front on the track, where the truck was going to drive, so that they wouldn't get squashed. We sold our fruit to the canneries in those days, because all the apricots got canned. But we dried all the number-two fruit and the ground fruit, which was your best fruit because it was really ripe. So we would take that, pick it off the ground and take that in, put it on trays and wash it with the hose, shake it, make sure it was clean, and then cut it. And then we would sell the dried fruit to the Rosenberg packing house.

Rabkin: How old were you when you started working with your grandfather?

Van Dyke: Oh, about six? [laughs] Picking brush, things like that, and cutting apricots, and picking off the ground. Most of the years, as we grew up, I worked more and more in the orchards. It was during the summer that we would work because you had to sort the fruit; you had to sort the cherries in the orchard

before you sent them to the cannery or before they were packed. So you needed someone in the orchard to sort them as the buckets were dumped in the boxes. And then with the apricots, you had to sort them before they went to the cannery, because the cannery wanted perfect fruit. So you took out culls. Otherwise they would dock you. It was so much fun. It was funny, because if there was too much fruit that year, they wouldn't want to pay the price. They'd find more reasons to dock you. "Oh, you can't can this because it has a speck," or "you can't can that because it's got a scratch." Then they would dock you so many pounds. If you really got mad, you would take your load back and cut it all. [laughs] That's the way it was in those days.

I spent a lot of time with my grandfather in the orchard because he and I were sorters. We had tables that you made that you would carry, kind of at a slant, a sorting table. You would carry it from one group of trees to another. Your men would pick three rows on each side of the drive that you drove your truck through. First you worked by the hour because you're picking selected fruit. And then when there's more fruit, you work by the box or the bucket, basically the bucket in those days. You would get punched for every bucket. That gives you more incentive because you can make more money. When you're by the hour, you're at a set wage. You sort the fruit, and you take out the culls, which you're going to cut, and you put them in boxes. Then we loaded them into trucks—no forklifts, all by hand. Then it would go to the cannery, and the culls would go to the dry yard to be cut.

That was basically from 1938 until we sold the place. By the time I was twelve, I was doing the books for my father, and the payroll. But I was still working in the

orchard with my grandfather. That was my responsibility, too. We worked every day, seven days a week, during the harvest. There was no ten-minute breaks in the orchard, or no timeouts. I mean, it's not like there were slave drivers. Everybody worked like that. That was the way everybody in America worked, so it was no big deal.

Rabkin: This was a family farm.

Van Dyke: It was a family farm.

Rabkin: What other people in your family were working on the farm?

Van Dyke: On that particular farm it was just my grandfather. My aunt married my Uncle Lou, and he had his own place. She had one son, George. (Depression days, one child each family.) They had their own lands. Then there was just my grandfather, my father, and my uncle Joe, myself. My mother ran the cutting shed, and I was in the orchards. She never went in the orchards. My grandmother sometimes would come. If we were picking fruit close to her house, then she'd come in the orchard, and help us, but it was more for socializing.

The wonderful Okies and the Arkies during the '30s would come every summer to work for us. The Dust Bowl had happened there and it was very hard for them to make a living, so they would come every summer to California. It was a treat. I just couldn't wait for everybody to come. They'd drive in. They'd come up the driveway with the mattresses on the car, the goats in the back if they had a trailer, or a lot of kids. My father would designate a couple of rows in the orchard for them to set up camp. I'd have a village out there. I'd have a little

town of people—kids my age, older people, and people that came back year after year after year, until after the war. Well, actually during the war, because the young people started to go to work in the shipping yards in Oakland, but they would still come in the summer. The old folks would come in the summer and work, and then the kids would come on weekends, or the people that were working in the naval shipyards would come on weekends, because they liked being with the family and picking. They were all farmers. It was really a lot of fun. I don't have very many pictures of that time because I was so young. My mother took a few pictures, but not enough. I have pictures in my mind.

Rabkin: So they were sleeping in tents, or under the stars in the orchard?

Van Dyke: Tents. And then sometimes— We were careful with our apricot drying trays because they are so hard to repair. But then when one of our Mexican families came (this was after the '50s), they would wire together some of our broken trays and make little houses out of them. But only one or two. Some of the people had trailers that they would bring. But most of it was tents. They would fold everything up and bring in tents. And like I say, mattresses on the roof. It was fun. At night we'd have music, and people would sing. We had Russians under the tree, [laughs] singing Russian songs. It was just a lot of fun. Some of our relatives from San Pedro would come with their fishing boats. They'd come to Monterey. At 12:00 at night they'd take a taxi to go from Monterey to our house, or any relatives' house. When they came, whatever house they went to and stayed at, everyone would go there for dinner. They'd bring all kinds of fish and we'd barbeque. We'd put out apricot trays, and we'd have thirty or forty people there that were all relatives. They'd barbeque on the

ground the fish, and cook whatever lobster or crab they had that was live in the house, and then put all the food on the apricot cutting trays, and sit on boxes, cannery boxes, around the fire. They'd tell stories and sing into the night, sitting out-of-doors. It was an amazing way to grow up.

Rabkin: Sounds like everybody worked hard and played hard.

Van Dyke: Yes. They were all like that. They were hard workers. They were all very successful.

Rabkin: So where did you go to school?

Van Dyke: I went to Cupertino Grammar School. There was no kindergarten in those days. It was first grade and on. And then Fremont High School, and then San Jose State. I graduated from San Jose State in the '50s.

Rabkin: What did you study in college?

Van Dyke: Actually I started out with music and business, because I was a pianist. Then I went into occupational therapy, because I liked science and math. But I did a lot of anthropology, because I liked anthropology. Then I started surfing. And I went and changed my major to a general major because I didn't know what I wanted to do after that. I spent the last couple years in college living over here in Santa Cruz and surfing. But I still worked on the farm, in the summer.

Rabkin: How did you get into surfing?

Van Dyke: I had a friend named Al Wiemers that was at San Jose State. I had seen a picture in *Sunset Magazine* when I was young—I loved the water and the ocean—of somebody standing on a surfboard. I always wanted to do that, but I didn't know where, how, and didn't know they did it here. My friend, Al, had known the Van Dyke brothers, and a couple of other people over here in Santa Cruz that surfed, and brought me over one day, and I went tandem, and caught a wave. And that was it. [laughs]

Rabkin: You were hooked.

Van Dyke: [laughs] Oh yes, right away. Instant. That was '53. But we still worked on the farm every summer, except the summer when I graduated college. Then I went to La Jolla for the summer to surf. I told my father, "I'm going to do this, this time for myself." And he said, "Okay."

Rabkin: So it sounds like you weren't sure at first that you would go into farming.

Van Dyke: I never thought that was what I was going to do, because my father was doing it. I didn't think about becoming a farmer until he got older. He really needed someone to take over, and I knew what to do. Before he died, he looked out the window and he saw the dryer yard and he said, "Well, I see you know what to do now. It's all up to you." So that was it.

Rabkin: Were you the only child?

Van Dyke: Yes. The Depression. My cousin was the only child too, in my aunt's family.

Rabkin: How did you learn to farm?

Van Dyke: I was there every day. I went out in the orchard with my dad. I was on the trucks all the time, and he took me everywhere. Besides [that], I worked for other growers who were relatives, because I was a good worker and a fast worker. I worked for a pear packer. In fact, I used to eat so many pears, the guys in the packing house used to say, “Betty Ann, we’re going to weigh you when you go in and weigh you when you go out and charge you by the pound.” [laughs] I worked for the Bogdaniches. I worked for the Marianis. I worked for the Mardesiches. I worked for everybody. I picked prunes. I packed cherries. I cut apricots. Did strawberries for Mary Ellen, jam. What else? Cannery—did work in the cannery, Libby’s Cannery, three or four years with my girlfriends. Good money. Better than working on the farm, because you had labor unions. If you worked on the farm for a dollar, you got a dollar nine at the cannery, and that was good money at the time. I don’t know what it’s like now. But that was good. So we all worked. Every one of us that was a farmer’s daughter worked in the canneries too. And we also worked for other people doing different things.

Rabkin: Were there particular people in your family, or friends, that were special mentors for you?

Van Dyke: You just learned from everyone. I can’t say that anyone took me by the hand. I worked, like I say, with my grandfather a lot. My grandfather was the oldest man from our island in town, so he was called *Borba*, which is uncle.¹ Everybody came to him for advice. Everybody came to him to borrow money. They didn’t go to banks. They just shook hands and loaned each other a couple

of thousand dollars here and there. He always helped people that came from Europe—and my father, too. They would give them a helping hand, take them in if they came from Europe. Give them free room and board, give them a hand, and loan them money to buy property, or whatever they wanted to do. They were very generous that way, very kind. And they weren't really into it for making lots of money. You know, it was just to make a living. They came from a small island, and usually in Europe at that time under the old Austro-Hungarian rule, the oldest son got whatever the family had, and everybody else was on their own. When they came to this country, they had land, and could buy more land, and there was more chances for the family. So many of them became extremely successful. The fishermen—the Starkist Tuna, the Chicken of the Sea, and all the fishermen in Alaska became senators, congressmen in Washington. A lot of Mardesiches got into politics. They did well. But as far as someone just taking you along and teaching you—you learn from everyone. Everyone you worked for taught you something. Because we didn't grow pears, and we didn't grow prunes; I hated picking prunes. [laughs]

Rabkin: Why is that?

Van Dyke: You're on your hands and knees all day long in the dirt. You want to pick in the shade because it's always hot, because it was always end of August and September. In fact, one year when the prunes season was really, really late in the Santa Clara Valley, they had the schools start in the first week in October because there was no labor to pick the prunes. It was during the war, so they started school two weeks late so that all the kids could go out and pick prunes. Would they do that today? No. They don't even want kids to cut apricots. You

have to be sixteen to hold a knife. Some silly laws, because one of the best things you learn when you're growing up is to learn to work, and the camaraderie you get when you're working with someone in fruit crops, when you end up throwing food at each other, and playing games, and learning how to work together. You're under pressure, because every crop you're harvesting has got a point where it's going to start dying or getting overripe, and you've got to all work together to do it. It teaches you team sports. You learn to work with people and deal with different personalities, and slow folks, and good people. It's a good learning experience. Was there a mentor? There wasn't, really. It was just the whole experience of everybody working together.

All my girlfriends worked in farms. You wouldn't see each other for the summer, because you lived three or four miles away. So we used to write letters. I had tons of letters from grammar school through high school because we would work on each other's farms. But you didn't go visiting; it was time to work.

Rabkin: Do you still have those letters?

Van Dyke: Unfortunately no. I threw the last batch away when we moved a lot of stuff over to Gilroy. We had an old wooden garage, which I had to tear down because it was falling apart. When I did that, I threw away all my diaries, which is too bad. I just kept one. I look at it now and I think, why did I throw that away? That's the history of the Santa Clara Valley. But they're gone.

San Jose State was a nice place to go to school. It was so cheap. I think it was five dollars to go for a quarter. It was on the quarter system. The junior college and the college were the same school. You just went. There was the one campus. The

separate junior college was built by my cousin years later, after we graduated. But at that time you went to junior college for two years—same classes as people in college—and then you went to the college. It was cheap, really cheap. It was fun too. It was a small school: five thousand, six thousand students. You knew almost everybody.

Taking over Van Dyke Ranch

Rabkin: Tell me how you came to buy the ranch from your father.

Van Dyke: At the end he [had] gotten sick. It was in July, and he was ill and he had to go to the hospital. We hadn't done anything about a will. He had written out a will on a penny postcard at one time, and he showed me where it was in his desk. He was leaving everything to me and my sons. I told him that it was time. He was in his seventies. My lawyer had just said, "We better do something, because you're going to be in all kinds of messes with the government. It's going to go to your mom, and then there's going to be this, that and the other thing in taxes." So we had to make a will. But we actually bought the land before. We inherited what he gave us, and then I paid my mother off what we owed her for the half. That kept her with a steady income for the rest of her life. And that's how we bought it, and that's why we did it. I guess it was good to do it that way.

Rabkin: Had you been working on the farm leading up to the time when you bought it?

Van Dyke: Yes, I worked always on the harvest. And before, I always lived on the farm. After I had the three boys and we were living in Santa Cruz, we still

came for the harvest, and I still came all the time, almost every day, because my parents were there, and would help with whatever needed to be done. Then I started doing all the bookkeeping because my father wasn't doing it anymore. You had to keep up with that everyday. So it wasn't like I was new to the farm or anything like that. I got myself twelve dozen gopher traps and started trapping gophers right away. [laughs] He hadn't been able to do it for quite a while, so we had quite a gopher problem. But I went all the time, yes. It was no big transition in my life. It was just something I'd done all my life. It's ingrained. It's not: How did you learn? It's just there. You don't even think about it.

Rabkin: Is it unusual to be in the position of being a woman farmer who owns and runs her own farm?

Van Dyke: No, because in the Croatian culture, men and women, you're equals. If you worked for my father and you were a child under fourteen and you couldn't do what an adult could do (which we all could), he gave you children's wages. But basically he paid everyone the same wage. If a man was getting a dollar an hour, and a woman was working next to him, she got the dollar an hour. There was no prejudice or discrepancy. It was just a matter of the work. It was like that with everything we did on the farm, with his ranch, and most of the other farmers too.

There were a couple of farmers I didn't like working for because they were really cheap. They would treat me okay because they knew my father, but they wouldn't do as well with their other workers, and I didn't like working for them.

There were two of them. Those were the two guys who always got into arguments. Went to court [laughs] with each other. I figured, good company.

Organic Farming Practices

And then the other thing, as far as getting into the organic movement, my father grew up in Croatia and he was in charge of feeding the family while my grandfather was gone. He was a gardener and he learned how to grow everything organically, because of course there were no pesticides there. Whatever pesticides they had, they were natural. He was always getting the prize for the best garden. He was proud of that. He had a donkey that he was proud of, too. He said his best friend was his donkey. So when he came to America he used as few chemicals— He wasn't into chemicals. Farmers were using a pesticide that you would spray on the apricot trees. It would stunt the growth of the tree, but make the fruit get big. They discontinued its use after a few years because it was carcinogenic. I can't remember what it was called. He used to go out and warn the farmers next to him, "Don't get that on my land." And he always said to me, "Don't spray anything in the orchard that you can't go in afterwards and pick the fruit off the tree and eat it." With the cherries, basically all he ever did was an oil base. He never sprayed with any chemicals. So he was basically organic.

That's how I got involved in the organic movement because, what's his name, the man that was at the university?

Rabkin: Alan Chadwick.

Van Dyke: Yes. Chadwick was having his first classes there at that time. This was in the early seventies. (When did I start harvesting that crop? I think I started picking that cherry orchard in '75, something like that.) Anyway, word got around that we didn't spray our cherries, and all of a sudden these kids were showing up, going, "Can we pick after the crop is over? We heard you don't spray." I said, yes. My father loved it. I remember Mike T. Walker came out with one group of people. They were on some Indian trip, American Indian. When they got through picking in the orchard, they came out and they were in front of my father's window where he always used to like to sit and drink a glass of wine. They put their hands in a circle [laughs], like this, and were chanting something. My father just loved it. We had a lot of kids coming, you know, long-haired. And that's how we got into the organic movement, in a way. I mean, we didn't get into it. All of a sudden, stores just started asking us. Community Foods wanted to buy our cherries. Heidi Skolnick one day (she worked for Community Foods a long time ago), said to me, "Well, why don't you just go organic?"² I said, "I don't know how to put the whole orchard in organic." She said, "Well, start with a few rows." So I did. I started with ten rows of apricots that we sprayed only with the same sprays that my father used when he was spraying, which was blue stone and lime, which is a copper-based spray. We did those ten rows, and we had twenty-five feet on each side that you could spray with Rovral, I think, a fungicide that we used at the time. That's how we started. And Ken [Kimes] and Sandra [Ward], who you have on your list, were my first inspectors.³ We've been friends ever since.

They list me as being certified organic from 1986, but we were certified the third year that the CCOF was in. A few years after that I took the whole place out of production because we had been hit with a heavy rain. My son had left the fava bean crop up too high. I went skiing and I told him to plow it under. He didn't plow it, and the fruit brown-rotted because of the moisture. So I had to take it out of organic that year. But in those days you would get certified within a year if you hadn't used any chemicals. In cases like [this], for those of us that [are] all of a sudden hit with a really bad year where it really rains a lot (like last year), and it destroys your crop, I wish they [the organic certification agencies] would give us a leeway, on a super-bad year like that, to just spray a fungicide. Fungicides don't hurt anything. They just go dormant on the tree. They never touch the fruit. They do it before the blossom is on the tree. It doesn't affect the ground, the worms, or anything like that. It dissipates. And that's the only thing we have problems with, is that. That one thing. Three years ago I had put another section into going organic. It's been treated organically except for this fungicide. I waited the whole three years, and then last year I went out to the orchard and I could see the rot starting to happen. I told Peter, "Okay, go spray with the fungicide. It's a whole twenty acres. I can't let it go to waste." And I thought God, another three years to go through this [certification] again. It's just pretty hard to do. Especially when it rains like that, at the wrong time.

The Challenges of Growing Apricots

Rabkin: You mentioned that growing apricots is tricky.

Van Dyke: Oh, it's the queen of the crops, out of all of them. There're some problems with peaches, like brown rot. But apricots, Blenheim apricots— Other kinds of apricots will hang on the tree for three weeks. But a Blenheim apricot, when it's ready to go, you get a little breeze— There was times when I'd be sleeping in the trailer at the farm, and the wind would start blowing in the morning, and I could hear: plop, plop, plop. You got to get up early in the morning before the pickers get out there, get the fruit that's fallen. Would there not have been any wind, it would have still been on the trees the next day. The pickers would have gotten it. But you've got to go out and get it off the ground, because the pickers will come and they can't pick. They'll throw a ladder out; they'll step on it.

Rabkin: Why do you grow Blenheims?

Van Dyke: Primarily because that's what my parents started with. That's what my parents always had, and so that's what we grew. And it is the best apricot. At one time, all the Santa Clara Valley, everybody grew the Blenheim apricot, because it was the best dried fruit. And it still is the best dried fruit. We never shipped it at that time, because it was very fragile. When I took the farm over from my dad and I started doing organic, I did start shipping them. I have shipped them all over the United States. The receiving end has to be patient, and understanding. You have to pick them with a certain firmness and a certain greenness. Once they have color they will ripen. It's not like they're not going to have flavor. They will have flavor. But you can't ship them when they're full color, because they'll ripen in a day or two, and they're too soft. We had pretty good luck with Raley's, and Nob Hill, and Whole Foods, and Texas Health. All

the places back East: Roots and Fruits, Rainbow—all over. I haven't been doing this for a few years. I've turned it over to my sons, so I've forgotten all the people that we sell to. But most of them now are all part of Whole Foods anyway, which has gotten huge.

Rabkin: And this is fresh or dried?

Van Dyke: Fresh. And dried, too. I do organic, unsulfured dried. I haven't been selling the sulfured fruit, but I'm going to start doing that myself too. What's destroyed the Blenheim apricot business is the Turkish imports. Your Blenheim apricot was your best dried fruit, and we used to dry (this includes all the Blenheim apricots) fifty to ninety tons. But now it's down to a handful of us that dry maybe less than a hundred tons. Before it was hundreds of tons. But the Turkish apricots are so cheap. They come in at fifty cents a pound. In fact, the packers are not giving us the money that we should be getting for the dried fruit, and that's what's hurting our business a lot. I'm trying to sell more fresh, which is good, because people, once they get them, that's what they want. Most of the other fruit that's out there that's an apricot that's fresh is not good. They're bred for shipping. And they don't make good dried fruit either. But the Blenheim—it's the queen of the apricots. It's really a good one. But it is delicate.

A Season of Growing Apricots

Rabkin: Can you take me through a season of the various stages of growing, harvesting—

Van Dyke: Okay, we could start out with January. In January, you're pruning. You have to cut out the old growth, because your fruit comes on the second year of growth. So every year you want to prune back. You will have fruit if you leave a sucker, and the fruit will be all the way up the tree. This is kind of what they do in Turkey, or even in where the Hunzas are. When I see pictures of their places, their trees are like this— They don't prune them. They must prune them at some time, because you have got to get rid of the old wood so you have new wood coming. And their blossoms go like that all the way down the limb—

Rabkin: A big long spray of branch.

Van Dyke: Yes, like anything that is unpruned. But your fruit is small. It stays small. And it doesn't really get the good flavor unless you don't water it. Then it will get the more intense flavor, just like grapes. My father always used to say, "Let your trees suffer a little bit, because you'll have better flavor." Also, if you let them suffer a little bit, if you're shipping it, or if you're going to cut it, it's not going to brown-rot as easily. Because there's not that much moisture in it. There's more intense flavor.

Rabkin: This is the dry-farming idea.

Van Dyke: Yes. Los Altos Hills always had dry farms, because they were on the hills and there was no way to irrigate on a hill. People had their little farms in Los Altos, and their fruit was always smaller, but very intense flavor, and very, very good fruit. There're still a few people— The Packard family has a place there that's on a hill. And I met a friend of mine two days ago at New Leaf [Market] who was working for a farmer in Hollister, but now he's planting small

farms for people in the Santa Clara Valley. He just got through planting forty Blenheim trees on the property that used to belong to friends of my father's and my girlfriend, Lorraine. Their name was Yelish. They were Slavonian people. They had a backyard, and they had a garden and they did a fruit stand. And here, I run into Terrance at New Leaf. Sixty years these people lived there that I knew, and he's planting forty apricots in their backyard where they were growing apricots before. [laughs] He said that's what his job is now. He's going to people that want to try to recreate little places of the Santa Clara Valley.

Rabkin: Yes. So January, you're pruning.

Van Dyke: January's pruning, and February you finish up your pruning. Usually in February, as soon as it starts getting a little bit warmer, the bud on the trees starts moving. The bud is always coming out where the leaves used to be the year before. Then when you get to the red bud stage, and a little bit white—you wait until your trees have maybe a few blossoms, and then you go in and spray with your dormant spray. And then basically that's all you do, is spray the apricots. Hopefully once, if the weather's good. If it's raining, you've got to go in a couple of times; even with the copper you do.

After that you wait. The petals will fall off the flowers, and then the fruit will be in what we call the jacket stage. That's the most fragile state. If the trees are blooming and you get rain on it, it's not going to hurt that much. But when it gets in the jacket stage, if you get a rain that's warm, temperatures between, oh, fifty-five and sixty-five, you get brown rot. A fungus. It'll brown-rot the fruit, kill the fruit. It'll also kill the stem. The stem will die, the little leaves will die, and the

petals will die. If you come out to the farm I could show you that, because we do have some of that damage in our organic section this year.

Anyway, you wait for the fruit to get out of the jackets, and then you wait usually two or three weeks after that, usually the first or second week in April, and then you have to thin. Because the fruit is in bunches. You have to break up those bunches to give the fruit a chance to grow. That's what we're doing right now, is we're thinning.

After the thinning, you do general maintenance. I would have the men dig around the trees all the time. My son hasn't done that, but you want to clean the dirt away from the trunk of the trees, and you set out traps for the earwigs. Because we're organic, we don't use any chemicals to kill the earwigs, so we trap them. I had the guys cut up garden hoses a long time ago and put them in the trunk of the tree. What the earwigs do is they go in the tree at night, and they eat. They go underground in the daytime. But when we put the hose there, they want to be away from the sun, so they climb in there. You leave the hoses in there for like a week, because once the scent of the earwig gets in there, the earwigs will keep coming back to it. Then we go with the men, once a week—labor intensive—pick up the hose; we shake it. Every guy carries a bucket with a little diesel and water. And you drop them in there [blows] blow them out like that. Sometimes there're hundreds of them in there. That's how we control the earwigs, which, as I say, is time-consuming.

Rabkin: What do you do with the earwig soup?

Van Dyke: We just bury it.

Then we irrigate and wait. Usually your weak trees will be the first ones that you pick. You pick those, and they go to New Leaf [Market]. It takes about two or three days of just picking a few boxes. And then a couple more days you start with a good-sized crew of men. Within two days after that (it depends on how the weather is), you're putting on forty to fifty people picking, maybe in two orchards, or three sections. You've got to walk the orchard everyday. You want your ground clean, so you can see where the fruit is falling, because the tree's going to tell you what's ripe. When you have that, then you can usually get to the sections that are ripening, and get the fruit off before it falls. We usually do two to three picks, go through two to three times. You don't pick apricots all at once, because there's too much ripe fruit and green fruit. And you can't mix it, because green fruit will rot the ripe fruit, and ripe fruit will dirty the green fruit. You don't want your fruit too green, because there's no flavor and you can't do anything with that. So it takes that many picks. But it's over like that [snaps fingers].

Rabkin: About how long is that harvest season? When does the first ripe fruit start appearing?

Van Dyke: By the time it's through, probably two and a half weeks.

Rabkin: Wow.

Van Dyke: It's really fast, yes. It's the same with cherries. You'll see cherries from May through August. But every place that has a cherry crop, it only lasts a couple weeks. It just moves from one area— It'll start in Lodi, or right now it starts in Pinoche, I think, or somewhere south close to Fresno—and it comes up

to Lodi, the Stockton area. And then it'll come up to our Santa Clara Valley, and then it would move to Hollister, and then it goes to Oregon, Washington, and those places. I think even Canada has them. But your Washington cherries come in later, and your Oregon cherries, after ours are all over. It moves up the coast. The same with the apricots. It'll start out in the [Central] Valley with the early varieties, which are, usually with no flavor, Katys, and Tiltans, etc. They're really pretty, but have no taste.

Rabkin: And they're coming out about when?

Van Dyke: They got apricots now that come out in May. Our apricots don't start until the middle of June, and last year they didn't start until after July, which is the normal time of year. When I was growing up, our apricots would always start around the fourth of July.

Rabkin: So is the season getting earlier?

Van Dyke: Well, [now] we're in Gilroy. Actually Gilroy's should have been a little later, as I recall. Because Brentwood and Winters come in before we do, and they're further north. Since we've been in Gilroy, our apricot season would start after the fourteenth or twentieth of June. But last year was more like a normal season from Cupertino. The weather was cooler. But then Cupertino, too, was closer to the bay. We always had that morning fog. At that time, you would drive out of Sunnyvale heading towards Mountain View and you had the bay on the right hand side. You had sloughs there. Especially past Mountain View or Palo Alto, it was all water, on the right-hand side as you drove to San Francisco. It's

all filled in. All the chips [high technology companies] people are there, and there's a lot of housing there.

Rabkin: So that filling and development activity has actually changed the climate.

Van Dyke: It could have. Yes. Because they were doing that when I was young, and they kept doing it afterwards, until finally the Save the Bay people came in. That was all water. When I went to the World's Fair in 1937 the first time, or '38, whatever it was, the Bayshore Highway was a three-lane road, which made it a death trap. [laughs] You passed in the third lane, and everyone was doing head-ons. They called it "the freeway" [imitates thick Croatian accent]. "I want to go on the Bayshore Freeway." [laughs] I had been to San Francisco, but not on that road. Because we went Highway 1, which was Highway 101, which went through all the towns: Burlingame, San Mateo, all those. They didn't have stoplights, so it's not like it took you a long time. What you saw was tree-lined streets, all the way from San Jose to San Francisco. When the fair came, they put the freeway, the Bayshore, in. So you got to go all the way along the bay. And for me as a child, having loved the water like I did, to see that—the bay, and the sloughs, and all this marshes and birds. It was on both sides of the road. It was on the left side, going up to the City, as well as the right. You don't see it at all on the left side anymore. You see a little bit on the right. But that was it at that time.

Rabkin: So you're finished with your harvest season sometime in July?

Van Dyke: Yes, when you're picking the apricots you're also cutting and drying. After I took over the farm, I started cutting all the apricots. I bought trays from

other people. We would sell our fruits to the Mariani Company. They would cut it and dry it. I said, "We can do that. We just need more trays. And get the people to do it. It's a little bit more work, but we're going to do that." My father had about four or five thousand trays, and I got it up to about ten or twelve thousand trays. We cut all our own fruit. Then I had to go into cold storage, because we would have a hundred tons of fruit sitting in boxes, and we couldn't cut it all. So I would go to my friend Don Christopher in Gilroy. He's a good cherry grower, a nice man. He would let me cold-storage all my apricots there. That way we would just cut what we were picking fresh that day, keep the rest of it in cold storage, and it would last. That's what made me see I could ship, too, because I would watch it. I'd go there every day and climb up on top and see if anything was rotting. It would last ten or twelve days. I thought to myself, if it can go in cold storage— So that's when I started packing fresh. I mean, I did a little bit locally, but I didn't pack fresh for selling. I started shipping all over the United States. And it was fine. Got a lot of people interested in Blenheims.

But anyway. While we're washing, finishing off the fruit, we get through with the picking, then we've got all the dried fruit to take care of. I'll show you pictures, or you can come look at it this summer. We have about a five-acre field that gets full of apricots drying in the sun. You've got to stack all that, and you've got to bring it in, and you've got to scrape it off the trays, which we do anyway during the season, because even with the ten or twelve thousand trays, we would run out of trays, and we'd have to scrape fruit off to recycle the trays. You scrape them, and put them in bins. I used to ship it all to the Mariani Company in bins, and just save a little bit up for ourselves. But when I started

the organic apricots, I started drying the fruits unsulfured. Unsulfured took up more of the trays, so I had to buy more trays. Sulfured fruit will dry in three to five days, and if there's a heat wave it will dry in three days easy. Unsulfured fruit takes anywhere from five to ten days to dry, so you have to leave it out a little longer.

Rabkin: Is that the main reason why people use sulfur?

Van Dyke: Sulfur preserves the color. I know Paul Mariani, my godfather, used to dry fruit for the hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. It was a major hospital in America at that time. They wanted unsulfured dried fruit for their patients that couldn't take sulfur. I never knew that people were allergic to sulfur, but I found that out later in life. So my godfather would do it. But he was basically a prune grower, so he had prune dehydrators. So he would dehydrate them. In fact most of your unsulfured fruit, like at Trader Joe's and other places, that is dried, unsulfured, is dehydrated. You can tell the difference from a sun-dried fruit by the fact that dehydrated fruit is flatter. The dehydration takes the moisture out of it and it kind of flattens the fruit. Also, if you soak it in water it won't come back to its natural form. Whereas if you take that unsulfured apricot that we dry and you put it in water (at least this happens within the first few months afterwards), it'll go back to the same half it was before.

Rabkin: Interesting.

Van Dyke: After that's over, we rewash the apricots that have been out in the sun just to get the debris, because they are sun-dried. We don't get mice or bird

poop, or anything like that on the trays. I don't know why. They're out there, but we don't have that problem. Birds don't fly over it, or do anything—

Rabkin: They don't try to eat the fruit?

Van Dyke: Birds don't. I don't know why. Sometimes—because we dry cherries, too—sometimes the birds will come and peck on the cherries that are on the trays. But if you scare them a few times— If you keep birds moving, if you consistently keep them moving—they'll stay away. You've got to be consistent. We used to do that in the cherry orchard to fight the birds. Cherry farmers, for a while they were spraying their cherries with something that was like snail bait. When the birds pecked on it, they didn't like the taste so it would keep them off. I would never use anything like that. We would have people with guns at different corners of the orchard. Then I would get all-terrain vehicles, or motorcycles, and then chase the birds. We found if we kept after them, starlings especially, for four or five steady days in a row, we could get rid of them for a few days, and pick cherries without too much damage. Birds do a lot of damage, and the starlings are really, really bad. In fact, I called the Audubon Society about the problem, and that's the only bird they sanction killing. Did you know that? They sanction killing them, because they said it's taking over the natural habitats, knocks the eggs out of the birds' nests and takes over their nests. It was conflicting with the natural-born species that are here. So I had a neighbor. He was a hunter that knew how to trap mountain lions, et cetera. He made us a starling bird cage trap. He got the plan from somewhere. We set up two or three traps in the orchard, and we'd catch sixty or seventy birds a day.

Rabkin: Just bop them on the head?

Van Dyke: Bop them on the head. And then what I discovered was my workers loved barbequing them. One of my girlfriends worked for a vet, and he wanted the birds to freeze for his owls. So I would bring him ten or twenty a night. And then my laborers wanted to barbeque them at night with salsa. So nothing got wasted.

Rabkin: So there's enough meat on a starling—

Van Dyke: Well, it's the breast, yes. When I was young my father used to shoot robins, and this was not uncommon. I don't do that, but it wasn't unfamiliar to do. But he would only do this in our pepper tree, in the fall, when they weren't breeding, to make pasta sauce. And he'd only do three or four or five, and we'd eat the whole bird.

Rabkin: Was it tasty?

Van Dyke: Unbelievable, unbelievable. [laughs] They're really good. In fact, if I hit one by mistake it goes in the pot.

Rabkin: So that's amazing to me that you don't have big bird problems on these enormous spreads of drying apricots.

Van Dyke: You don't. You can come and see. Maybe the sulfured fruit keeps them away? Well, we do the unsulfured fruit, and they don't go there.

Rabkin: So is there anything [about the apricot growing cycle] we haven't covered?

Van Dyke: We haven't finished with the drying. I'm going to just stick with the organic (we do same for both). We wash the unsulfured fruit, and then we put it back on trays, above the ground, on horses, so that there's no dirt that gets underneath. We sort them out. Usually there's no culls or anything like that. Always when you have sun-dried fruit you're going to have little flecks of dust. You know how you look at the air some times, and you see dust floating? That ends up on the fruit. And you can really see it on the sulfured fruit, because it's orange. So you'll see little specks of dust. We breathe the same dust. It's not like it's going to hurt you, but you try to clean that off, because everybody doesn't want to see spots of stuff. You can get away with it at the farmers' market a little bit because people are more used to farm stuff.

Then we package our fruit. For the farmers' market, we have gals help me package them in little packages. We put the rest of them in bulk packages and we ship them. I have a Japanese buyer that buys a couple of tons from me every year, and different places in the United States that buy the dried fruit. Jaffe Brothers. A lot of people that mail-order things buy them. New Leaf [Market] carries them all the time, and places in San Francisco. They go all over. We don't have a whole lot. It depends on the year. The year before last, we had a ton and a half. Usually we average ten to fourteen tons. Last year, which I'm still selling, we had about five or six tons. This year, we don't know yet, because we don't know what the crop will be. I think my biggest year was fourteen or fifteen tons. And they go to Switzerland, too—throughout Europe.

Rabkin: Wow. So you do a combination of organic and conventional?

Van Dyke: Yes. We have one whole section that's certified organic. Our Bolsa Ranch, which is fifty-three acres—the whole place certified organic. That is apricots, but my son pulled a lot of the trees out. I think the frost hit them this year. I think all the apricots we had—the Blenheims, the Pattersons, the Westleys—I haven't been there yet to see it—but I think they all got wiped out. And maybe some of the cherries too, because it was really cold. It gets real cold at that ranch. It always gets more frost over there.

Rabkin: This is a separate property?

Van Dyke: It's a separate property, yes. It's fifty-three acres. It's about six miles from our house. But it's further south and a little lower, and it gets colder.

Anyway, after we finish with the dried fruit, you irrigate the orchard. You keep trapping gophers, if you've got the traps. You have to put everything away. My son's been doing some other dried fruit, so he keeps his guys working. He does some dehydrating of pears, and some dehydrating of other fruits that he gets from other farmers. It's not all organic. Some of it goes to Mariani packing company, and some of it goes to some of the other people that distribute dried fruit. That brings a little bit more income. I'm not happy with it because it hurts our trays. Apricots don't weigh very much. Peaches weigh a lot; pears weigh a lot. Fortunately the pears are dehydrated. But the peaches are sun-dried, so it does a lot of damage to the trays, because they're heavy.

And after that, that's it. You put the trays back in the shed. You go in the orchard and you cut out dead limbs. When my father, and when I was running the place I wouldn't have anybody hired after October. We would irrigate by furrows, and

my sons would irrigate and I would irrigate. But they started using sprinkler pipes, so now they have people moving pipes. They employ more people than I did.

Labor Issues

Rabkin: Tell me about the labor force. Is it all seasonal, or do you have some permanent people?

Van Dyke: We have a foreman who lives on the Bolsa Ranch. We have some other guys who kind of live here year round, but they're free to work at other places when they're not working at our place. You don't really need a lot of people. You need a lot of people to prune, but we never had any pruners that lived at our place. We do now. You need people to thin. But people will usually come in and help us thin. And you need people to harvest and work in the shed. So you have three times of the year you really need people to be there to help.

Rabkin: And you mentioned that during harvest time you have maybe forty or fifty workers?

Van Dyke: Pickers. Then we have at least a hundred people in the cutting shed, because you've got to cut all that fruit. Picking is a lot faster than cutting. You can pick forty or fifty boxes a day. You could *never* cut that many boxes a day, unless you're on a machine.

Rabkin: So people are cutting the fruit in half by hand.

Van Dyke: We do it by hand. My son wants to get a machine. But when my son had a friend of ours in Hollister do some fruit cut for us by machine, he brought some home because I ran out of slabs, which is the overripe fruit. When you cut by machine you've got water running. It changes the flavor of the fruit. It really does. For one thing, the fruit comes out a little flatter because it absorbs the water. If you eat our dried fruit that's a slab and you eat a machine-cut dried fruit, you can tell the difference right away. I think that's why you've got a lot of people at the farmers' market that like our fruit. It's mostly because it's hand cut. Hand cut is a little bit more work and a little bit more expensive. But the quality is so much better and the flavor is so much better.

Rabkin: Where do your workers come from?

Van Dyke: When I had my foreman, Juan Monteon, he and I were very close for years— He died in Mexico. He had a big family that was here. In fact, two of his brothers had orchards, five acres each, and then expanded them a little bit, just like my parents did. Really good workers. My father loved them and I did, too. They were just like Croatians. [laughs] They had the same attitude—work hard, save your money and do your work yourself. My son Peter told me today about Emigdio, [who] is one of my favorite men. He works at nights in the garlic [industry]. They work during the year there. But he also has two farms. He's thinning his place by hand because of the frost damage. Peter said, "Well, I'm going to put the guys on ladders and thin by hand." I said, "No, no, no." Emigdio's doing the work by himself. I says, "You cannot hire men to go in with a ladder and thin by hand." Because when Emigdio first came to work for me, he and his brother, Juan, wanted to thin by hand. I said, "You can't do it. The place

is too big." "Oh, yes, we can do it." They got out there and they started working. And the first day they took a look at how many trees they thinned, and they just went, "You're right, Betty." Then we developed this way. We got my cousin's old flatbed truck from 1937. We put a bed on the back of it, from wood, and put a rail in the middle of it so the guys could hang on. Put three guys on the back of the truck on each side and drive through the middle of the orchard and thin like you're in the tree on a ladder, because you're up on the truck. That's how we thin now all the time.

Rabkin: So they still are literally using their hands to do the thinning.

Van Dyke: Yes, Emigdio is. Not us. We're using sticks. We're using sticks, because when you have fifty or sixty acres it's— Emigdio has five acres in one place and maybe two and a half at the other. He can do that by himself easily in three or four weeks. He prunes his orchards by himself. My father used to, too. My father would handle forty-five acres in Cupertino, or more. In fact, he not only pruned our own orchards, but he pruned other people's orchards. During the war he would just do it with two or three men and my grandfather.

Rabkin: And these are tall enough trees that you need ladders.

Van Dyke: You need ladders. Oh, yes. Once your apricot tree gets past five years you got to have a ladder, even if it's a small ladder. They branch out. They get big.

Rabkin: So most of these guys are Mexican?

Van Dyke: Yes. They have been since after the war. The people from Arkansas or Oklahoma either went back to their homes— Most of them stayed here and started their families here and got into some kind of business. After that, they had the Bracero program. We were never a part of the Bracero program. The contractors we've had we've known for years. We know that they're honest, and we always do business with them openly, and make sure that their workers are getting paid right. You pay by contract. Workers like to do that, because if they work really, really fast they can make more money. You do that for ten days if you've got apricots ripening fast. You hustle.

Rabkin: Tell me about your other crops.

Van Dyke: That's it. Cherries. I have a family orchard with two or three trees of each variety that I can get my hands on. I keep buying trees all the time, a couple of trees here and a couple of trees there that we plant. Those go to the farmers' market. That's not any part of the production. I plant a few almonds. Pears, plums, peaches, nectarines. I sell almonds. What else? A whole bunch of different varieties of apricots that the university has given us for experiments. Russian apricots that are yellow that are tasty. One apricot that's really, really good, comes out always scabby looking. Everybody loves it. Good flavor. You couldn't ship it from here to the street, but—

Rabkin: What's that one called?

Van Dyke: It's a number. [laughs] We call it XR-2. We have no name for it. The universities have a name.

Oak Root Fungus and Other Pest Challenges

Rabkin: You talked about earwigs. You talked about fungus. Are there other pests or diseases?

Van Dyke: Well, there's oak root fungus, which is a soil disease. There's nothing you can do about it. We've tried fumigation. It's a very aggressive fungus that attacks the roots of the trees and kills it. Some trees are resistant to it. They say that different root stocks— Apricot root stock is very susceptible. Amarillo Root Rot is what it's called. It does produce mushrooms, which are kind of tough and stuff, but I did have someone say they are edible if you do certain things. Those mushrooms show up around the trunk of the tree in the fall, and you know that it's being attacked, and there's no way to stop it. We have lost a considerable part of our organic orchard to the fungus, although I did read in *California Fruit Farmer*, or maybe it's the *U.S. Fruit Grower*, but anyway, one of the magazines said that a farmer in Florida has developed a peach root stock that is really, really resistant to the Oak Root Fungus, and he's putting it out. He's not even charging a patent thing on it like they usually do if they discover something. He wants all the farmers to get it, because he had so much trouble with it. Peach root is one of the best roots to put apricots on, because it gives the apricot a really good flavor, but it's really susceptible to oak root fungus and gophers. If I can get this root stock, I'm going to give it a try. It says that the fruit doesn't come out as big for peaches, but if the flavor is there it wouldn't make any difference as far as dried fruit goes.

What else is there? You have the twig borer, that goes into the trunk of the tree. That can kill them. I think we haven't had that problem because we've got earwigs. I think the earwigs are probably eating any of the eggs that are left by the moths. I'm thinking that, because we haven't that much problem with the twig borer lately. Gophers are always a problem. We do have owl boxes out, and we do have bat boxes out. Our major pest in the apricot orchard itself is a peach twig borer, which is a worm. The moths lay their eggs on the apricot. We use *Bacillus thuringiensis*, Bt, because the worm will eat a little bit of the skin; Bt is on the skin, and then in three days [the worm] will die. It does something to the stomach. It's not like it kills it, but the worm can't eat. Maybe it gives it giardia, or some kind of disease, [laughs] but it kills it without too much pain, I take it. But anyway, that's a problem.

Rabkin: And the bats will eat the flying insects?

Van Dyke: The bats, yes. When my father had the farm, we had a big barn from the 1800s. But it was dilapidated and falling. It was even built with square nails, that were all hand-tooled.

Rabkin: Wow!

Van Dyke: We had to take that apart. But I remember, before I took that barn down, that in the evening, when I would go out bats used to be flying out of it. I didn't think about it when I went to tear that down. But I built a shed the year after, real close to it. And I did find, one day when we were cutting apricots, a bat on the tray, sleeping.

Rabkin: [laughs]

Van Dyke: I picked it up and I took it over to where the water tank was. I set a box up on its side so I could get it a little area there, where there was a space between the wood and the box. I put the bat there, and it grabbed hold like that. I went back there the next day and it was gone, so I figured it woke up and flew away [laughs]. Yes, we have bat boxes and we have owl boxes. But it's still not enough. Because we're next to the hills, so we get a lot of gophers.

The Van Dyke Family

Rabkin: Are your offspring and grandchildren now involved in the farm?

Van Dyke: Well, I don't know. Every generation thinks, "I don't want my children to work as hard as I do," which is a grand illusion. My oldest son, his son joined the Navy. He's a Seal. And the other one is a mechanic, which is good, although he said to me the other day, (he calls me Mommers, they both do), he says, "Mommers, maybe I should get into farming." I said, "Cody, any time you're ready, I'll be right there, right next to you." But he hasn't said that lately. My other son is in Costa Rica, and he's got his kids down there. My other son works (he wasn't that interested in farming), as a salesman of supplies for cars and trucks. He likes that. He was more into cars and trucks than he was into farming. So I don't know who is going to take over.

Rabkin: So right now it's mainly—

Van Dyke: Peter and Kurt, when he comes home in the summertime.

Rabkin: Kurt is the one in Costa Rica.

Van Dyke: That's the one in Costa Rica. He used to come and stay six to nine months here and then just go back down there for three months. He didn't make it last year because now he has two kids. He's going to come this year in May and try and stay until November. He wants his son to come up here. But he's going to have to bring him up here to live up here if he wants him to farm, because especially in the orchard business, it's hard to start late in life. My grandfather did, but times are different. It's expensive. You got to know what you're doing to make ends meet.

Surfing and Farming

Rabkin: You have combined surfing and farming throughout much of your life.

Van Dyke: Mm, hmm.

Rabkin: I wondered if you could talk about how you've combined those two passions, one of them so tied to land and the other—

Van Dyke: —to the ocean. Well, I haven't surfed much in the last few [years]. Once I took over the farm I only surfed on vacations, when I went to Mexico or somewhere. If you're running the farm, you've got something going on every day, except for those couple of weeks in the fall when there's not that much to do. My sons were both surfers, my two oldest ones. (That's why my son is in Costa Rica.) You go surfing whenever you can, when the surf's good, but not every day, like you do when you are younger. But they're a good combination. A

lot of the guys who are farmers here are surfers. They are at the farmers' market but they all go surfing in the morning. [laughs]

Rabkin: What makes it a good combination?

Van Dyke: Most of the surfers that I knew at the time that I was surfing were teachers. Three months off in the summer. Three months off, and then two weeks off in December to go surfing where it's warm. A week off at Easter to go surfing somewhere. A few skied, but still, surfing was the main love. And so firemen were surfers and garbage men were surfers, because they went to work—when garbage was something that you picked up by hand and dumped, like Doug Haut and Dan Haut and Rich Novak and all these guys that are big in the surf industry—you got up at three o'clock in the morning so you can go do garbage, so you can get off at nine and go surf all day. Lifeguarding was another thing so you could surf all day. That's how you combine it. And when you're a farmer, time's your own, really. Unless it's harvest, and then you've got to be there no matter what. So it's a good combination. And that's why I say a lot of these kids that are farmers are surfers too.

Rabkin: Are there other farmers who have been especially important allies or comrades or models for you?

Van Dyke: You don't think about models when you're young, because it's part of your life. You look at people, and you just love them. When I look back now on the men and women that I've known, I am so grateful that I've got to know these amazing people, brilliant people. Did they influence me at the time? I don't know. I just really liked them so I hung out with them. It's just a part of your life.

It's an everyday occurrence. I get together with my girlfriend, Mary. Her parents had a hundred acres at that time, and she was a prune picker. She had to pick prunes and she worked and drove truck, and did all the stuff that we all did. We have a lot of laughs together. They're very big in the farming industry now. They own, oh, two or three or four thousand acres.

Rabkin: What's her name?

Van Dyke: Raykovich? Rikovich? Her maiden name was Koticich, but her husband's name was Raykovich. He just died this past December. Wonderful man, brilliant man. I should give you his eulogy to read. It's great. You catch the essence of every farmer in the Santa Clara Valley. But anyway, whenever I get to her, she and I have a lot of laughs together because we share so many experiences like that.

The Organic Farming Community/Movement

Rabkin: How about in the organic farming community? Do you have connections with people through organizations, for example, CAFF [Community Alliance with Family Farmers] or CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers]?

Van Dyke: Well, I've belonged to CAFF, yes, since it started, and I've belonged to CCOF since the third year. The Ecological Farming Conference that happens at [Asilomar]—the third year they had it I think we spoke on the "Successful Farmers and what They Do" panel.⁴ It used to be up in La Honda when it first started, and then they moved it over to [Asilomar]. We went to it every single year until the year my son got married. He got married the same weekend and

we didn't go that year. We used to go for several days. We'd always drive instead of [staying overnight at the conference] because we were always doing something at our place. It was pruning season. I didn't go this year. I went last year. I don't go regularly like I did before. And it's changed. Because, before, all of us—we led the groups. You'd go to the conference and there would be one of us there teaching you how to trap gophers, or teaching you how to dry fruit. Amigo Bob [Cantisano] was teaching you how to make compost. Everybody was teaching each other and they were all learning from each other. Now you go there, and it's more business. It's more marketing. I don't know, it's just different. It's a lot different. It's big. But it was big before. I mean, everybody came. You'd see the same people every year. You still see the same people, but now there's a lot *more* people, you know?

Rabkin: Yes.

Early Memories of the Santa Clara Valley

Rabkin: So you've probably seen a lot of changes. I know you've seen changes in the Santa Clara Valley.

Van Dyke: Oh, yes.

Rabkin: Before we turned on the recorder, you were telling me what it looked like to move through the valley [when you were young].

Van Dyke: Oh, yes. It was a field of snow. You could always tell whose trees were blooming. First of all, you would have the almonds. There weren't any almond orchards, but those would be the first trees to bloom. When I would look

out the upstairs window, the almonds would be first. Then the second thing to bloom would be the apricots. Then after the apricots would be the prunes. Those two were really close together. Then the last thing to bloom would be the cherries. And the thing that I always found very interesting was the almonds bloomed first and were harvested last. The cherries bloomed last and they were harvested first. Which, if you think about it, that's what happens. The cherries are little tiny, tiny things, and the almonds have to get hard.

Rabkin: And you could see all this unfolding from the upstairs windows of your Cupertino house?

Van Dyke: Yes, my Cupertino house. Cupertino and Los Altos is where the ground started slowly sloping up. Los Altos was the hills. Part of Cupertino was the hills, too. But we were just on a high enough level in a two-storey house to be able to look over everything. In fact, when our street flooded on our side of the road (we were a little bit higher than the other side of the road), and our neighbor was Marian Mariani, he had an orchard over there, we would have this big pond of water there, I mean, huge, and it would start to go over to his road and then his orchard would flood. It would run like a river down there. We were just elevated a few feet, but you could see everything.

There were only a couple of peach orchards. Peaches bloom pink. There were just a few. I couldn't see to Alviso, so I could never see the pear trees bloom. Most of those were by the bay, because pears like a lot of water. They had big fields there. Row crops were over there, too.

Rabkin: So the Santa Clara Valley was dominated by orchards when you were growing up.

Van Dyke: Absolutely. You just had San Jose, Santa Clara. Cupertino was a grocery store and a post office and a bank. (Well, that came after the war.) Sunnyvale was a little town, and then Mountain View. Los Altos was really tiny, like a block. Then it was Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Redwood City and those places. But they were all tiny. They weren't connected with subdivisions like they are now. So you had a lot of room between, a lot of orchards between the little towns, so there was really a differentiation. There was a railroad track that ran along San Francisco to San Jose. We always took it. When we were working in the cannery, we'd take the train to San Francisco to go shopping. We'd take our cannery checks, [snaps fingers and laughs] four or five hundred dollars in the pocket, and go to San Francisco and buy school clothes. We'd take the train. But along the railroad tracks was also a road that you could drive on, that went through the back of all the towns, like Sunnyvale. You could go straight on that road and go through Mountain View and then Palo Alto. And Mayfair was a little town. It's part of Palo Alto now, but that was a little tiny town. In fact, I think where Jesse [Ziff] Cool has her cafe in Menlo Park⁵, she's right across the street from where *Sunset*— Have you ever been there, to the *Sunset Magazine* place?

Rabkin: No.

Van Dyke: You should go. It's wonderful. Oh, it's fascinating! You can get there on that road. It's Middlefield Road, I think it's called.

Rabkin: Oh, yes. Sure.

Van Dyke: It goes along there. It's probably a four-lane highway now. I haven't been on it in years. [laughs] It used to be a two-lane dirt road. Well, dirt road at one time, and then paved.

Rabkin: Do you remember how it smelled when the orchards were blooming?

Van Dyke: Oh, yes. Paradise. Absolutely. Sometimes Easter vacation would come really early, and the trees would bloom late. You would drive up Highway 17 from Santa Cruz to go back to the valley, and before you reached the summit you could smell the blossoms. Then you reached the summit. There was no smog, so you could see all the blooms. It was beautiful, really beautiful. Blossom Hill Road—they named it that because it was a little elevated and it went along the edge of the valley there, along the foothills. You turn right when you get to Los Gatos and go on Blossom Hill Road, and you had this beautiful view of all of the valley to the left. In fact, some of the major pictures that were taken of the Santa Clara Valley at that time were from Blossom Hill Road.

In the spring in Saratoga they would have the Blossom Festival. People would come and you would sit on a hillside, and there was a little amphitheater, a little tiny, tiny Greek amphitheater. And from where you were sitting on the hillside you would see the valley in bloom in front of you, and this little Greek amphitheater where they had ballet. I saw Jasha Heifetz play the violin there when he was about seventeen or eighteen, because he lived there. We did that every year.

Capers

Rabkin: We were talking about the crops you grow, and one thing you didn't mention was capers. Are you still growing capers?

Van Dyke: Oh, yes. But that's just bushes. When I went to Europe in the sixties, my relatives there gave me gifts to take home to my parents. They were things like bread that was—Basquatina, it was called. They would make fresh bread everyday, but the bread would get dry real fast. But they never wasted it. They would put it back in the oven and dry it a little harder. They call it Basquatina and they used to soak it in their wine and eat it like that. They sent me home with Basquatina. They sent me home with a bottle of vinegar. They sent me home with a bag of dried capers. These are all things for my parents, right? [laughs] They sent me home with seeds from certain plants that were only grown there. I shipped one box home. It was all local stuff, cooked or baked, something that would survive the trip. I carried a lot of it home.

Rabkin: You said dried capers?

Van Dyke: Actually, I'm not selling them dry. I salt them, drain them, and then put them in packages. I always tried to figure out how they harvested in Croatia, because I knew that every night people went out and picked capers. In Croatia you eat your big meal at lunchtime. You take a nap after that. Then you go back to work. Around eight or nine o'clock at night you have your dinner, which is usually cold cuts, grapes, dry French bread, Turkish coffee, or things like that. And the people would go out and pick the capers when they went for their stroll in the evenings. Everybody goes someplace to stroll, in the town square, and

they have their conversations and they walk around. Then they go back home and they have their nighttime meal after that, and then they go to bed.

I brought the capers home, and they were so good compared to what we had had. I put them in the vinegar that they sent me for my father. I used some of that vinegar to soak the capers. My son and I ate, I think, five pounds in a month. [laughs] Oh, not that many, but it was a bag like this. I told my mother, "We have to grow capers." She had a friend who must have brought a plant because it's really hard to grow from seeds. She got a start from him and she and I planted one caper. She told me we had to build it up because it grew out of walls. So we built up a pile of dirt and then we surrounded it with rocks (smart woman) and then we planted our caper in that. From there, I managed to propagate four or five plants. I did this in the spring, and I'd do them every spring and forget to water them and they die. But one year I kept an eye on them and I planted four or five plants, and I planted them up high in a container of cement and steel, rebar (whatever they call it) so that I wouldn't have to bend over. Little did I know that the caper bush grows like this. When it's in the ground you can pick it. Now my bush is so high I have to get a ladder to get up there. [laughs]

Rabkin: [laughs]

Van Dyke: I had four plants in there and I made it really wide to begin with, and high, and the cement is cracking because the roots are spreading it. So I don't know what I'm going to do. So I've got cracks now in five places, and my sons keep telling me it's not going to fall apart because they put the rebar in it really

strong. I'm looking at it. It's got cracks this big. When I go to water it, the water runs out. So I need to put some more somewhere in the soil.

Rabkin: Do you sell your capers?

Van Dyke: Yes. I wouldn't if it weren't for the people at the farmers' market. I have some real fanatic caper followers. [laughs] I can't get new customers because they get mad if I don't have them. I have to make sure the ones that have been buying them the longest get them first.

Rabkin: Oh, boy.

Van Dyke: [laughs]

Rabkin: I can see I need to get on the waiting list.

Van Dyke: Well, there's a gal in Watsonville. I haven't gone to her place yet, but she bought eighty-eight caper plants. She got them through Sierra Azul [Nursery]. She first talked to me at the farmers' market. I showed her pictures of my caper plants and how they were growing, and she said, "I planted mine too close." [laughs] I told her I'd come and see her, but I still haven't gone up there yet. I gotta go. She's just a little way off the road on Hecker Pass, and I should go. Have you got watercress growing in there? [pointing at a plant in Rabkin's house]

Rabkin: Cilantro.

Van Dyke: Oh, it's cilantro!

Rabkin: It was bolting so we took the last plant, just for eating for the next few days.

Van Dyke: Oh, so you put it in there. From here, from a distance, it looks like watercress. I have watercress in Gilroy that grows in a ditch that I pick all the time. And then the county comes out and cleans the ditch and then I go back to the grocery store and buy watercress, bring it back, and plant it in the ditch.
[laughs]

Farmers' Markets

Rabkin: You mentioned selling at farmers' markets. Which ones do you sell at?

Van Dyke: I'm just doing the Live Oak one on Sunday mornings between 15th and 17th Avenue on East Cliff Drive. And then the Westside one is at the last stoplight on the way out of town on Saturday mornings.

Rabkin: Do you go out there yourself, or do you have people selling for you?

Van Dyke: No, no. I just do it myself. You can't make enough to have someone— Fresh stuff you reproduce everyday. Dried fruit is something that you keep for a long time. It's expensive. You have to be able to sell it, and if you paid someone you wouldn't make any money. So we just do that. But it's fun.

Rabkin: What are the major outlets for both your dried and fresh fruit?

Van Dyke: Well, even the stores that are organic will take our conventional, what I call the dormant spray. Whole Foods. The Real Foods. Veritable Vegetable. Everybody. The same people we've sold to for years. But like I say,

Whole Foods has bought most of the stores we've sold to in the United States. So I'm assuming they either ship them there, or maybe they are using other apricots there. We used to sell all over—to South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Michigan—you name it. Boston. We sold everywhere.

Rabkin: When you look at the current market for organic produce, and you think about your son and maybe grandkids on the farm, do you feel hopeful about the future of this industry?

Van Dyke: Oh, the organic industry? Absolutely. Yes. From day one. Because this is what we all like. One of my closest friends that we shared a house with became an organic farmer right away before Chadwick was up at the university. They just started growing things organically in their vegetable garden. They've been like that forever. Then Community Foods started. It all kind of started here where people wanted to be away from pesticides. My father was like that. "Don't put— No pesticides. Nothing that kills anything." And we always had gardens during the war. Later on, when my mother got older, and my grandfather, we didn't have them anymore. But we always used to grow our own food, because it's better for you. They did the same thing in Europe. They were only doing what they did there. If you live on an island you've got to grow everything.

Rabkin: Yes. And it looks like the market for it is continuing to grow.

Van Dyke: Yes. And the other thing that's growing, too, is the farmers' markets. There is a book I read by a woman writer. She wrote a book about a year on a farm with the family.

Rabkin: Was this Barbara Kingsolver's book?

Van Dyke: Yes, yes.

Rabkin: *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.⁶

Van Dyke: Did you read that?

Rabkin: Mm, hmm.

Van Dyke: Oh, that was great. [laughs] You know, if you don't have a garden for a long time, you forget what it's like to go in your garden and pick something and then put it in a pot and eat it. At the farmers' market I'm always taking something home that the kids have picked that day. And it's *so* much better than anything you get in the store. I think farmers' markets are going to keep expanding. People flock to them. If you've got fresh vegetables that you're growing every day, they sell out really fast.

Rabkin: Do you see any trends in organic farming that worry you?

Van Dyke: That worry me?

Rabkin: Or in the market?

Van Dyke: Well, you find an unscrupulous farmer here and there. I know that. But usually if you've got someone that's around the farmers' market they're pretty dedicated. Everybody that I know in the market is a dedicated farmer, and honest, and loyal. They're not really out to make a killing. They're just making a living. I think it's the way to go.

Buy Fresh, Buy Local

And the Buy Fresh, Buy Local too. The imports. [We are] in one of the businesses that was really affected by imports thirty years ago. [The United States] first imported apricots from Turkey when we cut all relationships with Iran. Iran was the supplier of all of the dried apricots to California at the time. Well, Iran couldn't ship to us anymore. And there were no Turkish apricots. The next year, all of a sudden, here's Turkish apricots looking very much like Iranian apricots in that package. [laughs] I told my kids. I said, "They're shipping . . ." And besides, we had Iranian friends, too, that were living in Santa Cruz. They used to come over and eat my apricots. Because their parents grew little apricot trees in their yard, so we had a little following of them. But anyway, I just figured that they were shipping them through Turkey. Then Turkey started planting more orchards. Now I don't know how much Turkey is doing, but I know that twenty or thirty years ago when this first started (I think it was about 1980), almost thirty years ago, one of the farmers went to Turkey to see what was going on, and they were planting big fields of apricots at that time. Plus, they were planning on damming the Euphrates River, which I thought was going to really make everybody down the road mad, because that's the main supply of water for all the different countries. I don't know if they finished their dam, or what they did, but I remember reading that once they had that dam in, that valley was going to be even bigger than California's Central Valley, as far as growing stuff. I haven't read anything about it in years, but I'm sure it went on, because there's lots of Turkish imports.

But anyway, this is what I feel too, as far as Buy Fresh, Buy Local—I try not to buy anything imported. I don't want to buy something that's traveled for a week to get here. The other thing is, if anything happens in the world and we don't have gas or oil and transportation and things like that, and all of our farmers are gone, this is a big country. Nobody thinks that's going to happen. I'm not saying that that's going to happen, because the world is really big. But just the same, it's nice to have all these young farmers with the farmers' markets and growing—Google [company headquarters, in Mountain View, California] buys everything local for their cafeteria. Ever since they've been around, they've had this cafeteria where everybody eats and everything is organic and local. In fact, I'm going to contact them to see if this year— [laughs]

Rabkin: How about development pressures on farmland?

Agricultural Preserves

Van Dyke: Where we are in Gilroy we're in an agricultural preserve, which got every farmer there furious. The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors had a meeting with all of us in South County. My father wasn't going to meetings so he sent me. My cousins went and all the farmers from there went. I mean, they shoved it down our throats. The people who were farmers there wanted to have control of their own land and not be told what to do with it. I'm not against a preserve. I think that the whole Santa Clara Valley should have been preserved. It's one of the finest places to grow fruit in the world. When they put every freeway in, they never used a stick of dynamite. You know, they go down thirty feet to make an underpass. It was all scoop.

Rabkin: Wow.

Van Dyke: I didn't know you had to work in a garden until I got to Santa Cruz. I didn't know about hardpan. You put a seed in the ground in Cupertino, it grew. The whole valley was like that. The whole valley. It was the richest valley in the world.

But anyway, we are in the agricultural preserve. I think [about] what's happening in the Central Valley. They're losing thousands of acres a day by development going in. You see it every time you go to Lake Tahoe and go skiing. It used to be all wide-open spaces and now it's all subdivisions. Not all that land was excellent. But a lot of it is. And usually it's the good land that goes first. You don't get the land that's not so good. So I have no idea what's going to happen.

Rabkin: I'd love to hear you talk about what you love most about being a farmer.

Van Dyke: It's a great life. It's really a good life. My friend Nick Raykovich, who just passed away, always used to tell his kids, "Listen," he said, "When you get grown up in life, find something you like to do and you'll never work a day in your life." That's how I feel. It's a good way to put it. If it's something you really like doing, it's work, but it's not work. Yes.

Younger Apprentice Organic Farmers

I admire all of these kids who got into agriculture early, the ones I'm meeting at the farmers' market, the ones that went to Chadwick's classes in the early years, the ones I've known. Jeff Larkey [of Route One Farms] came to the orchard *years* ago! He didn't tell me that until the other day. I've known him forever, since he

had long hair and a long beard. [laughs] I didn't see him for awhile until I started doing farmers' markets, and I didn't recognize him. But there're a lot of people that came to the farm because Jim Nelson from Camp Joy used to come every year, and Jeff came with Jim.⁷

I had this coterie of people who would come for the cherries. I looked forward to it every year. They'd come and clean out the orchards. The best fruit in the cherry orchard is what's left on the trunk at the end. It's big, real pretty, real dark. People would come. I just wouldn't let them use ladders. Just come in and glean it. And then charge them so much a pound. They'd all come in real honest, and they'd weigh their stuff, and they'd pay me the money. It was just fun being with the people, and watching them grow up, and come year after year, and bring their kids when they got older. Now they're all doing something else, so I don't get that many. Now I get older people that used to cut apricots when they were young. They come from all over the place and they come in and they start crying when they see the cutting shed. And they go and they want to cut apricots. They get excited. But that breed is going to die, too.

Rabkin: So you got to know a bunch of the people who are now establishing themselves as farmers in the area, when they were young apprentice farmers.

Van Dyke: When they were young, apprentice farmers. Jim picked all the tart cherries one year on the cherry tree and he went home and he made wine. [laughs] And he came to Gilroy and brought me some wine and we sat in the trailer and we got drunk! [laughs hard] In fact, he entered it in the Santa Cruz wine contest and he got a ribbon!

Rabkin: For cherry wine?

Van Dyke: But I don't think he told them it was cherry. I don't know what he called it at the time. But he hasn't done that in years. He got busy with Camp Joy and his students and everything. You see, I'm not there all the time now. I haven't been there all the time in the last few years. He used to come every year. He might still be coming. But he brought a lot of the Camp Joy people, and those people went on to do different things. I can't remember all of them now that came, but oh, there were a lot.

Rabkin: They came out to your place to pick?

Van Dyke: Yes. They would come at the end of the season. In fact, it was Joe, a friend of Ray's (Ray is my domestic partner of these forty years). Joe was allergic to sulfur. So he's the one who asked if he could pick the fruit off the ground, which I sold to them real cheap, even though it's the best fruit. I put them underneath the oak tree at my father's house. They used to cut their apricots without sulfur, and they'd do five or six trays a day, or maybe seven. They'd do a few trays like that. We wouldn't charge them anything extra for doing that, and my father used to always come out and talk to them. In fact, his wife painted a great picture of my father talking like this and all of us working out there. But anyway, that's where I got started doing unsulfured apricots, because he was doing them and then I thought I'd do a few boxes. I started selling them at Community Foods as unsulfured. It was Community Foods when it was over here on a side street. They had taken [over] a place called Margaritaville. That

went broke and then it became Community Foods. Were you here in Santa Cruz at that time when it was over there somewhere?

Rabkin: I came in just at the end of that.

Van Dyke: Community Foods was over by Seventh Avenue, but before [that] it was over close to Dominican [Hospital], over there. That's where I first started selling and that's when Heidi Skolnik said to me, "Why don't you get certified?" And I said, "Okay. All right. I'll do it." So that's the story, basically. One fell swoop. Going organic was not that hard. It was something that we were kind of into to begin with.

Rabkin: So the certification process wasn't that onerous for you?

Van Dyke: At that time if you were a CCOF member, part of your job was to certify somebody. So you had to go out, and because you were part of the group you had to be real hard-nosed about stuff. But everybody was *wanting* to do it. You didn't have to say, "Don't do this; don't do that." Nobody was using pesticides. You were just trying to figure it out. Starting out with ten rows of trees is nothing when you had sixty or ninety acres. I mean, that was nothing to worry about. I was more concerned about the bigger crop. But everything worked out really well.

Rabkin: Well, thank you very much, Betty.

¹ For more on the history of Croatian immigrants in California agriculture see Donna F. Mekis and Kathryn Mekis Miller, *Blossoms Into Gold: The Croatians in the Pajaro Valley* (Capitola Book Company, 2009).

² See the oral history with Heidi Skolnick in this series.

³ See the oral history with Ken Kimes and Sandra Ward in this series.

⁴ See the oral histories with Amigo Bob Cantistano and Zea Sonnabend, as well as other oral histories in this series, for more on Eco-Farm.

⁵ Flea Street Cafe.

⁶ Barbara Kingsolver with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

⁷ See the oral histories with Jeff Larkey and with Jim Nelson in this series.