In front of the Venice Food Tramps store. L to R: MaiBritt, Larry, Michael and Cole.

Venice Fruit Tramps

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In November of 1974 two other hippies and I opened a groovy little produce store on the boardwalk in Venice CA. We sold fresh fruits and vegetables and bulk dried herbs, and nothing in a package. We called the store Venice Fruit Tramps and paid $400 a month rent at 425 Ocean Front Walk (though actually in the northwest corner of what's now Fig Tree restaurant). Venice Gifts and Sunglasses, which offers, "The Best Sunglasses in Venice Beach!!", is now listed at that address.

I say the three of us opened the store, but there was a founder of the business who came before us. Jerry Van was selling produce from an old pickup truck in a parking lot on Ocean Front Walk a few days each week, and wanted to see it moved indoors with more permanent hours. Jerry insisted, however, that he did not own this business – that it was owned by the customers and the community at large, and that we had to promise that we would never own it either. So the agreement we made was that at anytime any of the three of us wanted to move on, we follow his lead and give the store back to the community. "No fat guy at the top skimming off the profits" was how he expressed this condition, and we all agreed at the outset to pass on control to whoever was showing up to work at the time of any of our departures.

Kathy and Joe – my original partners in the storefront – and I spent a lot of time with Jerry in the weeks before the store opened, often in a cloud of marijuana smoke, to make sure that we clearly understood the vision he was sharing. Hanging out with him at the truck we sometimes observed his "no prices" policy, where the cost could depend on the quality of his relationship with each individual, rather than on the quantity of produce purchased. We also met many of his customers. These were local folks who had lived along the boardwalk for years, and also recently arrived young moms who were just scratching by. But most memorable was the elderly Jewish community living at the Israel Levin Center, many of whom still bore tattoos on their forearms from their imprisonment in concentration camps in Central Europe during the war.

Getting started during a cold, rainy winter.

Winters in Los Angeles seldom meet the expectation of tourists to our town, who come expecting warm weather and sunny skies 365 days of the year. November of 1974 was particularly cold and rainy, and Kathy and Joe and I spent quite a few days looking out the plate glass window, from which we could barely see the ocean for all the cloudy mists and fog. There were days on which we had only a handful of customers and sold less than $40 worth of produce.

All this time cooped up together was not wasted though, as it gave the three of us opportunities to get to know one another. We had just met when we were the only ones who responded to Jerry's call for someone to replace him, so we used this time to get more into the ideology of how we hoped to manage Venice Fruit Tramps.

Kathy and I were both younger – in our early to mid 20s; Joe was about 40. It became clear that Joe had already given a lot of thought to alternative ways of running a business, meant to balance survival of the enterprise with community support, and I think a lot of the ideas that we came up with were initiated by Joe. We decided that none of us would take salaries but only pay our rents (at that time only about $75 a month for each of our small apartments); eat as much of our own inventory as we chose; take some incidental small amounts of cash from time to time for necessary purchases; and that we could spoil ourselves with breakfast together each day at Lafayette's Café or the Marathon Meatless Messhall, recently opened on the boardwalk at Windward Ave.

As far as planning the store's actual operations we decided to avoid fixed hours, so that we would open at about 9:00 AM and close just after sunset, which of course was very different in November than it would be in the summertime. We also agreed that we would keep a change bowl sitting on the counter, readily accessible to the store clerk and to our customers, to some degree to communicate mutual trust with such a sensitive issue as money.

Joe's most radical idea though, was that all of the produce should be priced the same, as determined by averaging the cost of everything that we brought into the store. With such calculations, bananas would be sold at the same price as avocados. I expressed significant concern that this would invite a lot of customers to only buy their avocados from us rather than include what would be overpriced bananas. I know it disappointed Joe, but we never tried out that particular experiment.

It's out of our control!

That weather-created lull didn't last too long though, and by early spring the sun was shining, the ocean was inviting, and the hippies started hitchhiking through Venice beach. I came in one day to find a young man named John K. working behind the counter and stocking shelves, and Kathy and Joe nowhere to be seen. John had just come down from Mendocino (more precisely, from Little River, where he was camping in the redwoods) with his red-haired mane, his big black dog, and his guitar. He had stopped by that afternoon to ask if there was any work for him. Joe and Kathy were anxious to get to the beach and so agreed that John could work for a few hours for today's food, and maybe a place to stay in the back of the store.

John was just the first of a dozen or so passers-by and new local friends who came to be the core workforce at Venice Fruit Tramps. LindaBeth and her young daughter lived around the corner and starting coming by in the mornings to help set up the produce displays. There was Scotty L., taking a break from studying tabla in the Bay Area and constantly drumming with his hands on whatever surface was in front of him – his personal version of whistling while he worked. Two other Jerry's showed up – one a very shy man who kept his hat pulled slightly over his eyes and got right to work helping with anything that could be done, and the other with whom I shared the training I'd received from Jerry Van to prepare him to be a substitute produce buyer – a very early morning task that I took on when the store first opened. A young and talented painter named Cole assigned himself to painting signs for the store.

As the summer of 1975 came on, we found ourselves dealing with new challenges, including food spoilage. Thankfully, MaiBritt E. brought her amazing baking skills with her when she came down from the Midwest. By that time we had expanded to include a juice bar and could use much of the ripest fruit to make delicious fresh juices – the line was out the door most days! But by early afternoon we would have dozens of peaches and nectarines that were going to spoil if we didn't cook with them within the next few hours. MaiBritt and I would gather these up and take them to her home a block away, which housed half a dozen people and so had a nearly commercial-grade kitchen. I would clean and slice the fruit while MaiBritt prepared the rest of the ingredients for a delicious fruit cobbler. We would remove the sheets from the oven and allow them to cool just enough to cut the cobbler into squares. As we walked the one block of Paloma Ave. back to the store, we inevitably sold numerous slices straight out of the pan, there on the sidewalk, as the people walking by got caught up in the aroma.

Like many stores that sell food, the busiest time of day was in the late afternoon and early evening as people started to make their dinner plans. The store would get packed wall to wall, and the displays that we had worked so hard all day to keep in order were suddenly a mess. That's when our neighbor Sharman B. would do her own shopping. As she moved around the perimeter of the store she would restock and reorganize each of the produce displays. I initially offered her a discount for this important assistance; in the spirit of the Fruit Tramps, she refused and said it was the least contribution she could make.

When the store finally got through the daily mad rush each evening a different focus took over. We prepared an inventory and shopping list for tomorrow's market run, and started dealing with whatever had not been sold that was not going to survive until the next day. Alex C., as a 14-year old kid who had grown up in one of the grand old houses along Ocean Front Walk and now found himself and his siblings challenged by his mother's creative parenting, would stop by at sunset and start to assist with the daily cleanup; in return he would take a box or two of tired produce with him. Competing with Alex was Mark W, one of the core Tramps, who had recognized that not everyone in our community could afford to buy the food we were offering. Mark started cooking a big pot of vegetable soup each evening which he would then carry out onto the boardwalk to feed the homeless people who were sleeping on the benches and on the beach. You see, homelessness was already present in Venice 50 years ago; we may have treated the issue differently then.

There were many others who contributed to the Fruit Tramps' community in ways other than working in the store. There was Andy V, the retired football player turned lawyer, who prepared small pamphlets to help people know their rights when confronted by LAPD, whether with demands for ID or accusations of using marijuana. The three local fruitarians – Randy, Ribs, and Bruce – taught us many details about how to evaluate the quality of avocados, tomatoes, melons, etc. The hippie moms and their babies who hung out on the lawn – Laurie and her beautiful son Segan; Gina and her

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dark-haired daughter Likrish; Jane, still pregnant with the boy who would come to be called Josh – provided an ambiance even while approaching the store, and always found something to do to help when they stopped by for a bite to eat. Swale wore his identity obviously, so that we never had to ask whether gays were welcome in our community – they were already here.

One Saturday morning a young man virtually burst into the store: "What's going on here?" He identified himself as a sociology major at UCLA, and apparently word of our existence had made it all the way to Westwood. He asked if he could see our charter and attend one of our meetings. I told him that we did not have a charter and then turned to another of the Fruit Tramps and asked, "Hey, do you wanna have a meeting?" We had never done this before, which astounded our new sociologist friend, but for his sake a group of us got together a couple of weeks later to talk to him (and each other) about our vision and how it was coming together and what was yet to be done.

I should pause here to say that by giving these short descriptions of a number of individuals and groups involved with the Venice Fruit Tramps, I have failed to provide a dynamic image of what was going on on a day-to-day basis. Picture this: if you walked into Fruit Tramps at almost any time you would see three or four or five young people, hair to their shoulders (female and male), busy with tasks – sweeping the floor, stocking the shelves, helping customers, working the checkout stand – and you would see a pleasure in these activities that showed that we were not only doing the work but also enjoying it – not quite a party, but close to it!

We (accidently) fought the law – and found cooperation! (OR: Our first run-in with authority)

On a retail stretch of storefronts with many plate glass windows along the front, there was an obvious work opportunity for someone skilled in keeping the windows clean. A young man named Ron dragged his buckets and squeegees and ladders from one to the next, and we were happy to pay him the nominal fee he requested for a weekly cleaning, We had been open for four or five weeks when Ron stopped in to ask how we had been able to get our health department permit so promptly. I believe our response was: "Our what?", as we were not aware of this requirement. Ron encouraged us to get this taken care of, and then informed us a few weeks later that he would turn us in if we didn't. We may have initially been angry with Ron, but we came to understand that he was simply doing his civic duty and that we had a shared interest in making sure that we were serving food from a clean environment.

So I called the LA County Department of Health and asked when I could schedule an inspection of our already open food store in Venice. Once the sputtering on the other side of the line stopped – "What do you mean that you're already open?" – an inspector agreed to stop by that very afternoon. He wrote us up for any number of violations. To begin with, a basic requirement for a health permit is for the facility to have smooth, easily cleanable surfaces. The prior tenant in our storefront had been a sound studio and so had glued egg cartons over all the walls to create a better sound background; that meant our walls were peppered with little bits of glued on cardboard that created a surface that was anything but smooth, and certainly not easily cleanable. Also, there were cracks in the floor that would need to be dealt with. Numerous other details were also identified, but the most significant oversight was that the only sink in the facility was the one in the bathroom. We would therefore be required to install a two-compartment stainless steel sink of sufficient size to meet the needs of a food-store operation.

Remarkably, the inspector told us that he would stop by once a week and that he would need to see some progress in addressing the many observations he had recorded. So that weekend, we bought scrapers and paint and gathered up as many of our friends and customers as we could, and proceeded to clean up and paint the walls. We then moved on to the floors, patched up the screen door, addressed rodent control, etc. But the sink – how were we going to afford to purchase and install the required stainless sink? The inspector made it clear that he didn't care how we got this done, but at one point he issued a "…next week or else" ultimatum. So we borrowed a few dollars from friends, found a plumber willing to work pro bono, and finally got that last detail behind us. What we didn't know at the time was that this would be the best investment we could have made because we were now able to get going with a juice bar, which proved to be the most profitable service that we offered.

We fought the law, and we won! (OR: Our second run-in with authority)

There's a problem when trying to deliver one half a ton or more of fresh produce each day to a storefront on Ocean Front Walk – driving is not allowed on the boardwalk, and there are posted traffic signs that make this point clearly and redundantly. But we had managed to extend our sense of community to include the cops on the beat – two young men in blue who stopped by the store at least daily, said hello, bought an apple, and went on their way. We had explained our situation to them and promised to keep our driving to a minimum, with a self-imposed speed limit of 5 mph and departure by 7:30 am, and they agreed that this was reasonable.

But one morning a different cop opened the door and demanded that the owner of the vehicle parked there come speak to him. I complied with his instruction and told him of the arrangement that we had made with the cops on the beat. "I'm the cop on the beat now," he replied, "and all of those signs clearly forbid driving here." He told me that if I was there again the next day, he would have no choice but to write me up.

As promised, this representative of LAPD's finest arrived the next morning to confront me anew. He requested that I give him my driver's license and told me that he would call it in to see if any other legal action might be required. As I handed him my license, I turned around and walked back into the store, explaining to him that I had work to do – maybe a little snottier than wise, but I wasn't really seeking wisdom in this situation. A few minutes later he called me out by name and informed me that there was a warrant for my arrest (I was not previously aware of this – it turned out to be for failure to pay a jaywalking ticket the prior year). He proceeded to handcuff me and put me in the police car, and then to drive the entire length of Ocean Front Walk, all the way to Windward Ave. I was pretty well known in the neighborhood by that time, and at some point, I commented that it seemed unnecessary for him to "perp walk" me in this manner based on an outstanding traffic warrant of some sort. His reply, and I quote: "If you don't like it, there are 49 other states."

I decided it would probably be best for me to keep my mouth shut, but I was not able to maintain that discipline when the

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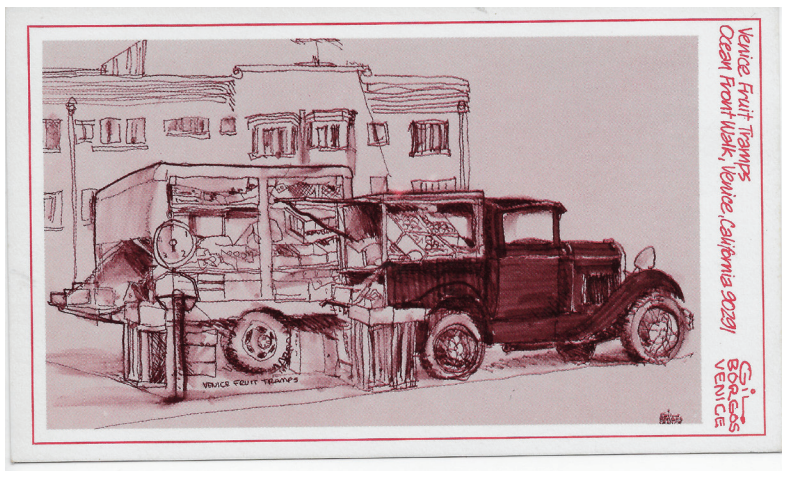

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cop floored the accelerator as he approached a 25 mile per hour speed limit sign on Venice Way. Again unwisely, I blurted out, "For such a law and order guy you don't seem to have much respect for that speed limit sign." He slammed on the brakes, got as much in my face as he could, and told me that he could get to the Pacific Division police station within 12 to 15 minutes, or quite late that afternoon, and that the choice was up to me. I shut up for the rest of our short drive.

I now had to deal with two traffic violations: the unpaid jaywalking ticket and the Incident of illegal driving on the boardwalk. I found myself in a courtroom pleading guilty with a cause, because I needed to at least try to reassert our special permission to drive on the boardwalk – early in the morning and at very low speed – to deliver food to our store. I found the judge to be empathetic, and once I had agreed that I would certainly pay the past due jaywalking ticket, he wrote his name on a small piece of paper and asked me to go speak to the desk sergeant at Pacific Division, "and get that cop removed from the beat." We never saw that policeman again.

Venice Food Tramps store front. That is Larry (Jerome Marshak) seated second from the right side.

The end came too soon

When we first opened the store we registered the business as a partnership between me and Kathy. We did this in support of Jerry Van's original condition, so that it would be easy to transfer ownership to others should either Kathy or I depart. By the spring of 1975, Joe and Kathy decided to leave; she was pregnant and wanted to get to warmer weather, so they headed to Mexico. It was a simple process to change the business license to retain my name and remove Kathy's and replace hers with someone else active in running the store.

I've previously introduced you to "two other Jerrys" who had been attracted to the Fruit Tramps, including one whom I trained as a secondary produce buyer. He had now taken on a large role in the day-to-day business and was the obvious candidate to be added to the license. As I recall, we did not give this much thought or engage in any in-depth discussions; the main goal we were attempting to accomplish was to honor Jerry Van's initial vision as Venice Fruit Tramp's customers being its actual owners, and we thought this could best be achieved by maintaining a minimum of two Individuals named as formal owners.

A year later I too decided to leave, and I somehow forgot this precedent. Jerry and I went to the county business office and simply removed my name from the license. This was a fateful error. Within months of my departure, I started receiving mail from the people who had been part of the core first generation of the "accidental collective" that had evolved in those first two years of the Fruit Tramps' existence. I was told that everything had changed – only Jerry now had keys to the store; work shifts were now assigned at his discretion only; and Venice Fruit Tramps had taken on the feel of any other retail food store. But I was 3,000 miles away and no longer identified as an owner or as having any authority whatsoever.

I returned to Venice a little over a year later and confronted Jerry about both his abandonment of our ideal and of his promise to maintain this ideal; that is, that Venice Fruit Tramps could never belong to a single individual. He explained to me that shortly after I left, he was the only one who was actually doing any work and so, as he told it, he decided on one particular day that the original model no longer existed, and that the store was now his sole proprietorship. He later sold it, and a natural products store existed at that location for almost 20 years.

Lessons learned

As I shared early drafts of this article with friends, several commented that such a nonconformist approach to business could not be successful today. Their rationale: rents are now too high; the thumb of "the man" is so much heavier today; only the "profit motive" can lead to a successful business (even if you are planning to give it away); lots of money is an absolute prerequisite to getting any business started; etc.

Each of these may be important factors to consider when thinking about moving forward with some new idea, but I would encourage you to not let any of them serve as an excuse. Do it now! Do it because you want to!! Do it because you can't help it!!! If it becomes compulsive, go ahead and follow your instincts and your drive. There will be plenty of time later to analyze what went wrong if you're unsuccessful, and tremendous satisfaction if, in fact, you can move forward with one or another crazy dream.

Perhaps a more applicable lesson would have been to recognize the direct relevance to Venice Fruit Tramps of some of the practices espoused by our UCLA social studies friend. Perhaps, for example, a formal charter would have protected the store's initial formative values better than our recollections of our word-of-mouth ideas and agreements. And maybe if we had scheduled regular meetings, we would have found opportunities to get to know our coworkers better, rather than be surprised by their departures from what we assumed to be well-understood and agreed-upon policies.

Prologue (Requested and incomplete)

Two friends who reviewed this narrative suggested that it could be improved with the addition of a description of Venice of the early 1970s to provide some context of what else was going on in our town.

I only arrived here in January 1974, though, so I can't give the same details as I've provided above for our produce store. Perhaps someone with a longer tenure here could write that as a follow up article, or if we can convince Sweet William McNally to reissue his presumably out-of-print Venice of America (1976).

But I can share some personal recollections and common knowledge of the time, to at least provide a partial overview of Venice as we were moving the Fruit Tramps indoors.

To begin with, Venice was never a single homogenous community in spite of the likely perception by some that there was nothing here but the boardwalk and the partying and the roller skates. The canals that had been built as part of Abbott Kenny's original vision for Venice of America had all been filled in during the 1930s, after Venice, with significant controversy, was incorporated into the city of Los Angeles. This and other changes to our community brought about by the LA City Council led many in Venice to continue through the 1970s to seriously discuss independence or secession. A later developer added the canals that still exist to this day, but these were in poor condition by the early 1970s, to the degree that some of the sidewalks were falling into the water. It was rumored that you could party with the Hells Angels and other luminaries most weekend nights by heading over to Carroll Canal!

Oakwood has always been an essential neighborhood in Venice, established to provide housing for the Black workers who were hired to build the new city. My first Venice home was at 6th Street and Vernon Ave. in Oakwood, when I somewhat naïvely moved in one night to what I was told was an integrated neighborhood. Whether this collection of family homes and Section 8 housing had once been a peaceful community, violence had become common in Oakwood, and the sounds of gunshots and sirens were far too frequent. These disturbances had arisen from tensions between Blacks and Browns, and from the first string of fear that gentrification would push those historic populations out of this once fine neighborhood. A walk through the streets of Oakwood today would show that this fear was not unfounded.

Moving to the boardwalk and the beach, an observer of the goings on there In the early 1970s might have been able to predict the activities at the Venice boardwalk and beach of today. Less predictable though was the huge increase since then in the size of the crowds and the number of street entertainers and vendors of both precious things and junk. But joggers and rollerbladers were already out in large numbers. People showed up on weekends to sell everything from household goods, almost like a garage sale but moved to the beach, to t-shirts and sunglasses and original artwork. Others offered Tarot and other forms of psychic readings. Musicians of varying talent found their places along the boardwalk and regaled us with everything from contemporary folk and rock tunes to free-form jazz screaming from a saxophone. Poets and saints also arrived to share their wisdom or nonsense while standing on one of the many benches that lined the way. The sand itself was packed on hot and sunny days, and most people there kept their clothes on!

As I hope I've communicated above, Venice Fruit Tramps was innovative in its embrace of new ideas. But we were not alone, as many others were experimenting with their own manifestations of the counterculture. The Marathon Meatless Messhall, for example, provided community seating, so we could get to know our neighbors while eating breakfast or lunch. One Life Natural Foods offered vegetarian meals at its restaurant on Pier Ave. at whatever price each customer could afford. The scope of services offered by the Rev. Jim Conn at the Church in Ocean Park extended far beyond religious matters, to the extent that the church was a community in and of itself. The Free Venice Beachhead (chee waa-waa!) was already publishing its unique news and opinions to keep us all informed. And as already mentioned, the original Fruit Tramps, still working from an old truck, had established a "no prices" policy for the produce it sold there, not to mention their recognition of community ownership of this enterprise.

So the soil in which we planted our idea and ideology had already been fertilized by others; we simply joined them by planting Venice Fruit Tramps in their midst. My gratitude for these true innovators cannot be expressed strongly enough, and I love you all for showing the way.

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