

## The Pear Trees

Alex and his wife could hear the wild pigs at night outside having a feast on the golden fruit as the wind blew the fruit to the ground. They rolled over in bed without concern. During the day, red ants scurried up and down the giant pear trees, taking in the sweet juice. The birds knew exactly when the fruit was ripe and had their fill. Squirrels stuffed themselves until they could hardly move. Yet there was plenty left if they weren't picked. Children picked a few occasionally, mostly throwing the pears at each other. They preferred junk food. On the corner, across the street, was a food bank. A line would form for free handouts. I guess reaching up and picking a few of the sweet, juicy, golden-red fruit was too much work. The pears eventually fell to the ground and the pigs, gnats, and flies, would feast. It was 1999.

In 1870, Ivan Vukovic, an immigrant from Croatia, immigrated to the United States and settled in San Francisco, getting a job as a shipwright, his prior occupation. He worked hard for ten years and saved his money. He married a United States' citizen and began building a family. He always dreamed of having a farm. He looked around in cities close to San Francisco but the property was too expensive.

At the market, in the section where the fruit was on display, he asked the friendly grocer, "Where do all this fruit come?"

"It comes from all over."

Picking up a juicy apple, he said, "How about thes, where do come?"

"Sebastopol. The best apples in the world. Would you like some?"

"Sur, how much?"

"A nickel each."

"I take a half dozen. Where Sebaspol?"

"Up north, across the bay." After handing Ivan the apples, the grocer began helping another customer.

"Where Sebaspol?" Ivan asked his fellow workers the next day.

"Close to Hayward," said one of them.

"Naw, in Pennsylvania," said another.

"Where that?"

"Across the country, where Ben Franklin lived."

"Where that?"

"A couple thousand miles away."

"Huh?"

After work, Ivan picked up a map for three cents, took it home, and studied it. After a half hour he found Pennsylvania, but no Sebastopol.

"Sebastopol is across the bay," said his eight-year-old daughter. "My teacher told me it was close to Petaluma."

"Petluma? Where that?"

"My teacher showed me on the map in our classroom."

The next day, Ivan went back to the store and purchased a California map. There, in very small print, was the name Sebastopol, not far from Petaluma.

Ivan planned a trip for a week's vacation with his wife and four children, with the intent of someday resettling to a farm - his dream since childhood. Following the map and some advice, he took a ferry across the bay to Marin, and then transferred to another boat to the end of the line in the swampy Petaluma harbor.

The captain on the boat was a talkative guy, and when Ivan told him he was a shipwright, it made him talk more.

"Where ya headin'?" said the captain.

"Sebaspol."

"Nice place. I hope to go there someday ta visit the redwoods west of there, and take my kids, ya know?"

"Have heard any land for sale, maybe a small farm?"

"Well, there's a lot of land around here, big parcels everywhere. See them cattle over there? This is cattle country. Now the chickens are movin' in. Eggs going out by the millions since last year, when some guy invented a hatching machine. No chickens needed."

"How they make the eggs?"

"I don't know, but people are gettin' rich, big fancy cars and all. If you look down a-ways, you can see big houses goin' up, mansions with ten bedrooms and twelve baths, they say."

"Twelve bath for ten bedroom?"

"That's what they says?"

Later, while eating their neatly prepared lunch, which was packed in a basket, they sat on a grassy beach beside the Petaluma River before taking a buckboard to Sebastopol. The scenery was beautiful as they bounced down the road. Once they left Petaluma, there were only a few distant farmhouses and barns in sight. They rattled along the dusty road, surrounded by the smell of horse manure, for twenty-five miles. The horse's hooves kicked up clods of horse droppings here and there.

The land was fairly flat, surrounded 360 degrees by distant hills up to 2,500 feet in height. The fields were green with a few trees scattered around. Along the swampy areas grew larger trees. Ducks, geese, and birds in large groups were flying everywhere, landing and peacefully floating in the marshes, sometimes with only their rear ends sticking out of the water as they searched for food.

When they approached town they saw a lumber yard and next to it a barn like building. A man with a leather apron holding a horse's foot between his legs was nailing on a horse shoe. Crossing the rail tracks was a sign in front of a building displaying Garrett's metal works. They past the post office, Chinese

restaurant, a bar and restaurant, and across the street a barbershop, grocery store and hardware store combined, and clothing store. A few more small buildings continued down the street. To the east of town was a lumber mill and packing houses and cattle pens, holding cattle waiting for slaughter. Surrounding the town were orchards, most of them apple, some scattered out in the country. The family spent four days there, visiting the redwoods farther west, strolling down the side of the river, and renting a boat in a swampy pond that had been cleared for recreation.

Ivan looked around and saw a sign in the general hardware store. *LAND FOR SALE. FRANK HANSEN.* He dialed the number and two people answered at the same time, a woman and a boy.

"Mr. Hansen there?" Ivan said.

"No sa," said the boy. "He out somewhere."

"Whoops!" said another voice. "I'll wait, I was dialing out."

"That's all right, Mrs. Logan. I'll be quick."

"Can you tell him Ivan called abou' property sale."

"Sure." The phone went dead.

"Ello! Ello! Mr. Hanson?" Ivan said.

"No, this is Millie."

"Millie?"

"Millie Logan. I need to make a call."

"Sorry, I try to get hold Mr. Hanson."

"Frank. At this time Frank should be at Chuckey's."

"Ah."

"Chuckey's, the pub. I need to make a call."

"Sorry."

Ivan hung up and went outside. He saw that the sign next door read "Chuckey's." He went into the bar, which was full of rough-looking men. As he pulled up a stool, the bartender said, "What'll ya have?"

"Ah look for Mr. Handson."

"Ya mean Frank? He just left."

The man sitting next to him said, "Frank went to the hardware store. The seat you are sitting on is still warm from where his ass was parked."

"Thanks." Ivan looked at the man with a poker face, wondering whether he should smile, buy a beer, or run.

At the hardware store, there were two people talking near the counter.

"Mister Handson?"

They both turned around and stared for a moment, sizing Ivan up. "Which one?" one of them mumbled, slurring his words.

"Ah...ah...Frank."

"That's me. How can I help ya?"

"I..."

"Oh, this is my brother, Ray."

"My pleasure," Ivan said.

"What can I help ya with?"

"Uh, well, looking for some property."

"Looks like you're talkin' to the right man."

Just then a customer came in not seeing Ivan behind a display. "Hey, Frank," he said. "There's a man looking for ya. Maybe a detective after you for stealing old lady Iris's bees."

"Get off my ass, Reed, ya old bastard, this man is looking for some property."

"Well, I just thought I'd let ya know."

Frank turned to Ivan. "What kind of property ya looking for?"

"A farm."

"We got lots of them. Let's go next store and talk. I'll buy the beer."

After greeting ten people while Ivan stood behind him, Frank motioned Ivan to a corner table.

"I got anything ya want, from a thousand acres to forty. Where ya from?"

"San Francisco."

"The big city! That keeps us all in business, buying our crops, mostly apples, all of mine, ya know. We don't get many buyers these days. Those chicken people are selling land right and left. Big money. People only come here to visit. Hey, Burt! Another and two shots of bourbon to wash down the beer."

"Comin' up."

"Land is selling cheap here these days and I can make you a hell of a deal."

"I lookin' for a small farm, mayb' roun' ten hectare's, good price."

"Hectare's..let's see, how many acres is that?"

"Between two, three, somethin' like that."

"I think a little more than two. Well, there're a few places already for sale and some that might be, if the price is right."

"How much the land cost per ah acre?"

"Anywhere from ten to twenty-five, depends on what's on it. Orchard land costs more but is harder to find. How about we meet here tomorrow, about ten o'clock, after I finish my chores?"

"That be fine. Wha' time?"

"Ah...ten-thirty."

Ivan didn't finish his beer or drink his bourbon. Frank finished his and downed Ivan's full glass of bourbon.

At ten-thirty the next morning, Frank showed up, riding his horse with another in tow, and tied them to the rail. Ivan was inside having a cup of coffee. Frank joined him.

"Ya ready for a look around?"

"Ready."

"Let's go. Jump on Nellie. She's old and slow but tough as nails."

"Ah, I never been on horse..."

"I figured ya were a city slicker, so I brought Nellie."

"How get on? I never do horse before."



"That's all right. Nellie already has you figured out. Just grab the reins and hold on to the saddle horn at the same time, now put your foot in the stirrup and swing the other leg over."

The horse turned as Ivan put his weight in the stirrup. He jumped around on one leg with the other slipping off.

"Whoops, ya got to throw your leg over quickly."

"OK." Ivan tried again.

"That's it, now grab the reins lightly and hold them on the horn so there is no slack, then when you want to go forward, loosen up the reins and give her a slight kick with your heels and she'll move forward."

The horse started backing up. Ivan got confused and kicked the horse with his heels, pulling back on the reins for balance. The horse started rising up on her back legs.

"Hold on! Don't pull the reins tight! Loosen them up!" Frank reached up high and grabbed the reins near the horse's mouth. "Let go, I got her. Let's try another way. Keep the reins loose and don't do anything. She'll just follow me."

Frank swung up on his horse and started riding. Nellie followed. Ivan, sweating, held on to the reins and saddle horn with both hands, gripping it tightly.

Frank showed Ivan three parcels of property; one 1,000 acres, one 160 acres, and one next to town that was 60 acres. Ivan never dismounted during the two-hour tour because he figured he was so sore he probably wouldn't be able to get back on. His rear end

hurt, his legs cramped up, and his testicles ached. It was not an option to get down and rest.

In the meantime, Frank rested the horses. He reached down with cupped hands to get a drink of the cool water from a small stream, then took a piss. "Hey, this water is cool and sweet, don't ya want some?"

Ivan wanted to get off the horse. He hurt badly but he stayed put, fearing that if he moved, the horse would rear up and throw him off, or start running. He had to piss so bad he could taste it but held his ground.

"No thanks, I stay right here."

Frank shrugged. "It's your party."

After their tour, Frank helped ease Ivan's painful body off Nellie and they headed toward the bar. Ivan staggered to a chair next to a small table, walking like he was drunk, and flopped down with relief. Over a few beers, Ivan told Frank that he couldn't afford any more than forty acres, if the price was right.

"Let's see what I can do."

Ivan and his family headed back to the city. Ivan was in pain and didn't feel as enthusiastic as he had been. But a few days later, he received a call from Frank.

"Mr. Erickson will sell you forty acres from his 160 acres for \$10 an acre. It's a beautiful property; the one that I showed ya a half mile from town. The forty acres borders the stream that you

both will have access to. There's an old barn on it and a few oak trees."

"I'll come this weekend and look."

Ivan bought the property, negotiating the price down to \$8 an acre. From that time on, the price of the property went drastically up.

The following year, Ivan began planting apple trees but he couldn't forget the magnificent pear tree in the back yard of his parents' home in Croatia with the delicious, juicy, reddish-golden pears hanging from its branches. He sent a letter to his younger brother, Marco, asking him to come to America and help build his house, and to bring bud cuttings from the pear tree.

Ivan planted a half acre of pear root stock in April, and after his brother arrived, they grafted the cutting buds to the rootstock.

One afternoon, two rough-looking riders covered with dust appeared. They wore side guns and had rifles in their saddle cases. Their horses soaked with sweat. They asked Ivan and his brother for water from the small stream that ran through their ranch.

As they drank, one of the men said, "Ya got any grub?" He pulled out gold \$20 coin. "And some hay for our horses and maybe a few hours rest in that barn over there?"

Ivan, a little confused and taken by surprise at the large sum of money, nodded. He led them to barn after they'd had their fill of water. "Can stay in the barn for night, there hay in there."

Other cowboys were around. Some had rifles and occasionally a six-gun or pistol to shoot varmints, but not like these two men. Ivan had read stories about cowboys in the West like Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickok, and Black Bart, who was a local outlaw. But these cowboys looked like the bank robbers in his imagination. He wondered if they were, in fact, real robbers.

Ivan was thrilled and invited them to his house for dinner. Ivan's wife cooked a meat stew and made a salad. The cowboys never took off their gun belts and sat their rifles next to the front door.

"Are ya real cowboys?" said Ivan's son.

"Ya might say that," said one of the men.

"Have ya ever shot anybody?"

"Well, young man, I try not to," said the other man, dipping a big piece of bread into his stew, which colored a part of his mustache orange.

"Can I—"

"Leave men alone, son, can't you see they hungry? They probably had a rough day."

The next day at the break of dawn, the men were gone. On the top of a stool lay another \$20 gold piece.

Word soon went around that a wealthy hatchery owner in Petaluma had been robbed of over a thousand dollars of gold by two bandits headed toward Sebastopol. Ivan and his brother never said a word. They went about their chores as if nothing had happened. In

the backs of their minds they had become part of the Old West. The exciting stories they had heard and read about became true to them and now they were part of the history of the West. Posses scattered around the countryside looking for the robbers but they were never heard from again.

In five years, Ivan and his brother planted another acre and a half of pear rootstock and months later grafted them with bud cuttings from their original pear trees. They planted most of the remaining property with Gravenstein apples. Ivan still worked at his job in San Francisco, along with his brother, and spent weekends and holidays at the ranch. Eventually, he and his family moved to the ranch.

When they were on school breaks, the children worked at the apple-packing plant every summer, and his wife helped at harvest time and sometimes at the packing plant. The apples were picked, delivered to the packing plant, then sent to San Francisco and all over the world. The pears were the favorite and most were consumed before they left San Francisco.

In 1931, Ivan died. His brother died a year later. The Great Depression was going strong, but the apples, and especially the pears, were still selling well. People had to eat and the family made a meager living. Ivan's eldest daughter took over the ranch and the family continued to farm it.

In 1972, prices were falling and the family, with little income, sold the land but kept the two-acre pear orchard with the house and barn.

Now neglected, the ranch and trees fell into disrepair except for one pear next to the house, which was cared for. Fortunately, an underground stream flowed six feet under the pear orchard and those trees kept growing until they became giants. The orchard stood by itself, surrounded by neighborhood houses. The land was very valuable and pressure was put on the family to sell. Ivan's great-grandson Alex sold two of the remaining two-and-a-half acres for \$160,000 – just enough to pay off the debt his family had accumulated – keeping the house and a half acre. The house, barn, and one pear tree were spared after bulldozers ripped out the magnificent pear tree orchard.

Today, the last gigantic pear tree remains in the back of the old house that Ivan and his brother built. Maybe the buds from that tree will be budded to another orchard someday. If not, that beautiful fruit will be forgotten...along with the sack of gold that remains buried under the dirt in the corner of the barn.