

## DIGIORGIO FARMS

By Sue Missimer

In the late summer of 1945 World War II was coming to an end, but the men and women serving in the armed forces had not yet come home and there were severe labor shortages in all areas of the country. Earlier in the wartime period the federal government had set up a program called American Women's Voluntary Service to recruit women to help bring in the harvests.

A friend from college, Marilyn Jestes, had worked in the program the previous summer picking grapes at DiGiorgio Farms, a huge vineyard operation near the town of Arvin in the San Joaquin Valley. On her return home she could show off to her city friends a deep tan and truly impressive biceps. She encouraged me to quit my job selling fishing tackle at Sears, Roebuck and work at DiGiorgio for a month until the fall semester began.

My parents drove me from our home in suburban Los Angeles a hundred miles up the Ridge Route to Arvin. In West Los Angeles the heat of August is usually tempered by an offshore breeze in the afternoon. In the lower San Joaquin Valley by afternoon the air, trapped in the V-shaped crucible formed by the arms of the Tehachapi Mountains in the east and the Coast Range in the west rises to temperatures in the high nineties and low one hundreds. As we drove down the steep descent of the highway into the great valley the heat rose to press against us.

The workers' camp, set in the midst of the immense green expanse of vineyards, consisted of a group of old but solid railroad cars set up on concrete foundations, arranged around a low wooden building containing a dining hall and rest room/shower facility.

We arrived after the picking crews had returned to camp. Marilyn came out to greet us, show us around the compound, and my parents returned home, wondering how their daughter, who had never so much as pulled a weed at home, would fare as a farm laborer. The closest I'd ever come to roughing it was a week with my Girl Scout troop in a tent at Camp Osito.

Marilyn and I shared a boxcar with two other girls from Southern California, Felicity and Dorothea, both refugees from the London blitz. Even with our four cots and our belongings strewn about the high-roofed railroad car felt comfortably roomy. A metal ladder fastened to one end led to a sort of transom in the roof where we could climb to sun ourselves.

Our camp population was 100% female. About half were students of high school or college age, the other half migratory farm workers whose speech marked them as survivors of the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma and Texas, older and weathered from years of working in the harvests.

Next morning, in the dark, Marilyn woke me. "Why are we getting up so early?" I, unaccustomed as I was to leaving my bed until well after daybreak, wanted to know. "We need to start working before it gets hot," she explained.

So we dressed, headed for a big breakfast in the dining hall, then climbed into waiting open trucks to be driven to the section of vineyard to be picked that day. Before the sun came up over the high wall of the Tehachapi Mountains we were out in the vine rows. The foreman, Pop,

handed me a lug, a wide wooden box to put the bunches of grapes into, a pair of clippers, and showed me how to pick the clusters of fruit and lay them gently--tightly packed so they would not shift about and bruise. When we had a full lug we carried it down between the vine rows to the wide packed dirt aisles that ran between the blocks of vines where a flatbed truck stood waiting. A man called a swamper would take the heavy box and hoist it onto the bed of the truck, stacking them in layers till the truck was fully loaded and ready to be driven to a central packing house.

In the early morning the work was fun. We were picking Red Malagas that day, a sweet table grape. The sky was pale blue, the air cool and clear, and as the sun rose the leafy vines shaded us from the sun's rays. But this was August and as the sun rose higher overhead we lost the screening of the vines and the air grew hotter and hotter and hotter. The vines could no longer protect us from the heavy heat and the power of the sun beating down on us.

We were being paid by the hour, fifty cents an hour, but we were expected to fill a quota of a certain number of lugs picked per day. By noon I felt as if I were melting. My head throbbed, sweat soaked my clothes and stung my eyes, and I walked slower and slower as I carried the filled lugs down to the swampers. I thought, "I'm being cooked. I'm going to die here."

Pop would let the crew rest under the vines and chat, read, write letters, as soon as they had reached their daily goal, unless his boss came around, when the pickers would put on a show of working. The experienced farm workers worked hard and fast and quietly so they could fill their quotas as early in the day as possible. They kept to themselves and had very little to say to the suburban college girls--not hostile or unfriendly, just reserved with us. But they could see that I was in trouble. Out of the quiet kindness of their hearts they told me to sit down under the leafy shade of the vines, took over my assigned row and finished my quota of packed lugs.

It seemed forever till the trucks came back to get us and return us to camp. I lay down on the cot in the boxcar, gradually coming back to life by dinnertime. The next few days were a little better. I learned how to find and clip the heavy clusters of rosy-colored fruit a little faster, making the most of the cool early hours under the long green tent of leaves.

The next Monday changed it all. The swampers, who had been working for seventy-five cents an hour under wartime wage controls, now went on strike for higher wages and we couldn't work at all. All the crews assembled at the big open-sided packing shed while the bosses explained the situation. Beside them stood the packers--young women who lived in Arvin or thereabout, and sorted the fruit we laborers had picked. They looked down on us as we gathered around the loading platform of the shed, dressed in our work clothes, dirty khaki shirts and pants. "What rough-looking girls!" one girl said to her co-worker, looking down at Marilyn and me. Addie, one of the migratory workers leaned over and exclaimed to us "They shouldn't talk that way about you college girls!", taking offense not for herself but for us.

For a few more days we stayed around but the strike was not resolved, the grapes were turning to raisins on the vines, and all the student pickers headed home.

Yes, it was hard work, but for us it was an adventure. For Addie and her cohorts it was daily life.