

Driscoll Road - It's the Berries!
Written by Philip Holmes, printed in Tri-City Voice, August 31, 2010

In the mid 1880s, residents of Washington Corners (now Irvington) going to Niles had two choices: they could go up Mission Road (now Washington Blvd.) to Mission San Jose, then north to Niles, or they could go north to Centerville, then east on the Centerville Road. Needing a shorter route, they first petitioned the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in 1858 for a more direct road.

The petition noted that several families would have to give up some of their land for the public road right-of-way. These families included John and William Y. Horner, E. L. Beard, Jonathan Beale, and William Hopkins. After some time, the petition was granted and a right-of-way for County Road No.1008 was secured. E. L. Beard donated land in 1871, and the Washington College of Science and Industry was built adjacent to the road on a knoll across from William Horner's house. The railroad and depot were just down the hill creating access and increased traffic.

It isn't known exactly when the road received its current name, Driscoll Road, but it's certain that it was named for the Driscoll brothers of strawberry fame. Donald and Richard Driscoll came to California from County Cork, Ireland, in the 1890s. They started raising strawberries in the Watsonville area and soon expanded into Washington Township. Conditions were ideal in both areas because of a long growing season.

The Washington Press reported in 1910 that the Driscoll brothers had a strawberry farm at the California Nursery but needed more land. The local paper noted in 1911: "Driscoll Brothers of the Niles Strawberry Farm were in Irvington this week seeking a location for additional land for their strawberry business." That year they bought 105 acres of the Martin Carter Estate on the present Driscoll Road. They set out 500 acres of strawberries in 1913, and their farm was reported to be the largest in California in 1916. "Images of America, Irvington" pictures the ranch on both sides of Driscoll Road.

A traveling caravan presented a public demonstration of "modern tillage" with tractors and tools on the Driscoll ranch in 1921. Influential local farmers presented the rare demonstration in response to requests. At one point, The Township Register reported that Richard Driscoll had moved from Niles to the Driscoll cottage in Mission San Jose. The family apparently moved back to Niles in 1932, and he died there in 1934. The family carried on the business, and continued to expand to a number of locations in California.

Third generation Don Driscoll, who now makes his home in Idaho, remembers living on Thornton Avenue as a child in the 40s. He attended Centerville School and recalls Holy Ghost parades. He remembers too, moving to Warm Springs near where the NUMMI plant now stands. He explains that the family moved a number of times and worked many fields because strawberries draw nutrients from the soil, and before the advent of

fumigation, the soil was unusable for periods of time.

The farms were operated on a share basis with Japanese families who lived nearby and with additional pickers during peak season. Packing, freezing, and shipping were done at the plant in San Martin, and it was reported in 1946 that 45,000 pounds of strawberries a day were being flown out of Salinas to eastern markets.

Over the years many hundreds of acres came under cultivation and represented a large portion of the California crop. In 1949 Richard Jr. was in charge of the frozen food division, Ned, a marketing expert, was General Manager, Don managed Irvington/San Jose, and George managed Modesto. Through experimentation and research many different varieties were developed, most lending themselves better to other locations, and the business gradually migrated south.

Diane Gomes Leys, who grew up on the family ranch that stretched from Lemos Lane to Driscoll Road, remembers hearing that there were Japanese families south of Driscoll. Her father, John Gomes, enjoyed playing baseball with the men who lived there. Because of boundary changes and city incorporation, Diane has lived through three addresses at that site: Niles, Irvington, and now, Fremont. Their ranch was sold in 1964 and became part of the Driscoll Road development.

While the Driscolls became known for their strawberries, the company produces all types of berries, having added blackberries, raspberries and blueberries through the years. It's now a worldwide organization. Don mentions Spain, Portugal, and England as well as Australia and Chile in addition to regions closer to home, such as Florida and Mexico. In spite of their far-flung operations, their corporate headquarters remain where it all started - Watsonville, California.

The land once covered with strawberries is now covered with homes and businesses and the Driscoll family is long gone, but we continue to enjoy strawberries, and chances are that those berries come from the family that gave its name to Driscoll Road.