

## Imwalle Farms Oral History Transcript

Joan Moulin and Diane Trembley are sisters in the Imwalle family; their grandfather established Imwalle Gardens around 1890. This family farm still remains standing and active close to the center of Santa Rosa—it is testament to the enduring importance of agriculture to Sonoma County. Joseph J. Imwalle worked with Luther Burbank on many projects; they were good friends. It was Imwalle who developed the Pink Lotus, and the Tuberous Rooted Begonias. This story is a fascinating account of the creativity of farming as well as the threat to farmlands with the expansion of city boundaries and infrastructure.

Transcription of an oral history interview recorded for Sonoma County Museum's exhibition: Sonoma Confidential

Joseph J. Imwalle was born in August of 1864 in Hanover, Prussia. He loved botany and horticulture, even when he was a young schoolboy and by twenty-one he became an “accomplished horticulturalist.” He came New York in September, 1885 and he worked his way to California with his brother. When he got to California he liked the Santa Rosa area and his brother liked the San Jose area, so his brother started an Imwalle Gardens in San Jose, while he leased land in Santa Rosa in the Mark West neighborhood and had a little farm there. Then he leased some land in the Boyes Springs area and worked there for a number of years. He made enough money to buy fifteen acres on the edge of Santa Rosa on West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street.

He had a great reputation for fresh vegetables and fruit and he won many ribbons when he went to display his vegetables. At the World's Fair in 1915, he won the gold medal out of all the world's displays. He was very proud of these medals. He kept working and buying fifteen acres here, seventeen acres, eventually the family amassed 144 acres in that little area. In June 27, 1924, he and grandma had built a real nice house there on the farm and they had a fire--it burnt the house to the ground and all grandpas' ribbons and his gold medal was lost. He never really recovered from that, he was sentimental about all those things and he had had them all framed.

In 1912, he drove for the first time and he had an accident and he never drove again. He and grandma, Mary Messmen, had five children. They got married in 1887 in San Francisco. Grandpa fed twenty families during the Depression to keep them from starving. He worked with Luther Burbank on many projects; they were good friends. Grandpa developed the Pink Lotus, and the Tuberous Rooted Begonias. All the plants in our yard were all part this part that, grafted trees and everything was wonderful because he loved to do those things. He took the taxi to the ranch because he didn't want to drive. He always wore a suit and tie, even when he was hoeing. Dianna remembers Japanese

laborers helping grandpa in the fields when she was quite young. Then he had Mike Rossi and Gus Rossi, who were unrelated. Then during the War he got Mexicans from Mexico, he had the same ones come back every year. The Mexican foreman that he had went back to Mexico and, after working many years for dad, bought a huge farm in Mexico, a rancho that was wonderful. He always wanted dad to come see it, but he never got there.

Our dad would load up the truck and deliver to restaurants, stores, and homes. He'd get up at three in the morning and drive to San Francisco with a load of vegetables to trade with the other farmers or buy what they had. They all called him "my brother." Then he'd come back and drive the truck and deliver all the vegetables. And Uncle Joe was his brother and he worked in the fields, he did all the planting, and dad did the truck. Diane said: "I use to go around with dad on the truck, well, we all did, and delivered the vegetables to the homes, when they told dad what they wanted. I even made out the bills. Somebody sent me a bill I had done in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade . . . We learned to add and subtract that way. We use to love to go with him. But he had some little boys that went with him."

There's a wonderful little story about dad and Tom Grace—they use to go to what is now Josephs, but it use to be a bar, it was a dump, we called it "the Rockpile". Maybe about 1948, I had a driver's license even though I was only 13 or 14, because we had a ranch I could drive. There were all these guys that would go into this bar every night. So, dad's truck, they use to double park, so, when I would come they would all be going home except for Tom and Grace and dad. And so there was dad's big, yellow Imwalle Gardens truck in the middle of the street. Always. Right in the middle of the street.

Things have changed. When Highway 12 came through it went through our ranch. Mother was so concerned dad was going to have a heart attack. It was awful. It was all beautiful prune orchards. We could walk for miles and it would just be our property. When we were little we would walk through the fields over to the ranch, it was no problem. Then the freeway came right through. Diane use to walk dad to the ranch every morning as a little girl then go home, because you could walk any where with no problem then. Our dad and our Uncle Joe had the 144 acres after they bought up prune orchards bordering on their property and the hop ranch. Grandpa didn't have that much, he kept it all so beautifully though, and he did it all himself, he planted and pruned. Grandpa didn't have hops, but dad did. They were so fun to pick, and you made lots of money.

When the freeway went through they were going to build a passageway for dad to go to the ranch, because we lived on the other side of the freeway then, when it divided the ranch it half. But, they could only do that for a cow, not for a person. So, he had to drive two miles around to get to the ranch. It was awful. It was really awful, because

they put the freeway so close to our house also. It was a very mean thing to do. It was awful, it ruined our farm. They just condemned it. And then there wasn't water. Half of the ranch was on one side, but there wasn't any water. There was the creek on one side, so they pumped out of the creek to irrigate and they had wells too and big tanks. But, there was nothing on the other side of the freeway. So, that sort of killed planting anything on that side of the freeway. Yeah, progress. Now Harry's doing it, planting Crane Melons.