



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

Throughout the years, planting, farming and selling oranges has never been just about making money, it's been about maintaining community. Today it has remained a local labor of love.

Although times have changed, the orange hasn't changed much, while now it has more labels attached: Organic, non-GMO, locally grown. One hundred years ago, during simpler times, they were merely known as Navel or Valencia.

In the City of Orange, it was Sunkist that reigned supreme and part of its kingdom was the Santiago Orange Growers Association, a packing house that not only produced and packed highly sought fruit starting in the 1900s, but served as a community hub.

The City of Orange was once fueled by the fruit, beauty pageants, and festivals were named after the orange bulbs, so it was no wonder that today the history is remembered alongside the sweet blossom scent.

While the smell left the City of Orange many decades ago, there are still pockets of trees around the county and second-generation growers who are keeping the tradition alive.

Travel about 15 miles east of the former Santiago Orange Growers Association packing-house, and the orange scent can be found among rows of green trees, a sight that once dominated Orange.

Don Neff, the son of a Washington wheat farmer, rides on a motorized cart underneath the tree canopies. The summer heat is so strong that even the shade can't keep the sweat at bay.

He briefly stops at spots on the 25-acre Yorba Linda ranch to check out the new irrigation system and inspect for hazardous bugs.

While on Neff Ranch it's easy to forget that it is in Orange County.

"Except for the freeway noise," Don said with a laugh, standing next to the gently-moving rapids of the Santa Ana River that sits on the east side of the property.

The apartment complexes and large, packed-in housing tracks surrounding the groves may also give some indication that the county has urbanized since the first trees were planted in the 1940s.

But although the land has changed, the agricultural mindset and picking techniques have remained the same.

Don uses a small, hand-held scissor-like tool to remove a grown orange bulb from its former leafy home.

"You have to cut as close to the fruit as possible, or else the stems will poke through the skin of the other oranges," Neff said, examining the fruit for imperfections before slicing into the shiny skin with a blade dulled by years of acidic juice.

While technology has advanced, tools have evolved. The local farmers never messed with a good thing and still use the same style sheers.

When Leo Castro's wife, Helen Poblano Castro, worked in the Santiago Orange Growers Association in 1950, she checked the fruit while wearing white cotton gloves to make sure the stems were fully removed before adding the fruit to boxes.

"If the paper-wrapped fruit was out of line or the stem was up on the orange, the box would be returned and dumped," Helen recounted to her husband. "Then we'd have to start all over."

It was during Helen's time as a sorting girl that the Mexican children at the nearby Cypress Street Barrio would clip oranges from the trees – as far as they could reach without a ladder – and place them into a shoulder sack that would hold about 75 fruit at capacity.

Orange trees with fruit at the top and barren bottoms were left in the short boys' wake.

Sixty-five years later, although technology has advanced and the majority of the county has moved on to less-green pastures, Neff Ranch's fruit has made its way

back to the packing house, which was renamed Villa Park Orchards Association in the 1960s after a change of management.

Don said they continued to bring oranges to the Villa Park Orchards Association packing house until the conveyer belts inside made their final fruit rotations in 2005.

Since then, he only takes half his 3,000-pound orange crop to out-of-county processing plants, mostly located in the central valley where citrus trees are still abundantly planted on cheaper land.

"Packing houses only pay out one to two times a year and that wasn't enough for weekly financial needs," Don said.

This is the way it always was, although young banks, like the city's first Bank of Orange founded in 1886, provided loans to local growers during the local orange growing boom at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By 1929, 820,000 boxes of oranges were processed by just one of the packinghouses in Orange.

Today many of the farmers uprooted the trees, sold off the land and became comfortable with housing tracks.

Don is an exception.

He and his small crew have created a system to pick, pack, and produce quality oranges once a week before selling at farmers markets.

Although farmers markets have always existed, once known locally as open-air markets, their resurgence is a recent phenomenon that has re-connected communities with their food.

It's this trend that has brought oranges – and an array of other locally-grown goods back to the Villa Park Orchards Association a decade later.

Megan Penn grew up in Orange and learned of the beauty of farmers markets while studying in Central California.

After moving back to Orange and starting a family, she decided that her hometown of Orange needed similar markets.

She searched across the city, to no avail. As if summoned, the Orange Home Grown Farmers and Artisans Market was born thanks to Megan and friend Betsy Elliott in 2011 at the former Villa Park Orchards Association.

"It started really organically," Megan said. "It was just talking to people. We wanted fresh food."

Neff's oranges travel to the market every Saturday morning and sit among white-tented booths where berries, nuts, carrots, and kale all wait to find a new home.

The once-a-weekend market serves more than just a place to buy local produce, it's revived the community hub that the packing house was always known for by making it a place for neighbors to come meet, share stories and create them too.

"It's cool seeing life being brought back to this place, at least one day a week," Megan said.

Dean Kim, the executive artisan baker at the Orange-based OC Baking Company, doesn't sell his locally-famous bread at the market for profit; he regularly breaks even, but that's not why he keeps coming back.

"You have to give back to the community that pays you," Kim said. "Baking bread is a sign of friendship and I love this town. I have a business here, I live here. You have to be good to the community and the community will be good to you."

Today, the reminder of an orange-picking past remains both at the Orange Home Grown Farmers and Artisans Market and at Neff Ranch.

The screams of excitement from the kids that used to run around and play at the Santiago Orange Growers Association packing house have now been replaced with the cheers of children listening to the live music and eating berries in the same parking lot.

Concrete tubes and dry standpipes are strewn across Neff Ranch, serving as memorials to the grove's past while sitting next to the orange trees of the farmers market's future.

Don admits that a farmer never has and never will get rich from picking produce, but it's not money that has driven him to the farmer's market and driven Megan to start it.

It's community.

"The only way a farmer is going to get rich is by selling land to developers, but we're up keeping Orange County heritage and keeping good people employed," Don said.

"I get to produce a little, tiny product to take to the farmers market that people love and I get a lot of reward from that."

While the scenery on Don's route to the packing house has changed, dramatically, he's going to a place where his oranges continue to serve as reminders of The City of Orange's history and sense of community.

Megan reminds us, "We're preserving a legacy."

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Part III of the Villa Park Orchards Packinghouse will be released on Thursday, November 5, 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.

Packing oranges in Southern California orchard, ca. 1900. Workers are packing oranges in the fields to conserve time. Image shows view in a Southern California grove, with workers standing on ladders picking fruit, with packers sitting with crates on the ground packing oranges. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.