

Blessings of  
the fog

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# SUNDAY BAY LIVING

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✓ FARMS

'I heard about the Apple Bob legend before I ever even met him. Everyone was saying, "Just wait for Apple Bob to come." '

— Scott Wolfram, New Leaf Market produce manager

APPLE

He's been  
growing  
apples without  
chemicals so  
long some  
may say he is  
the original  
organic  
farmer

BOB

By TRACIE WHITE  
Sentinel staff writer

VERALLS HUNG LOOSE over his





By TRACIE WHITE  
Sentinel staff writer

**O**VERALLS HUNG LOOSE over his hips, a hoe in his hand, an apple bag slung over a shoulder, and a baseball hat on his head.

It's picture perfect. Norman Rockwellian. A snapshot of Americana.

Bob Gilardoni, better known as "Apple Bob," is still rototilling at 81 years old. He's still out in his apple orchards by 5:30 in the morning, still battling gophers and worms and deer.

Still being neighborly, delivering peaches and berries and apples to Roland Ball and his wife Arlene across the street,

But, most striking of all, Gilardoni is still farming organically like his father did in the old country. The archetype of the American farmer, Apple Bob was once branded "hippie" and called "crazy" for his refusal to use fertilizers and pesticides on his crops.

And still he's breaking ground in more ways than one. An organic farmer long before most people knew what that meant, Gilardoni is today on the cutting edge of organic farming research.

But Gilardoni doesn't really see it that way.

He just gets up everyday at 5 a.m., spends the morning working in the fields, eats a large Italian meal with his wife at lunchtime and takes off for his rounds delivering his apples to most of the natural food stores in Santa Cruz County.

He farms organically because that's the way his father did it in his home town of Bellagio, Italy.

*Please see APPLE BOB — B2*



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

At age 81, Bob Gilardoni still gets up at 5 a.m. every morning and tends to his apple orchards the way his father did.



Gilardoni works the fields in the mornings, making his deliveries in the afternoon.



He was called a hippie and crazy. Now most people call Gilardoni 'Apple Bob.'



# Apple Bob: a pioneer in organic farming

*Continued from Page B1*

"Everybody knows me as Apple Bob," Gilardoni said. "I was called all kinds of names when I first started — like hippie." He shrugs, smiling at the thought of it.

**I**T'S MORNING and Gilardoni is, of course, working out in his 6-acre apple orchard in Corralitos. Taking a break from irrigating, he sits on the back of his white pickup truck, a branch laden with ripening Gravensteins hanging picturesquely over his head.

Gilardoni's never been politically active, he's never been rich, and he didn't graduate from high school. He's an Italian immigrant who grew up on a ranch in Soquel, married a Corralitos girl, raised three children, worked 25 years as a janitor and bus driver at, what was once, Corralitos elementary school, and basically always farmed.

He's farmed berries, apricots, plums, grapes, and even did some dairy farming in his early years.

And, despite the fact that he's never worn tie-dye or grown his hair long, he's become something of a legend within the organic farming community, admired by many of his younger disciples.

"I heard about the Apple Bob legend before I ever even met him," said Scott Wolfram, produce manager at New Leaf Market for the past two years. "Everyone was saying, 'Just wait for Apple Bob to come.'"

"I thought, wow, this guy is dynamite. I admire him for ... having the commitment to stick with it. He's been into growing organic fruit for, I don't even know how long. Everybody knows him (at the store)," Wolfram said. "He's like family. They stop and give him hugs."

**A**PPLE BOB was one of the first farmers certified organic

with the California Certified Organic Farmers. That was in the '70s long before the law required farmers who called themselves organic to be certified.

His wife, Ann, encouraged the organic farming. Both of them felt that the pesticides damaged their health.

"The big farmers are just starting to pick that up now," Gilardoni said. "When I started there was not one. I was the original one."

In place of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, Gilardoni used animal manure as fertilizer and sulfur as an insecticide. Over the years he has learned and incorporated many of the new methods of organic farming. He uses cover cropping, which involves growing a bell-bean cover crop in the winter to supply organic nitrogen to the soil in place of synthetic fertilizer. He uses Lifeboy soap hung in the saplings to deter the deer, and he sprays with seaweed and kelp to put nitrogen in the trees and help fight the red spider, he said.

Gilardoni is now also part of a collaborating group of about a dozen local farmers working with the UC Santa Cruz Agroecology program on a new organic farming method to fight the codling moth, which is primarily responsible for wormy apples in the Pajaro Valley.

"In the farming community you know who's doing what," said Sean Swezey, an entomologist from the UC Santa Cruz Agroecology Program who recruited Gilardoni for the study. "Apple Bob has been a long term, long-standing organic farmer."

Swezey happens to live in Corralitos so he contacted Apple Bob. Now he monitors the foil-placed in Gilardoni's apple trees. The dispensers contain a synthetic female sex hormone designed to confuse the mating rituals of the male codling moth.

Walking through his orchards, like he does every morning, Gilardoni points to the dispensers, and scratches his head. He's not quite sure how they work. Then he wanders on pointing out the different variety of apples ripening in the fields, the golden delicious and the pippins.

At 81, Gilardoni irrigates and rototills, but when he walks through the orchard, he just shuffles, his large, brown work boots kicking over the dirt clods. A light layer of the fertile Corralitos dirt dusts the stripped overalls he wears everyday and the worn wool sweater spotted with moth holes.

Gilardoni pulls a tissue out of the sweater's bulging side pocket and continues his tour. This is his grape vine, he says, this is his wife's garden, and this is his own personal garlic patch.

"You can see I'm Italian," Gilardoni says, particularly proud of the small garlic patch.

**B**ORN BATISTA Gilardoni in 1910 in Bellagio, Provincia de Como, northern Italy, Gilardoni came to the United States with his mother and father by ship when he was just 1 month old.

Anxious to tell the story, he carefully pulls an old newspaper article out of his wallet, unfolds it, smooths the edges and puts on an old pair of glasses patched several times with black duct tape.

The article tells the story of his father, Nicola Gilardoni, one of 11 children who came to America with his "pretty wife, 35 cents in his pocket and a can of sardines" to make his fortune. He got a job as a milkman in Riverdale, then moved to Soquel when Gilardoni was 9 years old.

"I'm one of the last oldtimers to come from the old country," Gilardoni said. "My dad lived till 96. In good shape too. He wasn't in no rest home. 'We were poor people. We came over third class with the animals. There were a lot of Italians here at one time. It was like a big family. How would we make it if they didn't help? We came here cause we were poor Italians.'"

Gilardoni loves to reminisce about the old days. How, at one time there were dairies and a paper mill and even a jail in Soquel and how his mom scrubbed floors for \$2 a day.

He also remembers how he first got started in the farming business — feeding the chickens and rabbits and horses on his dad's farm.

"It ain't like now," Gilardoni said. "In them days, there was no wood there in the valley. My dad he got me one of those little wagons. I'd pick up buffalo chips, we'd use them for burning."

From one moment to the next, Gilardoni seems to change in age. His strong jaw can slacken, his broad shoulders slump and suddenly he's no longer the strong, healthy farmer, but a tired, old man remembering years of hard labor.

It hasn't been easy, he said. Still, he's battling the gophers and some years half of his apple crop is crawling with worms. His health isn't so good any more either. He has stomach troubles.

"I forget I'm old," Gilardoni said, but he continues to work because he likes to, and he likes the people in the organic farming community.

"They treat me like I'm someone special," he said. "I'm not, but they treat me that way."

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