

## **Introduction**

In 1977 the Regional History Project received special funding to conduct a series of oral history interviews documenting the agricultural history of Santa Cruz County. In the course of conducting background research for the project, several individuals strongly suggested that Alvin Richardson be interviewed because he could well describe the experience of family farming in Santa Cruz County.

Alvin C. Richardson was born on Beach Road in Watsonville, California on October 5, 1908. His grandfather had arrived in the Pajaro Valley in 1858, where he began the family farm on Beach Road. This is the place where Richardson's father was born. In the late 19th century the family raised potatoes on Beach Road. In 1890 Richardson's grandfather began to grow apples on a hundred-acre ranch along Green Valley Road. In the 1920s Richardson's father raised sweet peas on the Beach Road property, and Alvin remembered fondly the decorative tubs of sweet peas that his father provided him with on his wedding day in 1929.

Richardson grew up in Watsonville, attended Watsonville High School, and spent his entire life in the Pajaro Valley. At the time of this interview in 1977 he had lived at his farm on Buena Vista Drive since 1934. Except for a brief

stint at Permanente in Moss Landing during World War II, Richardson completely devoted himself to farming. He primarily raised bush berries.

In this oral history conducted on May 6, 1977 at Richardson's home on Buena Vista Drive, he discusses in detail varieties of berries grown throughout the years, the labor and capital requirements of farming, and the challenges of marketing and distribution. Finally his older sister, Ruth Johnson, joined the interview to share her remarkable early recollections of the family farm, as well as describe some of the diaries and ledgers still in the family's possession.

Alvin Richardson died at Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz County in May 1998. He was eighty-nine years old. Copies of the manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; in Special Collections at McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz; and at the Pajaro Valley Historical Association in Watsonville. The Project is supported administratively by Christine Bunting, head of Special Collections and Archives, and Acting University Librarian, Robert White.

—Irene Reti  
Regional History Project  
McHenry Library  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
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## **Early Life**

**Jarrell:** Where were you born?

**Richardson:** I was born on the Beach Road, October 5, 1908. You can almost see it right down here on the flat on the Beach Road.

**Jarrell:** Now your family—were they farmers?

**Richardson:** They were farmers. My father's father was a sailor on one of the clipper ships.

**Jarrell:** To China?

**Richardson:** No, no, he used to go around and he came up the coast here and jumped ship in San Francisco and settled here in the Pajaro Valley. He was a first mate, on all the ships. And he worked out at the Kelly Thompson area. Whether there was a Kelly Thompson at that time or not, I don't know, but they worked there. Then he bought his own piece of property in 1858 on the Beach Road. My father and his two sisters and brother were born there on the Beach Road. Then he bought a piece on the Green Valley Road, the Ryder's apple shed years later, I don't know when. It was when there was no buildings there on it at all.

**Jarrell:** Yes. Just nothing.

**Richardson:** There was nothing there. I know it was something like thirty dollars an acre they paid for it at that time. What year this was I don't know. My sister would probably know.

**Jarrell:** And did your father meet your mother around here?

**Richardson:** She was a school teacher and taught in Calabasas; she taught in Railroad, and she taught in Roche School when my father met her. She was married in 1904.

**Jarrell:** And you were then born in 1908. Now, your father was a farmer.

**Richardson:** Yes. His father was a farmer, so to speak. After being a sailor why he went into the farming business, and my father was a farmer. He raised apples over on the Freedom property and their basic crop on the Beach Road was potatoes.

**Jarrell:** That was big in those days, hops and potatoes.

**Richardson:** Each farmer had an allotment according to what their acreage was. They would meet at the railroad station and bring their wagonload, how many potatoes they were allocated, and load them on the trains. They would go to San Francisco, and I guess from there go to wherever they were to be delivered. I don't know where.

**Jarrell:** So that was sort of an informal marketing mechanism to give everybody a shot.

**Richardson:** And the men would get together and put them in. I guess every man in the country was in trouble with a hernia because of handling these huge sacks of potatoes.

**Jarrell:** (laughter) Could you talk a little about growing up and when you were a little boy, your education and what work you had to be responsible for?

**Richardson:** Well, we moved from the Beach Road to Freedom in 1911. I was three years old then, and as a growing-up child I don't remember too much about it until I got old enough when I had to take care of the chores, milk the cows and do a few chores around, and help with the garden. We roamed the Corralitos Creek as brothers and sisters. We just had the freedom of all the country. So when we were over there in the Freedom area there was probably one, two, three, four, five, six—about ten houses were all there were within a quarter of a mile, and there was eighty acres at that time of the original property, property that still remained in the family. The rest had been sold off. The corner there still at Green Valley and what is now Freedom Boulevard was full of mud holes and ponds and they used to hunt ducks there as late as July. My father's father sold it off because he said, "You can't farm it anyway." That's where Stuart Avenue and down as far as the Veteran's Hall, that corner was sold off. So, the rest of the ranch was all put in orchard. My dad raised, on the Beach Road for years, sweet peas, and when my wife and I were married in 1929, we had tubs of sweet peas for our wedding decorations. You could imagine the Beach Road area where they've

raised lettuce, broccoli, or whatever. Now that was entirely sweet peas from where the Granite Construction office is now clear to the Beach Road.

**Jarrell:** My goodness.

**Richardson:** One field of sweet peas.

**Jarrell:** Well, when you were a young boy what would you say your father's total acreage was that he owned?

**Richardson:** His ownership was forty acres and he farmed the other three pieces. It was divided into four pieces for the two sisters, the brother and himself. He owned the one piece and he farmed the other three on a share basis for the other relatives, for his two sisters and the brother.

**Jarrell:** There was land in orchards.

**Richardson:** Most of the land there was in orchards and the Beach Road was in alfalfa and open ground for beans and potatoes.

**Jarrell:** And how did he do his work? Did he have a hired man?

**Richardson:** He had a hired man. That was Johnny Meister, one of the boys that did most all of the work for him as a hired man and the two of them did practically all the work that would be done. They had eight horses, four teams of horses, and they did all the work with horses before the innovation of tractors.

**Jarrell:** Oh, yes. And that would mean that he had the one piece that was forty acres and then the three other pieces . . .

**Richardson:** There was 160 acres.

**Jarrell:** 160 acres then. One man and another person that he hired. And where did you go to school?

**Richardson:** I went to school in Watsonville. Went to that primary school that was situated where Zenker's Appliance store is now, there on . . . Let's see, Zenker's and that savings and loan on the corner, that used to be a school building there. I think there was first, second, and third grades there. Then the old grammar school, which was where the YMCA now is, where that shopping center is on . . . that was an old school building there. I went there as a child. Walked to school every day from Freedom—2 1/2 miles.

**Jarrell:** Today they complain if they have to walk 2 1/2 blocks. (laughter)

**Richardson:** Yeah.

**Jarrell:** And then you went to high school here?

**Richardson:** Yes. I went to high school here. I'm a strange person. I've stayed here in the valley. I guess I'm one of those people that has never left the county. We've lived on this place here since 1934.

**Jarrell:** Really.

**Richardson:** See my wife was . . . The lower ranch, the lower fifteen acres, was deeded to her, and then I bought this twenty-two acres above here in 1945. We've lived here since 1934.

**Jarrell:** When you got out of high school what did you do?

**Richardson:** Well, first thing I did was we got married and went to her father's place in Dubuque, Iowa, worked for him until the "crash" in 1929, and came back to the ranch where I could hang my hat. Then I went to work at a high school as a custodian, a jack-of-all-trades, and whatnot. During that time when we were at the high school, we had the fifteen acres down there and I farmed that a little on the side. Then, during the war, they told me that I had to get some more strategic business, so I went to work for Permanente out here at Moss Landing as a machinist for four years. Then I really went to farming on my own in 1946.

**Jarrell:** Exclusively.

**Richardson:** Yeah, on this ranch, yeah. My wife taught school and I farmed here on this ranch.

**Jarrell:** It seems rather ironic that as a farmer you're told to get into something more strategic for the war effort.

**Richardson:** Well, that's what they told me. They said that what you are doing as a farmer, this fifteen acres down here wasn't enough to make it

strategic. They told me I had to get into something else, so I went down to Permanente and went to work.

**Jarrell:** Until 1946. Between you and your wife then, you own this whole acreage, right here in Buena Vista.

**Richardson:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** When you started farming here what did you start by growing, primarily, in the 1940s.

### **Bush Berries**

**Richardson:** We started with bush berries. You see them down there, 'lollies [ollalieberries] and boysens and then I have some marions now, but at that time it was primarily logans and boysens, and I've been in the berry business ever since.

**Jarrell:** How many acres of berries do you have?

**Richardson:** About ten acres of berries. There are about seventeen or eighteen acres of open ground being farmed and then the rest is in pasture or brush. There's about twenty-nine acres of it that is friable and is to be used for farming.

**Jarrell:** So, primarily then, when you started out you were growing various kinds of berries. How did you decide what crops to grow?

**Richardson:** I don't know. I just went into the berries and it's paid off for me over the years. The land out here, doesn't, to me, lend itself and the acreage I have to row crops. My water is a little bit short for handling this much acreage. I have to watch it pretty close to get coverage for the whole ranch.

**Jarrell:** Now that is not a recent thing you're talking about? This goes back?

**Richardson:** Well, we drilled the well in 1934, and we were just about to give the ranch up because it was dry farming, and it was mortgaged against it. We said, "Well, there's no warrant in keeping it." We had this possibility of having a well drilled. If we got water, why fine. If we didn't get water they weren't going to charge us too much to get the well drilled. Everybody was looking for a job in 1934. There weren't any jobs really. It was during the depression time and the Japanese had the money and the well rig, and so they said we'll drill the well. If we get water, fine. If we don't get water, why it won't cost you too much. So, we said, "Let's throw another hundred dollars with it and forget about it." We got water and of course we've been here ever since.

**Jarrell:** So this recent 1977 drought isn't too surprising to you because you've been . . .

**Richardson:** No, in 1924 we went through another one. My father knew about it, and I remember it. They had a hard time getting enough water at that time. When there weren't so many wells being drilled and so much draft on the water that was here, at that time, they still had a hard time taking care

of irrigation. This drought—we're little concerned that our well will continue, but it hasn't bothered yet. We don't know just what the situation will be.

**Jarrell:** So, it's mostly berries then?

**Richardson:** I raise beans for seed mostly. I've been raising beans for Charter Seed since 1946, and I've primarily raised, if I could get them, what they call a King Mammoth bean that seems to produce better on the sandy soil than any other type of bean. It gives me a good crop and if I can get a contract for that, why I raise it every year. But if I can't, like this year I won't be able to get it, I raise small whites. Beans has been used in my operation here . . . well, this is a rotation crop.

**Jarrell:** Yes, I've read about that. That's very healthful for the soil.

**Richardson:** To take a few berries out and put a few berries in and use the beans as a rotation crop. It's not a hard crop to raise and it builds your soil back up again so for about seven years you can go back into berries again and they do pretty good.

**Jarrell:** Have you ever grown any strawberries?

**Richardson:** This whole ranch has been in strawberries on rental by Japanese.

**Jarrell:** When was that? This very land that we . . .

**Richardson:** The first was in 1930. Before I bought this piece up here, they had strawberries in the lower piece in 1936, 1937. When the war came we had three Japanese families and they were moved out. At that time, Mr. Hyde took over the berry field here and Mr. Tuttle operated it for him. After that I've had three different Japanese rentals for short periods of time. The whole ranch has been under strawberries at some time or another.

**Jarrell:** That's very interesting. Now why do you not have strawberries? I'm just curious.

**Richardson:** Oh, I don't know. It's just the hassle of renting the ground, and the break away from the berries with the minimum amount of water and strawberries needing a maximum amount of water. For me to use the water and for them to use the water is quite a hassle. I'm contemplating renting again, but when I do I want to just say, "Here's the whole ranch. Give us a price for it and it's yours."

**Jarrell:** Yes. And you would continue to live here.

**Richardson:** I would live in the little . . . take care of the orchard and my farm would be this little acre around the house.

**Jarrell:** Right.

**Richardson:** When you get close to seventy years old you think twice before you go out doing very much.

**Jarrell:** Have your per acre yields of berries, or whatever crops, increased dramatically over the years for you?

**Richardson:** No, they haven't increased. Boysenberries have dropped off. Loganberries that we used to raise in the area—they completely phased out. I guess it was a disease or something, but we just don't seem to be able to raise loganberries in this area again. They come out of the Northwest but people raise them here and they'll get maybe two years of production and that's it, where they used to raise them for maybe seven or eight years. They just can't seem to keep them going. Boysenberries phase out after eight or ten years, twelve years. This patch in front is twelve years old and it doesn't look very good. Ollalieberries—before I put those in, I had a trial acreage of about half an acre, and the eleventh year it produced more than it did the third year, which is supposed to be the big year. The eleventh year it produced more. The peculiar thing about this—every other year it increased. It would drop back and then it would increase, and drop back and increase. The eleventh year the half acre produced more than it did the third year. So, I put in five acres of ollalies down there and this year it looks like one of those bumper years.

## **Labor**

**Jarrell:** What kind of labor is required for these particular berry crops throughout the year?

**Richardson:** I used to take care of it all myself—cultivation and spraying and irrigation. One man can take care of all the necessary work on ten acres, except for the picking. My average number of laborers for picking . . . let's see, about thirty-five. I have had as many as fifty-five at one week. But they would come and then the next week, they wouldn't be there. The average would be about thirty-five. They'll come for one week and then they won't pick any more.

**Jarrell:** That's it.

**Richardson:** That's it. They just don't care and those that do like to pick berries will stay with you. You have a varying amount of crates picked by different people. Those that can really pick berries will make pretty good money, and those that goof off and don't care too much, they won't do too much. I had ladies last year that paid as high as \$160 a week, and I had children paid as high as, maybe \$15 a week. It's one of those things. Would you like a run-down on this?

**Jarrell:** Oh, I'd love it.

**Richardson:** One lady here, her weekly paycheck was eighty-six dollars for the same period of time, \$20.45. Another person for the same period of time \$17.51.

**Jarrell:** Quite a variation.

**Richardson:** Let's see if I can find another one here. Well, here's \$63.34 for the same period of time. \$34.65 for the same length of time.

**Jarrell:** Is this a piece rate?

**Richardson:** This is on a piece rate, yes.

**Jarrell:** And these are cartons or what is . . .

**Richardson:** Crates. Those would be crates. This is at \$1.25 a crate. I was just looking for the, for these ladies that came late.

**Jarrell:** Where do you get these people to work for you?

**Richardson:** A lot of people come back year after year and then they tell people about it. They just come in and ask for work. I've had a lot of people ask already for jobs this berry season. I had one lady, that when I had berries up here, that would come at seven o'clock in the morning and by noon she had forty acres picked, and you made her twenty dollars a day. This was when they were paying fifty cents a crate, and she made here twenty dollars a day by noon every day.

**Jarrell:** Very industrious.

**Richardson:** Yeah. People right along beside them would make three dollars in the same period of time. If you apply yourself you can do it. As a boy, when I used to pick berries, my dad had berries in among the apple trees, as a boy I used to pick... At the time we paid what would be fourteen cents for a

crate of berries that we're paying \$1.10 for now, I made thirty-four dollars a week picking berries.

**Jarrell:** That's a lot of money.

**Richardson:** The kids today can't make thirty-four dollars a week at \$1.10 a crate.

**Jarrell:** Well, I don't know what that says.

**Richardson:** The kids just don't know how to work. See, I started working when I was seven years old. Of course the child labor law won't let you do that any more, and people never learn how to really get out and work.

**Jarrell:** Yes. I'm in agreement. Have you encountered problems over the years in getting an adequate labor supply?

**Richardson:** No. I've never had any problem. They come and you put them to work, and you tell the neighbors about it and they come. I've never had any problem. A lot of people have problems.

## **Economics of Farming**

**Jarrell:** I'd like to talk about the economics of family farming. You have about forty acres, would you say?

**Richardson:** About forty acres. About twenty-nine of it is being farmed.

**Jarrell:** Okay. So that's a rather small size for a farm. I think, according to the the farm census, the average farm is somewhere around 129 acres.

**Richardson:** That's in this area?

**Jarrell:** In the whole valley. It's an average though, and it takes into account the really large-scale and the small-scale [farms]. What have been your capital requirements over the year?

**Richardson:** That would be what you consider as gross expenses?

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Richardson:** This question, over the years, is hard to relate to because of the increase of costs. When I first started farming, my gross expenses would be about ten or twelve thousand dollars. Last year, you can take over the period of years and say that this increase was gradual. This would be about \$28,000, the gross expenses this year. That's all I can base it on. I'd say my requirement for starting out in the berry season, when you have a lot of labor come in, I like to have about \$2000 or \$3000 cash on hand to pay for the picking.

**Jarrell:** I see.

**Richardson:** To pay for the picking, that's all I need, see. Because there is always a backlog of . . . By the time you send your berries to market, it may be two weeks before you get your first check. To pay for the pickers, that's all I need, see.

**Jarrell:** So you need a little margin there.

**Richardson:** You need a little margin. But after the first check comes in, then it'll come in weekly after that so you don't have any problems. Of course, you can borrow money, but the last ten years I've been trying to operate without borrowing money.

**Jarrell:** I don't want to probe your financial matters, but at some point I'd like to ask you about people entering farming. The costs of that are quite exorbitant. I want to get a notion of what these figures are.

**Richardson:** I would have to do a little bit of figuring on that to make a statement of what it would cost to go into farming. If you're going in and renting land, that would be one thing. If you're going to buy land and go into farming, that would be another thing. If you're going to raise beans your costs are not as much. If you're going to raise berries then it's a tremendous cost. If you go into your field crops, like lettuce and row crops, I don't know much about them really. I don't know what the cost would be there.

**Jarrell:** They're quite exorbitant.

**Richardson:** If you can get the *Agricultural Bulletin* on raising of berries, they give you a run-down in that on the cost. That's pretty close to what the actual cost of going into berries would be. It seems to me that when I first started in raising berries that these figures were about six hundred dollars an

acre before you picked a berry. I imagine that now would maybe be three times that much cost. I couldn't say.

**Jarrell:** Well see, I was looking at one for lettuce, for instance, one of these same breakdowns of pre-harvesting costs, and that was, I think it was three hundred dollars an acre. But I know that strawberries are, by far and away, the most . . .

**Richardson:** By the time you rent your land and fumigate, plant your strawberries, and before you pick your berries you probably have grading of the land and some . . .

**Jarrell:** Then all that plastic mulch they use now . . .

**Richardson:** Probably some things I've missed. Your costs would be somewhere around \$1800 to \$2000 per acre. See, that's before you pick a berry.

**Jarrell:** Right.

**Richardson:** I'm guessing on this, but I feel that what it cost them to put berries in here . . . when Paul Howard put berries in here, his cost was \$1100.

**Jarrell:** Per acre.

**Richardson:** An acre. That was eight years ago.

**Jarrell:** And that was a lot.

**Richardson:** That's a lot of money.

**Jarrell:** It sure is.

**Richardson:** Well, it was more than that. That was when he finished up. It would be twelve years ago that he put in berries in here.

**Jarrell:** What, in your opinion, having experienced being a small scale farmer, what's the minimum efficient size of a farm which is within the capabilities of one family to operate now?

**Richardson:** This, again, depends on the product.

**Jarrell:** On the crop.

**Richardson:** Yeah. Bush berries, I'd say, on a hand-picked basis, would be—ten to twelve acres would be a profitable operation. If you are going into a larger operation, like some of these fellows out here with machine pick, you have to have twenty or twenty-five acres to amortize the machine. But there again, you don't get the quality of berries that you do on a hand-picked basis. There is a differential, there were the last years, on hand-picked berries and berries that were machine-picked, so I think you're paid well for raising the berries and picking them by hand. In my estimation.

**Jarrell:** You can make a living.

**Richardson:** I think you can.

**Jarrell:** So we're talking about very specialized kind of crops that are high yielders, in terms of money.

**Richardson:** And if you're going into beans, I think that possibly you would have to have three or four hundred acres to make a living wage. You see there's your costs. Your return on berries would be, oh, in an average year, I guess, say three thousand dollars an acre on bush berries. Your return on beans would be something like four hundred dollars an acre. You see that there's a great difference there.

**Jarrell:** In the return per acre.

**Richardson:** In the return per acre. I'm just taking a lot of this off of the top of my head, but I'm giving you a relative amount.

**Jarrell:** Comparisons, yes.

**Richardson:** But this is what my return was on this place. Now somebody else's may be different.

**Jarrell:** I'm sure a lot of it is dependent upon individual practices and efficiency and your knowledge and experience that you've built up. Now you made an interesting statement that you haven't required any kind of credit over the year, for the last ten years or so. Now just in my reading of mortgage rates in the county among farmers, that certainly has fluctuated, but one question I'd like to ask you, generally, not just about yourself, but,

do you think that bankers or lenders feel that a smaller farm is a worse credit risk than a larger unit?

**Richardson:** I looked at that question when I read it and still I can't answer it because I haven't been in a position to know. I've never had any trouble borrowing what I needed. Prior to this time, when we sold our Beach Road property, then that gave me cash to operate on so that I don't have to pay interest. This interest, up until that time, when I was borrowing money, just seemed the difference between me making money and breaking even, you see.

**Jarrell:** Just the interest was that margin.

**Richardson:** The margin. Of course, I do have a farm loan and I'm not about to close it out because, if the money that's there is five percent money.

**Jarrell:** That's right.

**Richardson:** See, and if I close it out, and then have to go borrow money, it's going to cost me ten percent, or thereabouts, so why pay that up while I've got this money in interest that's paying me seven percent interest against the five percent that they are charging. I'm making two percent on this money. There's no point, in my thinking, to close it out. I could, tomorrow or the next day, close it out, but why, if I'm making two percent off on it. I'm using their money, so to speak, is what it amounts to.

**Jarrell:** Have you noted a decline over the years that you've been here in Pajaro Valley, in the number of young farmers?

**Richardson:** I've been more or less of a loner out here in my own little forty acres and I haven't associated too much since 1948, I guess, with other farming people, farm groups. I was president of the Berry Growers Association for about four years, five years, and then that folded because of the lack of tonnage. We didn't have enough to pay our costs. There were a number of young men at that time. I think that if you find that, whoever the farmer is, if his son has come along and enjoys the farm, he's continued.

**Jarrell:** In taking it over.

**Richardson:** In taking it over. If he doesn't like farming, why he goes into something else.

**Jarrell:** So when the father retires, if he does have a son who's at all . . . has that tendency . . .

**Richardson:** I know that there's one young man out here that has taken over his dad's operation. I'm not really in a position to answer that.

**Jarrell:** So you'd say that except for being president of the Berry Growers Association, that basically you've kept to yourself.

**Richardson:** Yeah.

**Jarrell:** Is it out of any animosity, or are you just a loner?

**Richardson:** No, it's just that my activities are with the Kiwanas Club, with the church, and I raise a crop here and I seal it and . . . I haven't had any desire, really, to associate with farm groups. I belong to the Farm Bureau and I go to the meeting once in a while, but I just can't answer that question.

**Jarrell:** Do you subscribe to any journals or newspapers?

**Richardson:** The *Farm Journal* and *California Farmer*, *Farmers' Digest*.

**Jarrell:** Over the years have you had much to do with the UC Agricultural Extension or the advisors?

**Richardson:** Not too much. The only time that I've had . . . I had them check on some seed that I raised in Freedom one time for Certified Seed, and John Melendy was . . .<sup>1</sup>

**Jarrell:** Yes. He's retired now.

**Richardson:** They checked on that for Certified Seed. They have been up to the ranch and picked up samples of berries and plants and things. There hasn't been anybody here for a long time, checking on diseases and growths and quality of plants and berries and so forth. But I haven't seen anybody here, oh, in ten years, I guess.

**Jarrell:** Really.

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1. John Melendy was the Santa Cruz County Farm Advisor from 1946-1976. See *John Melendy: Santa Cruz County Farm Advisor*, an oral history published by the Regional History Project.

**Richardson:** Of course if I want to know something about berries, or a crop that I'm raising and I'm having trouble with, I can get the *Agricultural Bulletin* and it'll give me more satisfaction than the person. I get a bulletin and it tells all about what to do and how to treat it and I get a lot more satisfaction out of that than I do out of a person coming out and looking it up.

## Marketing

**Jarrell:** Speaking just of your berries, right now, to whom have you sold them, or through what means have you gotten rid of your acreages?

**Richardson:** When I first started berries I sold them through brokers that handled fresh berries in San Francisco and Los Angeles and Oakland, and sold them to Oliver and Buchwald, a processor in town. Ten years ago I started selling them on my own. We had a twenty-two cent price one year, and then because of an overabundance of berries, or something, the price went to six cents. That's what the processor would pay us. So I froze some that year myself, fourteen tons, and I advertised in the *San Jose Mercury*, and I had a cousin in Paso Robles, that was my liaison person there, and I sold them frozen to the housewife in thirty pound cartons. I sold fourteen tons of berries that way.

**Jarrell:** That way?

**Richardson:** That way.

**Jarrell:** Amazing.

**Richardson:** I delivered, in San Jose, to the housewife, to the door, to the home. In Paso Robles I went to my cousin's house and people came there and picked up the berries because that was too far to take and deliver. I deliver in San Jose, and I have maintained that program, and I deliver anywhere from ten to fourteen tons a year of my forty tons for the housewife. About half of what's left, I deliver to a broker. It goes fresh to San Francisco or to Los Angeles, and the other half—well, about a third goes to a processor. And those that I sell to the processor pay my cost of processing my berries that I freeze for myself. The year that we got six cents I sold every berry I had for twenty-one cents a pound, that I processed myself. So I've beat the market every year from five to seventeen cents per pound by selling to the housewife. We got a forty cent price three years ago, four years ago, and it dropped to twelve cents the next year. I still maintain that level of price to frozen berries and when I got twelve cents roadside here from the processor, I sold my berries for thirty-seven cents. The housewife is tickled to death to get them at that price.

**Jarrell:** That's right.

**Richardson:** Because Safeway, and practically all your stores at that time were selling one pound and four ounces for \$1.15, and I was selling mine for about forty-three cents per pound. The housewife was tickled to death to get them and it's a good price for me.

**Jarrell:** Yes. So that's a direct route. I have read in several studies on family farming, generally, not just about berries, that one of the problems with marketing arrangements, is that smaller volume farmers are at a disadvantage, definitely, no matter what the commodity is.

**Richardson:** Oh, yes. The farmer that raises thousands of tons of [a crop] that say, makes ten dollars a ton, so he makes ten thousand dollars. The farmer that raises one hundred tons, you see, what he comes out with is one thousand dollars and this makes it hard on him because his costs on a small scale are more actually than the large-scale costs.

**Jarrell:** It seems that you have, somehow in a limited way, but certainly fitting for your livelihood, you've overcome these disadvantages of marketing, to a certain extent.

**Richardson:** I feel that a person that would want to take a hold of this, they could sell every berry in this valley through this channel without any trouble.

**Jarrell:** Instead of the networks that they have statewide which are quite complicated actually. Have you ever participated in marketing orders?

**Richardson:** I was a director on the boysenberry marketing order for four or five years and this has fallen by the wayside. Just last year they quit because it was a boysenberry advisory board, and, well, boysenberries are phasing out. There weren't enough berries with the assessment to make it feasible to continue. So they just closed it out. See, in this advisory board there was no

amount of money to be disbursed. It actually was just enough to keep costs. The basis of the assessment was to take care of costs, and I guess there was maybe five hundred dollars, or something like that, and that was allotted to something. I don't remember what it was. Of course, when I sell beans to raise beans and sell them to anybody else that's in the warehouse, they're subject to a percentage on a marketing order for beans. I don't know just what it is but I notice the last year's crop of beans I sold to Jim Nielson, one item was at one percent—the marketing costs. Just what that would entail, I don't know, as my participation in the marketing order is that the money is taken out. But I can't help but feel that it has helped to show people what our product is, because most of these marketing orders are on an advertising basis, where they advertise the product so people will buy it.

**Jarrell:** It's like a promotion.

**Richardson:** It's definitely a promotion. That is what it is. Not that the price would be any greater, but they move a greater amount. You say there's an overproduction of some products. I defy you to find a can of boysenberries east of Ohio, unless it's a specialty store.

**Jarrell:** And then it will be \$1.69 for a little tiny can, probably.

**Richardson:** I don't know what it would be. We were on this tour. We said to somebody about we raised bush berries, "Well, what are bush berries?" And we told them to look in the store and see if they could find any, and let us know if they could find any. Somebody said, "Well, we were looking for

some boysenberries, wanted to make a boysenberry pie, and we couldn't find any." And they were in from Ohio and Georgia and North Carolina, North Dakota.

**Jarrell:** No luck.

**Richardson:** No luck.

**Jarrell:** I often have bought those boysenberries from Oregon. They're very well distributed. There's a very chatty little spiel on the back.

**Richardson:** You can find them in areas within a reasonable distance of where they're grown, I guess.

**Jarrell:** That's right, but back there in the East.

**Richardson:** Unless it's a specialty store you won't find them. I know that Frank Oliver now is putting up a product, what they call Big Valley berries. On the strength of what I was doing, he's packaging and selling at a lesser price. He's moving a tremendous lot of berries, and he's shipping them a lot into new areas, at a price. He's moving berries. In other words, he's making a small profit instead of a big profit on each pound of berries, and he's doing a lot better.

**Jarrell:** So, to get back just a moment to the Berry Growers Association. That was a cooperative organization among berry growers. What was its primary function, would you say?

**Richardson:** The primary function was to bypass, I think, the processor, who was offering us a certain price, when we, processing our own, could beat his price on the same market by two or three, maybe four cents. We could process the berries and sell them at his price, instead of taking the price that he would give us. We could sell the berries at his price and return to the grower that additional profit.

**Jarrell:** Would you say that, of your berries, that most of them go to a secondary market or a processing market. They're not sold fresh? They're canned or frozen.

**Richardson:** Those that the processor freezes maybe go into another channel, to pie, to jelly, to jam, to canned berries I don't know.

**Jarrell:** You just sell your berries.

**Richardson:** Yeah. But I know that Frank sells a lot to wine . . .

**Jarrell:** Oh yes. The fruit wines, I hadn't even thought of that.

**Richardson:** Yeah. He sells a lot to wine. Your poorer quality of berry will go for juice and it goes for wine. A good quality of berry would go for jam and jelly and pie.

## **Risks of Farming**

**Jarrell:** Over the years, what are the most serious risks that you have faced, and still face maybe, as a small-scale farmer?

**Richardson:** Well, I guess, loss of crop. (laughter)

**Jarrell:** The loss of your crop. Has that happened? You said that loss of crop was the worst risk . . .

**Richardson:** One of the things that would make you lose the crop, of course, would be insects or fungus or disease. Oh, I imagine there's . . . lack of water.

**Jarrell:** Have you ever been faced by an inability to sell your crop for one reason or another?

**Richardson:** No.

**Jarrell:** Do you know of farmers around here who have gone broke?

**Richardson:** Not really. I don't know of any man that . . . They've had a rough time of it, as far as berry growers are concerned, but I don't know of any that actually have gone broke. There undoubtedly are some around that I just didn't have association with.

**Jarrell:** Yeah. And just a final question. To what extent is there regional competition, in terms of an overview of our agriculture, between Santa Cruz County and Salinas producers of berries? I don't know if they grow that many berries down there.

**Richardson:** They don't grow any, what you might call cane berries or bush berries down in that area. Lots of strawberries and of course row crops are the main . . .

**Jarrell:** That's the main thing.

**Richardson:** I couldn't answer that question.

### **Ruth Johnson**

**Jarrell:** Mr. Richardson's sister, Ruth Johnson, has joined us, and we're going to talk about your parents, and perhaps your grandparents.

**Richardson:** I was just wondering about when dad took over on the ranch on the Beach Road. Do you have any idea?

**Johnson:** Well, Grandfather Richardson died in 1899, and my dad felt responsible for the family to keep the place going.

**Richardson:** Potatoes and beans were their crop at that time. Later on, when we knew about it we had sweet peas and seed and alfalfa. Was there any . . .

**Johnson:** Sometimes they put in an orchard of pears, thinking that they'd do well on that ground, and it didn't work out.

**Richardson:** What time did they buy the ranch in Freedom?

**Johnson:** Freedom? I think it was about 1890. I have a letter there that says... It was written by my grandfather to my uncle, who was in San Jose going to school, saying, "I have some cash, or I have some money I'd like to invest, and if you see something around San Jose that looks like it would be of value, let me know about it. If not, I'm interested in the Avenue Ranch." That

would be the one on Freedom Boulevard now. One hundred acres from Green Valley Road to

Ryder's shed for seven thousand dollars. (laughter) That was about 1890.

**Jarrell:** Do you know if any of your relatives, or neighboring farmers ever had anything to do with the Farmers Alliance, which was the predecessor of the Populist Party? It was quite big in Santa Clara County and this county. I've been reading about it.

**Johnson:** I don't remember ever hearing anything about the Farmers Alliance.

**Jarrell:** It was also a successor, a more radical successor, to the Grange.

**Johnson:** I haven't found any papers, or anything, that would refer to either.

**Richardson:** My sister might be able to answer some of the questions so far as the early . . . better than I could, and if there's something that you want to know, relative to the earlier farming, the history of the farming in this area.

**Jarrell:** We were trying to . . . we were talking about the land that was worked. All of this land was owned. Is that correct?

**Richardson:** All this land . . .

**Jarrell:** That your father . . . did he lease some land?

**Johnson:** I don't think the family ever leased any to have more to work. There might have been one little piece down on the Beach Road at one time that they were thinking about buying, but other than that, no. It really worked the other way, that we had tenants on the place later.

**Richardson:** What was that ranch that was east of the slough side of the road there? Didn't dad farm that once? I mean, didn't the folks farm that once in a while? Was it the Allen Ranch?

**Johnson:** I think the piece I'm thinking about down next to the river was the piece they were going to buy, but I don't know about the other, the Allen Ranch.

**Jarrell:** Can you talk about what your mother's life was like as a farmer's wife, and what say, a day, in her life would be like?

**Johnson:** Well, we had a housekeeper. I couldn't say too much about the general run of things except that, oh, there was very often somebody working on the place that would eat meals at the place. We had a fellow called Charlie Jap, that [would] come and do the laundry. There were several different persons that came, from time to time, as housekeepers. My mother had malaria. It was before 1911. We were down there, and I think for about three years she was coming down with that. We had the housekeepers. She had been a teacher, and she was pretty much her own person, not just a farmer's wife. Oh, she'd like to get out and work in the yard, I don't know if she knew too much about it when she first . . .

**Jarrell:** Did she grow flowers, for instance? Do you remember that as a child? Did she sew or embroider or try anything like that for her own, not just for practical reasons . . . but for enjoyment, for pleasure?

**Johnson:** She was more the type that went to the church affairs, she played—that was what she did.

**Jarrell:** She played the piano?

**Johnson:** Played the piano. She had learned on the organ. She played. She spent quite a bit of her time that way. She played for the church and she belonged to the Ladies Missionary Society. You know, these [kinds of] things.

**Jarrell:** Which church was this?

**Johnson:** This was the First Methodist in Watsonville.

**Jarrell:** And what have we here?

**Johnson:** Looks like we have some old records. She had a buggy and drove a horse if she wanted to go to town. She had ridden horseback when she was a teacher.

**Richardson:** 1880, I believe.

**Jarrell:** Now there are bills receivable. "Paid his note, McCallum, one hundred dollars. Note with interest at ten percent per annum." Ten percent. Now this was your father's books?

**Richardson:** That's my father's father's book.

**Jarrell:** Your grandfather's book. Isn't this wonderful that you have these?

**Richardson:** 1892.

**Jarrell:** These are beautiful old ledgers. I forget what you call this beautiful kind of binding. [Who is] A. F. Richardson?

**Richardson:** That's my grandfather.

**Jarrell:** Avenue Ranch.

**Johnson:** That would be the one on Freedom Boulevard. It was called the Avenue.

**Jarrell:** I see. Oh, these are wonderful! Twine. Freight on sacks. Repairing harness. Cash paid for two pigs. Sharpening up a crowbar. Water pipe for a pump.

**Johnson:** Well, you're not mentioning the amounts there.

**Jarrell:** Oh, no. I'm not. The two pigs—\$4.65. Ten cents for sharpening a crowbar. Ninety-five cents for a water pipe. Shoeing a horse—fifty cents. A sack of bran—eighty-five cents. Sharpening a bean cutter—twenty-five cents.

**Richardson:** Oh brother! It would cost you twenty-four dollars to get a bean cutter sharpened now.

**Jarrell:** Really?

**Richardson:** Yeah.

**Jarrell:** This is just amazing. I think it's so wonderful that you have these. Well, then in 1890, this is the same year it was thirty-five cents for sharpening a bean cutter. (laughter)

**Johnson:** The price went up, huh?

**Jarrell:** Yeah. To telegraphing to Santa Cruz about potatoes—fifty-five cents.

**Johnson:** There are some letters that I have that tell about how many carloads sold in San Jose for so much, and some left over. Somebody was going to Santa Cruz to see if they could sell them there, and what they got, or you know, this type of thing. And then, one year they were so . . . everybody has raised potatoes so there was no market for them. Couldn't sell them at fifty cents a sack.

**Jarrell:** Two hogs. Cash for two hogs—403 pounds—\$26.20. A calf—twenty dollars. My goodness. So every year . . . it's wonderful.

**Richardson:** My wife and I wanted to go through this. It's why my sister brought it over here to us, and we just haven't had time to do much with it. We've got three boxes like this of records. We sent a good lot of this stuff that we had that was historical to the University of the Pacific. It's in the historical library up there now. And there are a lot of things that we haven't really gotten around to put together yet, really. You look back and say, well,

it took three generations to gather enough stuff together for one generation to live. Now it takes three generations to throw away what one generation can gather up. It's just reversed, so to speak, and all this stuff was stored in the attic, just poked up in the attic.

**Johnson:** And *Readers' Digest* says, that it used to take three generations to fill one attic, and now it takes one generation to fill three attics.

**Jarrell:** (laughter) The idea that there is this continuity in your family is wonderful, it really is. Do you have children?

**Richardson:** I have three daughters.

**Jarrell:** And none of them is a farmer.

**Richardson:** None of them. My grandson was out here driving the tractor. He's the only one of the family that's ever had any inkling, or inclination for farming and I don't know if he'll really want to stay with it or not. He hasn't got the push that it takes for a farmer. You've got to get out with the sun and go to bed with the sun. He gets here about 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning. He's twenty years old, but he's a wonderful kid, he's learning and doing a good job.

**Jarrell:** And you direct him and let him know . . .

**Richardson:** Yes, I direct him.

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