



It was the late summer of 1969, and I had just returned to California from a summer in Sweden. Thanks to my Palo Alto grandparents, Carl and Augusta Swanson, I was sent to Southern Sweden to learn about my mother's family roots and to meet various family members residing in their place of birth. I was about to return to Cal Poly - San Luis Obispo where I was a student studying the social sciences and, in particular, Sociology. During my first week back in SLO I met a young guy named Tom, who lived down the street from where I was living and who was studying in the Department of Agriculture, specifically majoring in Crop Science. Little did I know that within fourteen months we would be married, and I would have learned quite a bit about California agriculture in the Central Valley. Until I met Tom and went to the Stone Ranch my knowledge of farm life was extremely limited. I was born in Palo Alto, CA and lived most of my life right here in the San Francisco Bay Area. I knew one went to the store to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables to eat and cook with and that was about it!

My husband, Thomas Ellsworth Stone, was raised about three miles outside the town of Exeter, in California's Central Valley. Presently, Exeter contains approximately 10,533 inhabitants and is in Tulare County.<sup>i</sup> It is blessed with rich and lush soil and sits at the base of the Sierra Mountains near the entrance to Sequoia National Park. It rests off Hwy 99 and is about a three to four-hour drive from either San Francisco or Los Angeles. Exeter is known for its production of many crops including the Emperor grape; stone fruits, including peaches, plums, nectarines; as well as oranges, walnuts and olives. During more current times pistachios, mandarin oranges and blueberries have also claimed their home in Exeter.<sup>ii</sup> The ideal weather conditions seem conducive for the growth of varied crops.

During our early marriage Tom and I, along with the rest of the Stone family, would gather in the dense foggy days of winter to help plant peach trees. The first year I was assigned the watering of the newly planted trees. I naively thought I would walk through the massive acreage and water each newly planted tree individually when, in actuality, I drove a tractor and watered the trees with a huge hose and enormous water tank attached to the tractor. To this day I am teased about being a "City Girl".

It was during these special family gatherings that I began to learn about the Stone family crops and in particular - peaches - specifically the O'Henry peach which to today is one of my favorites.

According to GoodGrower.Com, an online reference, regarding peaches, they state "Unlike apples and pears, where new varieties are slow to appear and stay forever, new peach varieties come, and most go, in a continual parade. But sometimes, a new variety comes and stays a long time. Varieties like Elberta and Redhaven fit that description and so, too, does the variety - called O'Henry". Gerry Hunter, from Fowler, Ca, also declared that the O'Henry peach "Is still among the top ten varieties planted in California, and it's a major variety in Washington, Idaho, and Utah."<sup>iii</sup>

O'Henry peaches were introduced in 1968 by Grant Merrill of Exeter, CA. Paul Stark Jr. writing in *Fruit Varieties Journal* in 1974 likened Merrill to Luther Burbank.<sup>iv</sup> He felt Merrill was a genius in his field and because of him, fresh peaches of high quality exist. The O'Henry is known for its extended shipping characteristics and attractive color and can be sold six months of the year instead of the usual two months for other varieties. It was also noted that Merrill developed more than 50 varieties of peaches good enough to patent. The O'Henry was his favorite. Merrill was a public breeder and not affiliated with any public program. During the 1970's and 1980's, some 40 percent of all shipped peaches in California were Merrill cultivars. The O'Henry is still widely cultivated in California by both commercial and smaller farms. The slow ripening peach is commercially popular for its reliability, long shelf life, and shipping quality.<sup>v</sup>

Some interesting facts about the O'Henry, as listed on Specialtyproduce.com website, include<sup>vi</sup>:

1. Large with orange skin and bright red blush covering the entire circumference of the fruit. The skin is thin and slightly fuzzy. The flesh of the O'Henry is almost a turmeric

- yellow with a smooth, firm texture. It is a freestone peach variety and contains a bright red pit cavity, reflecting the intense color of its skin.
2. O'Henrys are a late summer variety of *Prunus Persia* (peach). Their variety indicates the closing of peach season. O'Henry peaches were selected as one of Sunset Magazine's top five peaches from the West Coast. They are revered for their flavor, size, and excellent storability.
  3. O'Henry's are rich in vitamin C. Also, they are a good source of vitamins A and B, as well as dietary fiber, potassium, and iron. Peaches are also a good source of bioactive compounds, components of food that influence physiological or cellular activities in humans.
  4. Peaches are a diverse fruit, excellent for fresh eating and hold up well to cooking and grilling. They make amazing pies and tarts. They can be poached, added to salads, and are canned into jams, jellies, and preserves. They will keep in a refrigerator 3-4 days.
  5. The O'Henry peach is said to be the grandparent to several newer varieties, including the Augustprince peach, a fruit similar in flavor and color. They are seen at farmer's markets in August and September in CA. They are prevalent in our local grocery stores. They are also sometimes found in commercial markets throughout the southwestern region.

Kevin Day, the University of California tree fruit advisor in Tulare County, said the O'Henry "was the first of the high-red-skin colored peaches and revolutionized the industry as a consequence. It was also a very versatile variety that could be used for fresh, drying, or freezing purposes. It had good flavor as well." <sup>vii</sup>

I, for one, am very grateful Grant Merrill discovered and patented the O'Henry peach. Grant Merrill lived until 1973 and is memorialized in Red Bluff, CA, his home city. The O'Henry peach is beloved by many and has a huge following. Thank you, Grant Merrill. Next August make sure you try an O'Henry. You will not be sorry!

For those of you who have never visited Exeter, CA, it is worth the trip to learn all about the history of the San Joaquin Valley in terms of crop production. Unless you are a fan of extreme summer heat, it is my recommendation to visit during late fall, winter, or spring. Exeter is the

home of many professional artist rendered murals depicting its agricultural history, 31 in total on the sides of downtown buildings. The Stone Family label is both the Red Car Label (used for peaches) and the E&R Label (used for grapes). You will find the E&R label in the mural dedicated to the agricultural growers of Exeter, CA and a tribute to the Stone Family Growers. If you don't have time to make the trip, see some photos of the town and murals in my appendix.

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<sup>i</sup> Tulare County Economic Development Corporation, <https://cityofexeter.com/edc/>, accessed 12/21/2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Discover Exeter, California. Chamber of Commerce, pamphlet.

<sup>iii</sup> [www.goodgrower.com](http://www.goodgrower.com), accessed 12/21/2019, page 1.

<sup>iv</sup> [www.goodgrower.com](http://www.goodgrower.com), accessed 12/21/2019, page 2.

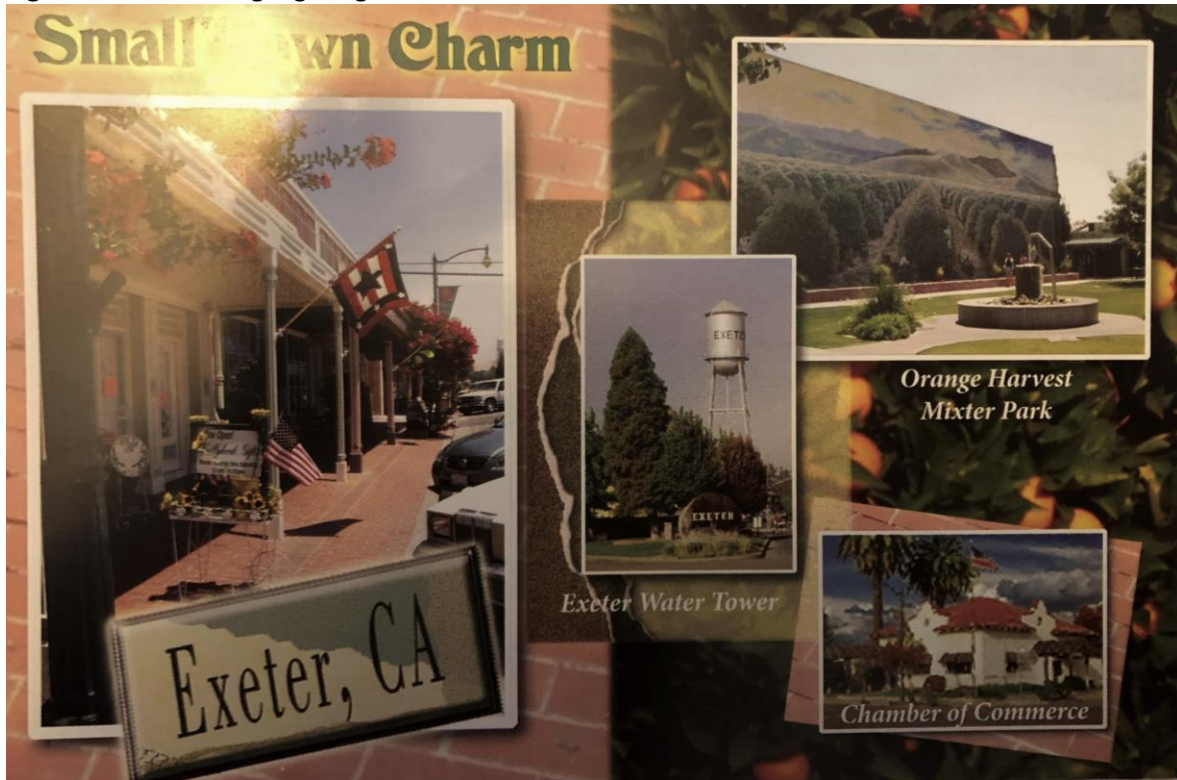
<sup>v</sup> [www.goodgrower.com](http://www.goodgrower.com), accessed 12/21/2019, page 2.

<sup>vi</sup> [www.specialtyproduce.com](http://www.specialtyproduce.com), accessed 12/21/2019, page 1.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://recs.ucanr.edu/?blogasset=61546&blogtag=Kevin%20Day>, accessed 12/21/2019, page 2.

**APPENDIX: EXETER PICTURES AND IMAGES**

**Figure 1:** Postcard highlighting downtown Exeter’s small town charm.



**Figure 2:** O’Henry peach, displaying the red flesh interior.





Figure 3: O'Henry peach ripening on tree.



Figure 4: Paul and Emily Stone's peach packing label, with the Red Car a tribute to Paul's Southern California roots.



Figure 5: Paul and Emily Stone's Emperor grape label from Stone Ranch, the E&R representing their middle initials.



Figure 6: E&R label showcased on downtown Exeter Emperor grape mural.



Figure 7: The packing ladies' mural, Exeter, CA, just like packing days at the Stone Ranch.





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