

Mary Leighton Oral History Interview, August 25, 2018
Interview conducted by Michael Dicianna in Salem, Oregon
Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program Oral History Collection
Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Oregon State University Libraries
13 minutes and 51 seconds long

[00:00:08]

Michael Dicianna: There we go. Okay, today is Saturday, August 25, 2018. My name is Mike Dicianna. I'm an oral historian for the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Oral History Project. We're at the Oregon State Fairgrounds here in Salem, Oregon. And we sort of begin with some introductions. Could you guys state your names and a little bit of biographical information about you and how you're related to the farm?

Mary Leighton: Are we good to go?

MD: Yep.

ML: Hi, I'm Mary Leighton. I am one of the Sandoz Farm family members and I have been a part of the farm since birth because we grew up on the same farm which we have owned in our family since 1880. Currently, I am operating on the farm with the farm stand, or farmers market, or cattle, that type of thing, which we'll get into earlier. We all grew up on the farm working hard. I went to school at Oregon State University and then was a veterinary technician for 23 years, and now currently just do all of my work on the farm.

Ted Sandoz: And I am Ted Sandoz, one of the other siblings in the group of us. There's a total of five siblings. I'm – I've got a day job in town as a mechanic. I also am running hay operation, and me and my wife are running the hog operation at the farm, and part of the farm stand and farmers markets, and any other duties that need to happen on the farm.

MD: Okay, let's get into a little bit of some historical information about this farm and also, you know, where it got us to today.

ML: Okay, great. So, our great-grandfather, with his two brothers – our great-grandfather is Charles Sandoz – and Arnold and Alphonse came to The Dalles area in 1878. They actually came from Switzerland in the 1860s. They were in California for about 10 years and they heard there was good farmland in The Dalles. They migrated up to the Dalles and came up the Mill Creek Valley, saw Mt. Hood – it reminded them of their family area in Switzerland – and settled there.

They farmed for two years prior to purchasing the eastern end of the Caldwell land claim. And we still currently own that farmland that they farmed on. So, they purchased the land. They started by growing some wonderful root crops. One of the brothers, Alphonse, actually went to an agricultural school in Switzerland, and his job was to teach his brothers how to do agriculture properly.

He then taught them how to grow fruit trees. He taught them how to grow root crops, vegetables, and that type of thing. And our grandfather – great-grandfather, I am sorry – our

great-grandfather was the man who marketed the product into town. So, they would gather up all their fruits and vegetables, drive by wagon into town, door to door to the houses. And at that time a lot of the homes had, you know, either the wife at home, or they did have maybe a maid or a nursemaid, somebody who did the cooking, and they would purchase the vegetables right there at the backdoor, that type of thing.

MD: One of the things that, you know, there's a couple of ideas that I got a kick out of with these older farms, especially from this period, is, you know, what place did this farm have in the local community during the day?

ML: During the day their job was to bring the good local fruits and vegetables that were of – and basically all year long because they were able to store these vegetables and fruits in cellars or earthbound handmade cellars that they could bring into town to the community. The community didn't always the local gardens, especially those that lived in the town of The Dalles. Outskirts, yes. And the community had more of wheat kind of growing or cattle growing, and the local fruits and vegetables were not available, and so that's where they secured their product to get it out there to the community.

[00:05:10]

MD: Well, bringing it up to today, tell us about the farm as it is today and what, you know, how it's evolved into different products and that.

ML: Today we have changed the farm a little bit. Our father – actually, let me start with our grandfather, Julius. He purchased a little more land from the land claim that they had initially purchased, and it had more of the hillside in which there was rangeland. At that time he purchased the land but it didn't have a purpose. Our father went to the World War II, and on his way back from World War II he was on a ship, and they treated their soldiers very well and they fed them quality meat products, quality food, and at that point in time our father knew that he wanted to raise quality beef. And he knew that that farm could support that as well as the fruits and vegetables and the fruit trees.

So, there was a change in that area of 1950s in which our father started raising cattle. He would put them out on the rangeland, and then more fruit trees were placed on the side hills. Currently, today, the side hills are totally full of fruit trees, and those fruit trees are the sweet cherries that the Pacific Northwest does raise here, the quality cherries.

On the rangeland up high, we currently graze the cattle from the months of April to July, depending on the year, and then we bring them down onto Ted's irrigated pasture ground. But the hay has been removed at least once, if not twice, from the irrigated ground, prior to the cattle moving on.

So, we do have the cattle operation still going, we have sweet cherries, and in a small area, we have a garden area. It's only an acre but we try to produce as much good vegetables that the customers like to have. And we also have the hog operation which is now pretty sizable in the sense that we do a lot of pork meat. Our main products in our farm stand are beef and pork, USDA style. We do have a certified kitchen in which we can all of our products. We have a

lot of pickle products, jams, that type of thing. So, we have that available and then the fresh fruits and vegetables, and that's where we stand today.

MD: Now, has the property itself changed this century? I mean, is it bigger, smaller?

ML: It has changed. It has become bigger and it currently is in the hands of my brother Ted, my brother Chuck, myself, and my cousin, Dan. And so, initially, when they purchased the land in 1880, it was 320 acres. And then it grew to over 500 acres, and then it has reduced down to a total of about 400 acres amongst all the family members.

MD: Now, what do you consider to be the challenge that this operation has had over the past hundred years?

ML: As Ted and I were discussing on the way down, weather is the biggest challenge. You never know what you're going to get. And this is very prominent in the cherry industry. The weather can be very devastated and/or affecting to our cherries. This year we had a pretty good year. Last year, not so good. So, it just depends on the weather that way; that's our biggest challenge.

We are very good at being conservatives to the land. We have a nice riparian zone along Mill Creek. Mill Creek is the water system that feeds the city of The Dalles. We try to protect it. We have it fenced so the cattle really only cross in one area. We have an irrigation system in the creek in which we protect the fish, and the other thing we have is bird coveys throughout the farm because the quail are very important. My cousin, Dan, has tried to introduce pheasants back in, and they don't stay around very much. But yeah, that's our big thing right now.

[00:10:02]

MD: Well, we've talked about how things are operational, you know, today. Where do we see this farm going in the future? I mean, what are your goals for the future really now?

ML: Well, right now our farm has been in our family 140 years, and the goal for me, personally, and I think all the rest of our siblings, is to stay there another hundred years, or 200 years, or whatever it might be. So, the goal would be to always produce a crop of some sort that works for the family member who is operating it and can provide some income to keep the farm operation.

MD: Now, who's going to be taking – you know, who's the next generation? Who's going to be taking over as we go on?

ML: Well, we all have children, but in all reality my goal, and I think Ted's goal, is we're shooting for his son, Theo. He doesn't know that yet.

MD: [Laughs]. So, we always – we'd like to know a little bit of some observations about agriculture in Oregon today and where you see it going in the future as a farmer.

ML: Agriculture today, you know, agriculture changes throughout history, basically. And you know, at – hundreds of years ago, everybody was involved in agriculture by growing their own foods. Then that changed, everybody's moved to the city, and you've got a few farmers out there. Then you've got the farmers becoming devastated because they need to have loans to operate their farm because they have failing crops, or whatever might happen, and then you see those farmers going under.

I think that what I see happening more today – I mean, I do know that some farmers suffer with loan debt, but I think we as Sandozes have always just operated on a cash basis, and as a small operation, it's important to just stay that way. You can still have somebody working in town, like Ted is working in town, but he comes home and he works on the farm. And the farm is operating without debt and is providing good food for the local community.

So, I think that I see a tendency more towards that with some of the younger generation coming up. I see new farmers starting in, trying to do an acre garden and take it to the farmers market and try to do it on a cash basis, and that is a good tendency instead of, you know, going to a huge operating.

MD: When we've talked about the, you know, the present day and the past and how you feel the farm's going in the future; is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview about your century farm? Have we covered everything?

ML: I think that we probably covered everything. We just like to see our local farmers stay in the farming operation to keep our land, you know, under a good conservation, and to provide good local foods and provide a good... healthy lifestyle.

MD: Well, on behalf of the Century Farm & Ranch Program, I want to thank you for your contribution to this oral history project, and let's go see some awards.

ML: That's great, thank you.