

CHAPTER ONE

FARM AND FAMILY

I remember us kids laying down in the shed, going to sleep on top of the walnuts in the bins with the dryer blowing hot air through the walnuts. Mom and Dad worked around the clock, twenty-four hours. This was during the walnut harvest, October through November 1. The walnuts were our main crop; so that's the reason why we ran around the clock like that. Mom would bring us outside with her to keep an eye on us while she was working. My mother took care of the walnut dehydrator.

We always had a lot of fun lying down on top of the walnuts. The heat would rise up there, so it was always nice and warm. It's in a great big shed — it holds up to about fifty bins — and we have this great big blower that blows air underneath the bins. Here's how the walnuts are dried: The bins have metal on the bottom, and they have holes in that metal; so the dry air goes up through the walnuts, and that dries the walnuts. The blower is heated with propane gas to be able to blow the hot air underneath the tunnel where all the air goes up to heat the walnuts — to dry them off.

We were laying on top of the walnuts inside the bins where the hot air came up. The bin doesn't have anything on top. We were laying on the walnuts — on top of themselves, and we kept warm by the warm air coming up underneath the tunnel. The blower dries about sixteen bins at a time, because there's three different

sections, and each section has sixteen bins. It usually takes one to two days to dry the walnuts. After the walnuts are dried, then we have these big semi-trucks and we have a conveyor belt that runs in between.

You have your walls to protect the bin area and a walkway in between the bins. Underneath that walkway is a conveyor belt. When they're dry, we lift up this handle, and that opens up the bin, and all the walnuts come out. Then, they go up the conveyor belt into the semi-truck, and the semi-truck goes down to San Jose, California, and they're processed there.

We were in different bins. There was room for two people in the bins, but most of the time we wanted our own bin. The feeling — to describe it — it just felt so incredible, because you're all stretched out with all of these walnuts, and that hot air coming up to be able to keep you warm. Mom was always around those bins so she could keep working. Then, she would take us into the house.

What happens is that during December through, I would say, probably March, the trees are dormant, so there's no leaves or anything. The walnuts start as flowers and what we call a catkin. And a catkin is like a caterpillar ... it's hard to describe. Then, the catkin drops off and pollinates the flower, and then it forms a green husk. The green husk breaks apart, I would say, in the month of October or so. When they start doing that, it's time to start the walnut harvest. The walnut is taken off the tree by shaking the tree; then the walnuts fall down to the ground. What's left of the walnuts is just the walnut shell — like everyone knows about. If that green husk doesn't come off, that means the walnut is still too green.

I grew up on a farm of walnuts, and almonds, and prunes — about 400 acres of land. My dad and mom did a lot of

commercial work — that's where a lot of the other people who owned orchards, we did their orchards for them. My father built the business up from a small twenty acres that he and his father bought, up all the way to 800 acres. We harvest over a thousand acres each year, including the commercial work. That took them about twenty years to be able to do that. That's where he really built his reputation up.

My brother Greg was the main one who always loved the farm; he really participated in every way he could — in everything — as he was growing up. He was the more active one of the family with the farm. I always hated the farm because I had to get up early in the morning. Us kids were always out there at 6 a.m. picking the prunes.

I remember my mom almost had a heart attack because she saw Greg when he was about ... I think it was about four years old ... driving the forklift out on the farm. He always had to be out there with Dad, moving the equipment, being a part of the action. Dad let him take the risk of driving the tractor around the yard — that was okay with my father. And it was okay for my mom too, but Mom was a little more scared of the situation than my father was.

Greg was the third one out of all of us. When Greg was born, I wanted him to be a horse; that did not work out. I wanted a horse so bad that my mom and dad got me this play horse — a wooden horse. That's where I rock back and forth. But I wanted a real horse.

I had a sister that was born in front of me, Nancy. She was one year older than I was — a year and two months. Then came me, and then came my brother, Greg, and then came my sister Kathy.

My older sister, Nancy, was always the one who protected me — always the one to make sure I was okay. I remember that

somehow I got mad at her for something. I ended up scratching her face, and she has this tiny scar right down the middle. I got grounded for that, but Nancy always forgave me. She was the type of person who really stood up for everybody and really had a lot of fun doing it, too, I think. She also really loved to sing.

My younger sister, Kathy, was born on the day of the Red Bluff Rodeo Roundup. We were staying over at some friends' house, and Dad said, "You got a baby sister."

And I said, "I don't want a baby sister!"

I wanted a brother to be able to play baseball and basketball with. 'Cause Greg was so wrapped up in the farming, I didn't have anyone to really play with. It took a couple of years to get over it. Then I said, "Hey, I can do the things I wanted to do with my brother with her."

When she was about four years old, Kathy and I always went out and played basketball together — the hoops. We played one-on-one, Horse, Ring-Round-The-World. During the spring-time we always got our bats and balls, and I went out and pitched softball to her. Kathy just really developed: volleyball, basketball, and track and field were her things. In high school, she won a bunch of awards for her athletic ability. In fact, her whole room at my parents' house is just full of trophies and little plaques and the little medals she won — and it just was by being committed to her sports.

One of the things I really admire about all of my siblings is that they didn't get an ego — that pridefulness stayed out of it. Kathy is one of the most down-to-earth people; Nancy, with her singing, is one of the most down-to-earth people, too, that anyone could be able to meet. You do not see this pridefulness. They have been able to keep that separate, and I think one of the reasons why

they have been able to keep it separate is because of the parents we had. They taught us that you shouldn't get an ego. You should not get a prideful attitude about things, of your successes and everything. If you'd go the way that we went — with building our business on the basis of unpridefulness and honesty and being able to be trusted — you're gonna be able to make it in today's world situation. I think Mom and Dad laid the foundation for all of us kids; then we did the rest of the work.

We had a very small house to begin with. It was a living room with a porch, a small kitchen, a bathroom, and a small bedroom downstairs. It had an upstairs, and we had two bedrooms up there. One of the things that happened is, starting in I believe 1974, my mother and my father decided to add on and start making the house they wanted to have — as a family. So what happened is they knocked the porch out, and that became the living room — a great big living room type of situation, then the living room that was already there became the dining room. We had the kitchen still, and then we had the upstairs.

My grandfather was a carpenter and built houses. They used to live in a little town called Chico, which is thirty-five miles south of Red Bluff. When my father was in fifth grade, my grandfather decided to move up to the Red Bluff area. They moved into the house I grew up in — on twenty acres. From that twenty acres, my father decided to make a commitment that he was going to be a farmer the rest of his life; so he started borrowing money from the bank and buying different orchards. That's how he started out. He wanted to be able to build his business up. He was a master at being able to negotiate and how to be able to be fair on the bottom line. The most important thing about my father is that he did not want to cheat anybody out of anything. If he saw

something that was cheating, he wouldn't do it. It was just really incredible in the way he mastered his own business situation.

My mother grew up in Chehalis, Washington, on a little farm. She always picked strawberries during the summer. That was her summer job, and she always saved money. She always worked on some kind of farm, but her goal in life was to be a teacher. She moved from Washington to California after graduation from college to be able to help her mother, because her mother was in California and was not doing well. And she settled in Red Bluff, and she met my father at a church function. It was love at first sight. Back in 1959 is when they got married. She was a teacher for three years at Red Bluff High School right before she got pregnant with me; then after I was born, she gave up teaching and just became a housewife. Then, after a housewife, she ran the farm with Dad. They were both Christians, so they were very committed in their relationship with God.

When I was a baby, I remember my father — in the sixties. Before they come up with what we called irrigation pipes and sprinklers, we used to flood irrigate. The whole orchard had to be disced up into a canal type of situation so water could reach certain areas throughout the whole orchard. It would probably be like half an acre at a time to be able to have water all over the ground. My father would lay down at night, because you would flood irrigate at like 2 a.m. in the morning, and he would lay down and he would sleep out in the field. What happened is he would lay down in the canal ditch, and then the water rose high enough and hit him in the face and that would tell him to get up and move on to the next section — to unshovel for the next little half an acre.

During part of the year we have what we call “frost protection” where the almonds are out in bloom. My father was a man

who had to get up whenever the frost alarm went off. Usually they set it at thirty-five, and the freezing temperature is thirty-two. What we did ... he always woke people up — all the workers that worked for us — and we had to go out and light what we called “smudge pots.” They were a round barrel type of thing full with diesel, and then you light it to be able to keep the tree warm — to protect the nuts and the blooms. We always went out and lighted those things by hand. Every minute counted, because it’s getting cold. This is how we provide for our family.

Everyone loved my father because he really always gave. He gave his time to his kids, and he was a man that always was trusted by everybody because of the way he presented himself — the way he did business when he made contracts with other farmers. He was a guy who would always not look out for himself, who could settle for anything in negotiation. He always gave to people; he let people borrow a lot of equipment.

A couple of the places that my father and my mom bought over the years had houses on the property; so they have always let some of the workers that were year-round to be able to stay there ... staying in the homes. That way they could be able to get ahead for themselves. They never charge ’em any rent, so it was part of the benefits situation — that if you stayed with us all year round, you got a house. During harvest, I would say, there was about thirty people all together that worked, but then we only kept about six people all year round.

We had a lot of great workers — a lot of great people. It was a really big thing for my father to administrate that and, on top of it, do everything else. He was a man who was very committed to work and very committed to his family — to his wife — making sure there was enough for everybody in the family. He went the extra mile to make sure things did not break down.