

THE LAST WALNUT GROVE

BY DEVANY VICKERY-DAVIDSON

In the early 20th century, when walnut groves stretched from Ignacio Valley to San Ramon Valley, it was said in autumn that anyone without black hands must be a tourist. Whole families worked walnut farms of 10 to 30 acres. Conditions in these fertile valleys were ideal here for dry farming of walnuts—a staple food cultivated by humans for over 9,000 years.

It would be reasonable to assume that the main town in this region, Walnut Creek, derived its name from these groves, but in 1862 when the town was founded, it was named for the native black walnut, which grew wild here, as it still does in much of Northern California. The nuts of the native variety are smaller and much more difficult to shell than the Persian walnut (also known as the English walnut), but in 1873, a creative botanist named Myron Ward Hall conceived a way to graft the Persian walnut onto the stock of a hearty native black walnut tree.

Mr. Hall, who lived in Alamo, created a tree that would thrive here without irrigation, and thrive it did. In the early 1900s, hundreds of acres of walnuts were planted in the shadow of Mt. Diablo. New orchards were still being planted after World War II, and in the 1950s, many groves were enhanced by irrigation.

Today there is but one commercial walnut grove remaining in the East Bay and it may have just had its final harvest. Danville's last walnut farmer, 78-year-old Armand Borel, is ready to move on. With him, the area's long history of walnut farming will retire—Mr. Borel has sold 7 of his 16 acres farm to developer Sid Corrie, who also retains first right of refusal to the remaining acres of Mr. Borel's walnut groves.

Borel's grove was once in a rural area surrounded by other farms, the largest of which was Bishop Ranch, now a massive corporate business center. Today, the Borel farm is bordered on one side



Travis Boone's "slide trombone" revolutionized local walnut harvesting in the mid-20th century.

by Interstate 680 and on another by a strip mall anchored by a massive Costco store. Fortunately, some of the area's walnut history has been preserved at Forest Home Farms in San Ramon. Sixteen acres and the Boone homestead were donated to the city of San Ramon to preserve and teach others about the area's agricultural heritage. The Boones also left behind a great many photos, ledgers, news articles, and other information regarding local farming in the 20th century. Thanks to Ruth Boone's generous donation and the city of San Ramon's investment in maintaining and developing programs at Forest Home, a great deal of information remains in the Forest Home archives. Kim Giuliano, the program manager, has recorded and documented oral histories of many valley farmers.

For much of the 20th century, Travis Boone harvested, hulled, dried, and sold walnuts for many local farmers. In the early years of harvesting, migrant workers knocked the nuts from the trees with very long poles, or they climbed the trees carrying rubber

mallets, with which they hit the branches to make the walnuts fall. Midcentury, Mr. Boone, an ingenious businessman who had already invented machinery (still in use today) for cleaning, drying, and packing walnuts, came up with a rather amazing apparatus for harvesting. His contraption (sometimes called a "slide trombone") was made up of ladders and buckets attached to a tower on a Caterpillar tractor that could drive through the groves. The workers sat in the buckets and the tree's branches at various levels. The invention meant that the harvesting could be done by local, rather than migrant workers. Based on one oral history in the Forest Home archive, Mr. Boone managed to use his influence with the sheriff of Contra Costa to acquire a labor force of prisoners from the county's prison farm for the work. It

Photographs courtesy of Forest Home Farms, Illustration by Helen Kravynhoff



Women harvesting walnuts during WWII.

may have been risky to be in the top bucket, but it was productive and quite an improvement from the old way of harvesting. Today, mechanical shakers do the work of getting the nuts from the trees.

The Boone farm was not especially large, but it became a central site for the hulling, sorting, cleaning, and drying of walnuts from surrounding farms. Harvested walnuts were taken to downtown Walnut Creek, where the Diamond Nut Company had a production facility, on the site currently occupied by the Dean Leshner Center for the Arts. The nuts were sold there and Mr. Boone would give the farmers their share.

Many growers contracted out the Boones' harvesting services as well. Mr. Boone's wife, Ruth, played a central role in the business, handling finances and often managing the workers as they went out to harvest at other farms. She stayed in the groves with them from sunup till late afternoon, handing out slips for each bucket of nuts that a person gathered. During WWII, she rallied and got the women of the area together to do co-op harvesting, so that the farming could continue.

The beginning of the end came in the mid-1960s, when many local groves succumbed first to crown rot and second to suburban sprawl. Real estate prices rose to levels that convinced many farmers to sell out. Only a few, like Borel, hung on. They farmed with or without the knowledge that their real estate was the bigger asset.

Borel's barns still hold his hulling, cleaning, and drying machinery, and until the city of Danville approves Sid Corrie's development plans, the walnuts will continue to grow. Borel wears a weathered face, uses a walker to get around, and still dons an old rancher's hat with walnut stains on it. He has put in his time doing difficult work for over 50 years. Who could begrudge him selling his property for many millions of dollars? While he deserves the easier life that selling his farm will allow him, it is still sad to see his farm developed into another densely packed suburban business center. Suggestions have been made about turning the parcel into a park or preserve, but economically that does not make sense. And so he will go into what remains of his golden years with his memories, and another bit of California's agricultural past will go with him.

While Armand Borel may be our area's last walnut farmer, there are still plenty of California walnuts available.

Walnuts remain a huge cash crop in the state, with 99 percent of the commercial domestic supply and two-thirds of the world's supply of walnuts coming from California. A handful of California growers have dedicated their farms to organic methods, and we hope to see these thriving well into the future. One such is Dixon Ridge Farm, near Winters. Russel Lester and his wife, Kathy, both holders of degrees from UC Davis, started Dixon Ridge two years before graduating in 1977. Their organic operation began in 1989 and they sold their first certified organic shelled walnuts in 1992. The Lesters do their own hulling, sorting, and drying with the help of some staff. Their walnut production and sales have increased about 40 percent each year since 1992 and they have received many awards for their efforts. If your local farmers' market or grocery does not have organic walnuts, you can find them online at www.dixonridgefarms.com.

EAT WALNUTS!

Walnuts are the workhorse of nuts, and if properly stored, have a long shelf life. Used in multitudes of ways, they provide many culinary opportunities. I have been a walnut lover since I was a small child. My great-uncle, Melvin Shorey, had a large nut farm with almonds and walnuts in Chico. Every fall he would send boxes of nuts to us and my grandmother and I would sit at her kitchen table cracking them. Some went into the freezer for later use and some we used for baking, candy-making, and eating out of hand. Now, I incorporate walnuts into many recipes for their nutrition, crunch, and flavor.

Walnuts are powerhouses of omega-3 fatty acids. The FDA has acknowledged scientific evidence supporting the claim that walnuts may lower risk of heart disease, and the agency has given walnut producers the right to make that claim on their labels. Other research has proven that walnuts are high in a natural product called ellagic acid, which has been proven to arrest the division of cancer cells. Currently, the Hollings Cancer Institute at the University of South Carolina is conducting a double-blind study of 500 cervical cancer patients, which is expected to support their previous nine years of study showing that ellagic acid brings about G-arrest within 48 hours (inhibiting and stopping the mitosis, or division, of cancer cells), and apoptosis (normal cell death) within 72 hours, for breast, pancreas, esophageal, skin, colon, and prostate cancer cells. Only raspberries and strawberries have a higher ratio of ellagic acid to dry weight. Walnuts are also high in serotonin. Restoring levels of serotonin in the body relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety. Everyone's motto should be "EAT WALNUTS!"

