

An Excerpt of an Oral History with Nick Pasqual

Many of our narrators mentioned Nick Pasqual, a Filipino immigrant. Nick is a pioneering organic farmer who helped found both the California Certified Organic Farmers, and the Live Oak Farmers' Market at Green Acres School. Beginning in 1963, Nick sold vegetables (some of which he grew) at his stand in the Village Fair area of Aptos, California. His own vegetables were organic before the word was in popular or legal usage. When he had to close down the stand at the Village Fair, Nick helped organize the Live Oak Farmers' Market and until very recently, Nick and his wife, Velma, sold vegetables at the Aptos Farmers' Market at Cabrillo College. We had wanted to interview Nick, but he declined because of ill health (Nick is now in his late nineties). We are grateful to Allan Lönnberg of Cabrillo College, who granted us permission to reprint an excerpt of the transcript of the oral history he conducted with Nick in 2006; to Nick and Velma Pasqual who graciously agreed to the republication of this excerpt; and to Jerry Thomas, who called our attention to the existence of Lönnberg's oral history with Pasqual. The complete oral history with Nick Pasqual, entitled A Very Rough Road: The Life of Nick Pasqual, is available in the Special Collections Department of the UCSC Library.

Timeline: A Very Rough Road:

A Rough Chronology of the Life of Nick Pasqual

1913 Nick is born on October 10 to Mercedes Eugenio and Roque Pasquale in the town of Dingras, province of Ilocos Norte, Philippine Islands.

1931 Sails to San Francisco aboard the M.S. President Jackson and begins work picking grapes in Delano, California.

1932 Moves to the Stockton area and works asparagus, peas, grapes, apricots and pickling cucumbers.

1939 Works in a sardine cannery in Pacific Grove, then works in a restaurant in Coronado, San Diego County, then moves to San Francisco and lives with his uncle.

1941-45 Works in the Naval Shipyard on Mare Island.

1945-46? Moves to the Sacramento Delta and works asparagus and sharecrops.

1947-48 Works as a cook on the Darrigo Ranch near Stockton.

1948-49? Moves to San Miguel Canyon, Monterey County.

1952 Receives a letter informing him of Velma's interest in getting married.

1956 Marries Velma Pellegal in civil court, San Francisco.

1956-57 Moves next door to a ranch owned by Bob Benter.

1958 Buys land outside of Watsonville for \$300 down and begins farming on his own.

1958-63 Farms in Watsonville and peddles produce throughout Central California.

1963 Starts a produce stand in the Village Fair, Aptos, California.

1976 Is a founding member of the first farmers' market in Santa Cruz County, at Live Oak School.

1977 Nick's father dies; Nick travels back to the Philippines for the first time.

1980 Medfly scare closes Live Oak Farmers' Market, which moves to Cabrillo College, Aptos.

1986 Nick stops his membership in CCOF.

1989 Nick's mother dies; Nick makes a second trip to the Philippines.

1989-present Nick and Velma continue to farm and market produce at the Aptos Farmers' Market.¹

Excerpt from the Oral History

There's a flea market down there in Aptos they call Jim Jones Company. They started that Village Fair; they cleaned up that barn, and when I heard the news that they were going to open a big flea market, I stopped in there and inquire about it, what they do, and I told them that I want to participate with the flea market, and that Jim listened to me, because he wanted customers. He wanted people to come in. I explained to him that I have produce and produce is an everyday business. So, if you give me a lease for a space in the Village Fair and let me open it every day, then I can do business.

This was during the assassination of that Kennedy, 1963. I remember that was when they opened that flea market. Then I moved in. I didn't have very much: apples, tomatoes, flowers, but people came and bought. People with no money, but they got checks. I was trusting everybody! They write a check and I go cash it and there's no money! They give me the address; I go look for him at the address that he give me, and he is not there! "He does not live here!" So, I learn a lot of things. I been very trusting all the time. But, very soon I learn more and learn more.

Jerry Thomas was farming in those days. He was not making any money either. He had been doing some gardening, been raising some pumpkins, squash, and

he come to peddle to me, and sometimes it didn't sell. "Well, you just leave it there, and if I sell it, I'll give you the money next time," because I didn't have no cash money to pay it off. So, Thomas trusted me and I trusted him, so he left the squash and I tried to sell it, but I cannot sell it for the price that he wants.

But Jerry, he believe in organic—he believe that because it is a good chance to make some money. He understood the whole problem about the wholesalers, that he could not make money depending on them. So, he been observing how I do it in the Village Fair. I was doing very good because I could sell a lot of other things besides my own produce. But I always make it a point that my own produce be in one section, one table. I mark it organic.

There was one guy from Porterville, California, and he learn about me. He was peddling organic oranges, but he had a hard time selling anything. "So, Nick, you have a big place and I cannot sell my oranges. I leave them here; sell what you can and when I come back, you pay me what you owe. I count how many boxes I leave, and if you don't sell it, I will take it back."

So, those kinds of arrangements helped me, because I didn't have enough cash and I kept selling the oranges that were marked organic. Then, very soon, the word spread around that I'm selling organic things. And the people that came to the Village Fair, they open the doors and enter the produce department and there I was. And they see my wife with the baby, in the back. And there was even a lady, a family in Santa Cruz—they were good people: "I put in a new refrigerator, Nick, and I have the old one I cannot use no more, so if you can use

it, you come and pick it up.” That’s why I had all those old refrigerators in there! They donated it to me.

I find out there are a lot of good people in there, but there were also some not very good people. They write a check to me and they didn’t have no money. They fake. But, anyway, I kept learning. Hard luck schooling.

Then after many months, people discover that I was selling produce down there, then Jim Jones closed the place. They could not make it. So, then what am I going to do? I cannot do nothing now. If I lose this, I lose my peddling business, and if I lose that, I am too old to go work for somebody else—they don’t accept you if you are a certain age. I was fifty years old in 1963. If I don’t make it now, I will be a total failure. But, anyway, I did not quit selling produce in the Village Fair. The owner of that packing house—I went to talk him: “Can I stay here, anyway? Please let me stay, and I’ll pay rent instead of the flea market people.”

“Well, Nick, you don’t have to pay me nothing for awhile. Stay there if you can stand it. Stay there and I’m going to try to re-open the place and make a different name. I will call it the Village Fair.” But, it would take a long time to make arrangements about what to do, how to spread the news about the Village Fair, be selling higher-class antiques. Then, the news spread, and very soon, they got the permit to open the new business. And then, very soon, when they open it, business started to pick up with me. People would come in, buying antiques, and they open the door and I was there. They discovered that there’s produce in there, a lot of old people. In those days, the old people were very kind people. They are the ones that had been helping me; they were the ones that were very

kind to me. Even the fire department people, they always buy the produce from me to cook in the fire department. Then, very soon all the people doing business in the area, lawyers, some doctors and barbers, they come to me. Even people working at Safeway, they come to me! “Why do you buy produce from me? You got all the produce in Safeway!”

“I like your produce better!”

So, when they’ve been talking like that, it was encouragement to me. If I stay and don’t quit, then there’s a chance. The only thing that was not very good was that it was cold in that building. But, I have no choice; I cannot move, my wife was pregnant at that time with Vicki. She was not helping me at the Village Fair at that time; somebody else was helping me. But then when my wife found out that I don’t bring in enough money home, but I pay the money to my helper, she decided to be brave herself, to take the job from the hired person: “Let him off and I’ll do it—I’ll help you!”

So, she helped me. A lot of time I had a lot of problems because my trucks were not in good condition. Sometimes we got stuck in the road. So, I questioned myself. I think it was a mistake to get married. I blamed myself: I cannot leave my wife; I got two boys already, and I determined to kind of make it go. It cannot get worse; it can get better. I talked to some people, like . . . “Well, Nick, it’s hard to make a fruit stand. Sometimes it takes three years before it starts to pay off. Three years.”

But, that time passed very fast. Very soon three years passed and it really picked up, because I never sold any junk food. I used to go to the wholesalers myself,

once a week, to Oakland, and buy some produce down there, like bananas, peaches, things that I cannot grow myself. Apples I buy locally, and they delivered them, also. Prevedelli—he was an old man—there were lots of peddlers those days—he used to stop in my place. I buy apples and other things that they peddle, like artichokes. But, those people that were peddling artichokes, they were stealing those artichokes from the ground and came selling them to me! But, I didn't know that trick they had been doing. I find out very soon; the news come out that the workers they got in the artichoke fields, they inspect the trucks before they leave. They smuggle artichokes and beans into the truck and sell it someplace else. Everybody trying to make extra money, you know. I been buying from them and very soon, they quit coming. "Why don't you come no more?"

"Well, I was fired from my job."

"It's like avocados—people are trying to make money and when they come to Aptos with avocados from down south, I buy them. Walnuts, they are peddling walnuts and I buy two, three sacks, and next year, they bring me more. And the business picked up. I was growing tomatoes, squash, beans, lettuce, cucumber—I raise all those things in good shape. I had some people come and work for me, once in a while, not steady. I do most of the work. And then when my sons, Junior and Peter, they had already learned how to cultivate, switch the pump and things like that, they helped me with weeding; I teach them how to weed. And that's enough, now go play! And they get used to it and help me. I worked late in the night, preparing my load for the morning, to Aptos. In the morning, I

go to Aptos, open the store down there at eight o'clock. Sometimes in the week, when it's not really busy, then I just leave my wife and stay in there.

There was a time, I remember very well, that my wife make only seven dollars a day. Because tomatoes were cheap, and not many people buy, and seven dollars—you sell quite a bit of produce for seven dollars. It was kind of a sad story, but I tried to learn to be content and just buy food. And, the good thing about this business that I'm doing is I cannot go hungry, because I got chickens and pigs, too. All that produce that I cannot sell, I bring home and give to the pigs. And the pigs and chickens were growing. I tried everything! Pretty soon, those pigs are a problem. I been selling those pigs, but pigs were selling for only ten, fifteen dollars a pig. Big pig! And, I tried to raise goats also. So, I said to myself, I cannot starve, anyway. I got no money, but I got vegetables, there are eggs—I'm selling eggs down there at the Village Fair—these are the foods I bring home. The bread—I'm selling bread, too. I pick up bread from the Pajaro Bakery, so I got enough, why worry about it? If I can't sell it, we eat it! So, we survive, anyway. And then, we go to the flea market and buy old shoes, old clothes and my wife finds something over there, too. So, we manage it that way.

And, very soon, time pass, pass. Junior and Peter were growing up, after graduating from high school in Watsonville. Peter decided he don't like the farm no more because we cannot make enough money for all of us. Peter decided to quit the farm and go for induction into the army. He volunteered for the army. He stayed there for three years. He learned all that truck driving, tractor driving, and very soon after he learn that, driving big rigs, he came home. He went to look for a job truck driving. But, nobody was hiring truck drivers in those days.

It was President Carter at that time; gas was short and they had to ration the gasoline according to your license. So, the truck people, they don't hire nobody. So Peter was forced to come back to the farm to help me. I teach him to drive caterpillars, and he liked driving that, he liked to work the ground. Peter get used to it, a little bit, about farming, but what discouraged Peter was when we go to the market, farmers' market, still we don't make enough money. I was still at the Village Fair at that time, but what I raised I took to the farmers' market.

Junior was still with me at that time. Junior was interested to continue the produce stand business. But, we got to find a better place, a more presentable location. Junior tried to help find a better location, but with the money we had, it was not easy to make a decision. We looked down there in Santa Cruz, Soquel Avenue, in that area. There is a place down there, near the lumber place, but it did not materialize.

To begin with, I know how the farmers' market started. At that time, a lot of people are depending on their livelihood on the welfare business. You've got to go get some kind of ticket to get welfare money, to buy food, food stamps. But, I think it was growing to be a big problem for the government. According to a guy from Sacramento who came to talk to us, at Live Oak School, that "you can enlarge this if you want, but you have to recruit people to participate. And willing enough to be consistent and steady." Small farms, something like that. Because, they realize that this welfare business is coming to be a burden, so they give a chance for the small family farmers to make their own livelihood. So, it is a good idea. I didn't have no place, because I had to quit the Village Fair later on, they came to me, that "the farmers' market going to be open, and how 'bout you

participate?" I was in the organic already at that time. People in the Village Fair learn already that I had a small portion grown organic. "Yeah, I'd like to go down there, because I am already in this kind of business, organic." But they did not strictly require organic in the farmers' market. But, because a lot of people already learn that I have good produce, people doing business with me at the Village Fair, they been telling me, "If you close this place, Nick, wherever you go, we'll follow you."

So, that was encouragement to me. I'd been telling them that I'd still be operating near the Village Fair, but that I would close down the Village Fair because my two sons are not willing to help me in this type of business. And, very soon, I'd have to depend exclusive on what I raise to go to the farmers' market. I cannot bring what I buy and sell no more. So, I quit paying my license. The farmers' market gave me the opportunity to participate down there, to sell our own produce.

And finally, it was discouraging about the Village Fair. We close it up—we didn't have enough money. The money I had saved at that time, 1977, it was at that time I received a letter from the Philippines that my father is dying, my mother is dying: "If you want to see them still alive, maybe you can talk to them, don't delay. You've got to visit them soon." So, I managed to make some money, went to San Francisco to buy my ticket, and went to the Philippine Islands. I went by myself because I didn't have enough money to take my wife. My father was still alive, but he was kind of dreaming, already. My mother died later, in '89. That is when I went to see her.

Peter was the one managing the farm then. He quit the farmers' market: "I don't like that farmers' market no more!" He found out about a farmers' market in Marin County, in San Rafael, so he decided to go there, because they sell faster there. I did not interfere about his judgment, so we went along with his opening of this market. I went along with him. And very soon, Peter, "I don't like to join that farmers' market no more!" He didn't want that certification, because certification, you got to pay \$300 for membership to the organic organization, plus you've got to pay ten percent of your gross sales to the market. And Peter did not like that at all. So, I cannot decide it all by myself, because I thought Peter was going to take over the farm, and I will be just a helper or supporter to him. But, I did not want to quit that organization at that time. "Well, how can you pay? We didn't make money," Peter said. So, finally I went along with his decision. We quit paying our dues to the organization, so we don't put "organic" on our sign anymore. Because, according to the code of the farmers' market, if it says organic and you are not a member, they can sue you. So, if that is the case, don't put the sign up. They know us, anyway.

The time was getting rough at the farmer's market, because a lot of people (other farmers) are coming in to the market. The market was not very strict at that time. People came and peddled; even grocery stores came, and it very soon it was kind of going haywire. And, when we go to the farmers' market in San Rafael, we are not making much money any more. We make money, but long distance, it takes all the gasoline and our time! We don't have time for the farm, and the money we make, we pay to the gasoline station. We went up once a week.

Very soon, Peter get disgusted about that and he quit all that and he left me, so I had to take the reins of the farm and farm again. We were here in Los Lomas. We didn't have the title yet, but we were here. Peter grew up here. They, the children, kind of like this place, because they have learned that everybody is rich in this country, and they learned how to live like we do here because we didn't have no well, a water well in here yet, at that time. Somehow, the word got around, when we go to the flea market and other places—we're talking about well drilling, and nobody want to drill; the bank don't want to loan no money, and the word spread that I need somebody to help out. Junior learn all about hardship; that I've been hauling water from our neighbors and bringing it home for our drinking and washing. It was not easy. I had to borrow water from that neighbor down there, and pretty soon the neighbor find out that it is not a good policy to give water to your neighbor, because very soon you are required to give water all the time. They will have that right, to force you to supply the water. Then, very soon, he cut off the supply of water.

"Why did you cut it off?"

"Because it is a complication about this, about lending water to the neighbor." I did not question him; I just bought a tank, a 300-gallon tank, put it on the pickup, and filled it over there. I've got neighbors: "Yeah, if you want water, you just come over here and get it."

The neighbors were a lot of good people. They understand, because everybody kind of poor anyway, at that time. So, we managed some way.

I took over the farming and continued to build a business, going to Aptos and back. People said, "I'm glad you've come back to the Aptos Farmers' Market."

So, it's been going like that. For three years, I did not miss any farmers' market day. I go down there every day, rain or shine. But the rest of the farmers, like Jerry Thomas, sometimes they come and sometimes they don't, especially when that medfly came along. Then everybody was kind of discouraged because they closed up the Live Oak Farmers' Market. And, we had to move, move, move. It was very hard to make a steady place for the farmers' market.

The original farmers' market was at Live Oak. My parking space was back, way back. But, customers discover me anyway, that I was the only one that had produce to sell. Everybody heard about it, but they were not prepared; they did not have the merchandise to present. They had the will, but they don't have the merchandise yet. It is in their mind, already.

When the medfly came, then we had to do something; we had to find a new location, and we approached the church down there in Aptos, beside Safeway. There is a space in there. "Well, if you can use it, you are welcome." But it could hold only four or five trucks. Sometimes we sell half of what we have; sometimes the other farmers don't sell anything. There was even a time when these big farmers from King City, they had a hard time making any money to the wholesalers, so they came to the farmers' market, by Safeway. But, the word spread around anyway that Salinas heard about the farmers' market, and Salinas wanted to open a farmers' market in Salinas, too. So, it is a good thing that the word is spreading that farmers' markets area good chance to make it. We keep

coming, and very soon, Wally, and Ken Kimes came also, with organic mushrooms. There were people who started organic mushrooms in Salinas, but they could not make it down there, but Ken was thinking about mushrooms, too. And he came to join the market in Aptos.

And that's how the Aptos farmers' market began, because when the medfly came and the church was not big enough, one of the farmers, Joe Carota, went to the college [Cabrillo Community College] and talked to the college to see if we could have a farmers' market in the parking lot. They approved it, and we've been in that college for so long.

ⁱ Editor's Note: By 2008, Nick's increasing fragility makes selling vegetables at the market impossible. At the date of publication of this oral history series (March 2010) Nick Pasqual was still alive.