



Small Towne Short Stories
Villa Park Orchards Packinghouse – Alyssa Duranty – Part I

The smell of sweet soap mixed with a natural citrus scent once filled the large sorting hall inside the Santiago Orange Grower's Association. Women working inside once basked in a flood of light that glistened off the natural wood floors.

For thirty years, Mrs. Margaret Osterloh sat at the end of the ever-revolving conveyer belts tallying, by hand, boxes filled with newly-washed and waxed fruit packed by well-dressed women in cotton dresses, perfectly-pinned hair, and long aprons.

Now the building is mostly empty, except for relics of the past. The chatter of gossip has ceased, the windows are now covered, and only smells of dust and rust remain in the nearly-forgotten center of community, economy, and farming life in Orange. Yet, the iconic citrus co-operative, the first of it's kind in Orange, is kept alive today by memories.

When Mayor Teresa "Tita" Smith's mother packed oranges while attending Orange Union High School—the building that is now Chapman University—she packed the orange bulbs in tissue paper and wooden crates, ink-stained with the word Sunkist on the side. By the time Mayor Smith joined the family and community tradition in the 1960s they used cardboard boxes to ship the produce around the country and the world.

Tita's life inside packing houses didn't start in high school; she was raised among the citrus groves on her grandfather's property. Her father had been born during his family's journey to the coast from the mid-west, a trip many Orange transplants made in the early 1900s. Tita's grandfather Herbert Hoefs, a son of German

immigrants, worked as a longshoreman after World War I, but believed his true destiny was in his pocket: a newspaper ad promising a profitable life planting orange groves, a crop that, strangely, had not given Orange its name.

He was not alone.

Alayne Campbell's father became an orange farmer, just as her grandfather D.F. Campbell had after leaving Illinois. Their family moved to the Palmyra Hotel, raised two boys, and became a part of the new community.

The family moved from the hotel to a property in Villa Park and Alayne's father tended to several groves around Orange before selling his product to packing houses. During the farming heyday in the city as many as a dozen packing houses were operating at one time. Santiago Orange Grower's Association, developed in 1893, was the largest in the city and at one time the largest in the nation. Two decades later, a third of the people living among the town's trees worked in the citrus industry. Alayne's aunt was one of them.

"She told me she had the greatest time working because she sat around and visited every day with all these women," Alayne said. "It sounds like a hell of a job, but see she was very social minded and she just loved having all these people to talk to."

During the peak of Orange's citrus industry in 1948, the city had more than 67,000 acres of Valencia trees. Alayne remembers, "Maybe the year before, it was so long ago that it's hard to remember," being at the annual Orange High School Christmas dance. The boys had to ditch their dancing partners and head out to the groves. They usually worked in the summer when they weren't playing baseball, but the money was ripe for the taking if they made sure the Oranges also ripened.

The cold winter air the night of the dance had potential to harm the orange orbs high in the trees during the off-season crop. So the teens headed out in the low-hanging fog caused by the citrus with black, oil-filled pots. The smudge pots were placed between three or so trees, so that the heat rose out of the chimneys and warmed the air around the fruit. The next morning, farmers like Barbara Resnick's father would head out to the groves to check for damage.

"I remember daddy had a special knife in his pocket and he'd go walking through the grove and he'd take an orange and cut it down the middle." Her dad, who owned about 10 acres on their property, would be happy if the oranges stayed juicy. Her mother would be petrified that if she left the white sheets out to dry overnight, the smoke from the pots would stain the newly cleaned linen with black soot.

Barbara and Alayne have been friends nearly their whole lives. They were both two of the first babies born at St. Joseph's Hospital and still enjoy a glass or two of iced tea together. While Barbara's family grew 10 acres of oranges on their Pine Street property, Tita's grandfather, maintained his grove on the side of the only highway in the city, the two-lane 101 next to the Orange drive-in movie theater.

Bill Barron remembers running around the groves, playing as a child. In grade school, he threw Oranges at other boys—Southern California snowballs.

"Sometimes we got hit with Oranges too ripe and those just hurt," he remembered.

On hot summer days, the child-size Bill would take swims in the reservoirs that irrigated the groves. He remembers that the roads used to have painted zigzags to help drivers find the intersection during the citrus fogs.

Barbara and Alayne also played in the groves, attempting to fish out crawdads from the cement pipes in weir boxes used for irrigation.

"I think it would be dangerous if you were a little kid in the groves, you could fall into a standpipe," Alayne said.

"Yeah, that was half the fun," Barbara replied.

Barbara would get into trouble jumping from furrow to furrow, not because she was getting her clothes dirty or because it had the potential to be unsafe, but because the groves needed water.

One day after church Tita encountered a man that would change the city.

"We would go to mass every Sunday morning with grandmother and mother and when we got home, they would unleash us in the grove to run around and burn off steam," she said, remembering being around 10 years old.

"That's when we see this guy on top of the snack bar (at the Orange drive-in) with a cross on top of it preaching."

The man with a cross that caused her farmer grandfather to take off his straw hat in the field to scratch his head turned out to be Rev. Robert Schuller.

This grove was where Tita, a 5th generation Orange resident, was introduced to working in the citrus industry, more than a decade before boxing fruit in a packing house.

Her grandfather picked more oranges in the off-season, when the packing-houses were closed, so he started an open-air market next to his grove and the highway. When her 18-year-old mother married a 20-year-old Navy sailor, Tita's grandfather gave him one year to make a profit on the fruit stand. But what if he failed?

"My grandfather said 'If you can make it go, I will give you the business, if you don't, then you can get the hell out,'" Tita said chuckling. That moment became a life-long family memory.

The kids would help out in the fruit stand. Tita sold freshly-cut flowers to the shoppers.

It was expansion that led her grandfather to rely on fruit stands more than his grove, the same city growth that would ultimately push groves out of the city. Herbert became a wholesaler, selling fruit from the growers to Santiago Orange Growers Association and other co-ops, taking the fruit and delivering it around the county.

During the summer, it was a treat for her and one of her brothers to climb into Herbert's dark green truck with a wooden flat-bed and head out to deliver the fruit. Their delivery route included an iconic open-air market on the coast where they served date shakes that the children enjoyed.

Tita's family was pushed off their grove by the state continuing to expand the freeway. Most of the other growers submitted to cutting the trees down voluntarily.

"My dad always said 'If the land is worth more than \$6,000, then you should do something with it besides grow oranges,'" Alayne said.

And that's just what her father did.

Military men who lived and worked on one of the three local bases during the war learned to love the Southern California life. Their return to Southern California after the war created a need for housing.

"They saw it was a much better place to live than shoveling snow back east," Alayne said. The same reason the growers had come.

"Life got bigger," Tita said. The changes continue decades later. "It's unbelievable that it can change so much."

Tita misses the smell of the orange blossoms that used to flood the spring-time night air, a smell that reminds her of her childhood.

"I wanted to pack oranges because my mother had, and as a part of the tradition of Orange, to be able to say 50 years later 'I packed oranges here,'" Tita said.

The future generations of locals were not as lucky. The packing-houses around the city began closing, and Santiago Orange Growers Association closed in 1967 and became Villa Park Orchards Association.

The smell of sweet citrus that used to fill the air, and the scent of the oncoming Valencia season soon disappeared with the groves.

During the decline, Villa Park Orchards Association kept the conveyer belts busy with citrus from neighboring counties; it eventually made little sense to keep such a business in place when the land was nearly barren of citrus and worth more money to sell than keep alive.

Villa Park Orchards Association moved their operations up to Ventura County full time after 2005, where oranges continued to blossom. For several years after its departure, H&H Avocado Company kept the produce tradition alive in the building, but not for long. Cardboard boxes with logos remain, covered in dust and forgotten, on the building's barren bottom floor.

It seemed that produce was a thing of the past for the once-bustling building when the doors closed. Only echoes of the train horns that once made the building so desirable remained.

People continued to come to the building for years after the closures, hoping to find fresh fruit and vegetables, but alas the produce had travelled to another town.

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Part II of the Villa Park Orchards Packinghouse will be released on Thursday, October 1, 2015. Subscribe to [*The Paper Trail*](#), our free subscription newsletter, to receive our monthly installments of Small Towne Short Stories.

Alyssa Duranty graduated as an English major with an emphasis in journalism from Chapman University after serving as an editor at The Panther Newspaper. An Orange County Press Club scholarship winner and member, she quickly excelled at The Orange County Register where she commonly writes breaking news and articles on public safety. Her writing has also been featured in The Los Angeles Register and The Press-Enterprise. She has also been a guest on KFWB radio. Her knowledge of Orange County, its perks and quirks, is always growing and evolving to uncover new stories and culture.

Villa Park Orchards Association truck with orange boxes, 1960. Salvadore Felix unloading filled boxes of Villa Park Orchard Association Sunkist oranges off flatbed truck in 1960. Johnny Pesina is at the left by the conveyor belt. Packing plant located at 10121 S. Santiago Boulevard, Villa Park, California. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.