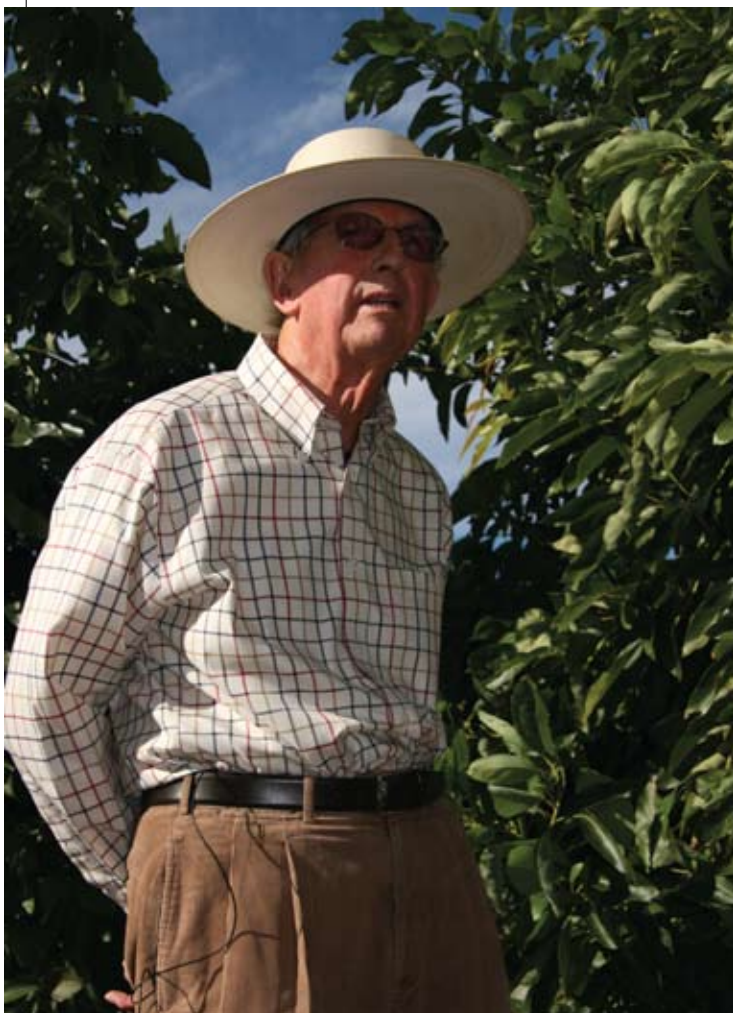


Grower Profile



A Gentleman Farmer Passes On James Lloyd-Butler (1925-2022)

By Tim Linden



James Lloyd-Butler, a Ventura County farmer extraordinary with a rich background steeped in California history, died at the age of 96 in late January while still an active participant in the very successful agricultural ranch he nurtured for many decades.

“He was an excellent farmer,” said Roger Essick of Essick Farm Management who knew Mr. Lloyd-Butler for more than three decades, and personally helped manage his ranch for the first decade and a half of this century. “I managed it alongside of Jim. He was always very much involved and was there every day.”

Essick called Mr. Lloyd-Butler “a very practical grower who would think through every change. And if he made a change, he would stick with it. You’d call him ‘open-minded’, which is a very rare trait for old farmers.”

And Essick said it served him well as his ranch, which included avocados and citrus, was one of the top performers in Ventura County. “I’d say it was right at the top.”

The longtime farm manager said Mr. Lloyd-Butler was open to any idea that helped improve his grove from new varieties to new pruning techniques to new crop inputs. “If he started something, he’d stick with it and reap the benefits. He was a big believer in mulch and the benefits he reaped were incredible.”

James Ormonde Lloyd-Butler was born on December 15, 1925, in Oxnard, CA, at St. John’s Hospital and lived most of his life within a short drive of that location on a ranch that was originally Rancho Santa Clara del Norte, a 14,000 acre



Mexican land grant dating back to 1837, and occupying much of the Oxnard Plain. Mr. Lloyd-Butler's ancestors acquired their part of the property in 1864, and it passed down to him and his brothers, Pat and Shane, through their mother Ida Ross Lloyd-Butler. She became the principal heir in 1908. Mr. Lloyd-Butler grew up on the ranch picking walnuts, which at the time was a major Ventura County crop. After graduating from Santa Clara High School in Oxnard, he joined the Navy and served as a radioman in the Pacific theater during World War II. After the war, he earned degrees from St. Mary's College in Moraga and Cal Poly, Pomona.

In the late 1950s, Mr. Lloyd-Butler and Cynthia Dolores Marsh were married and settled into life in Ventura County. He initially worked as a superintendent on another farm but eventually took over duties at the family farm in the mid-1970s as his father's health was waning.

Son Thomas Lloyd-Butler said from the mid-1970s until just a few months before his death, his father managed the family ranch owned by the three wings of the family. Once James took over the reins, he endeavored to modernize the operation by trying new farming practices and upgrading all aspects of the operation from crop sectors to varieties to the irrigation system.

Though avocados were grown on the ranch as early as the 1950s, Tom said his father experimented with new varieties and greatly enhanced the avocado portfolio. Tom noted that his father was one of the first growers to experiment with the GEM variety. "My father had a tradition of innovation. He had studied entomology and was very interested in bio-diversity. It resonated with him."

Tom recalled a bee habitat project his father worked on in collaboration with Dr. Gordon Frankie of UC Berkeley. That project is still alive today, supporting 126 species of native bees found on the ranch. "If it wasn't for people like him, we wouldn't have made the progress we had," Frankie was quoted as saying in another publication's tribute to James Lloyd-Butler.

Tom recalls that his father was always welcoming other

growers and researchers to the property, willing to both learn from them and pass on his own learnings. Like the farm manager Essick, Tom pointed to his father's love of mulching, which he used to improve the soil and reduce water usage. "He also used cover crops," he said. "He was always wanting to conserve soil. He was a believer in regenerative agriculture."

Ben Faber, a University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) specialist for Ventura County, also had a long relationship with Mr. Lloyd-Butler. "He was a wonderful guy," said Faber. "He was a really good person always willing to hold field workshops."

In fact, on his passing, Faber wrote a piece for the UCCE newsletter that he titled, "A Fine Farmer Passes".

Faber worked with Mr. Lloyd-Butler on many different crops including avocados, Meyer lemons and litchis over the years. In the tribute to this fine farmer, he wrote: "He was a great gentleman who loved learning, had a great love of family and was one of the best, if not the best farmers in Ventura County."

Jan DeLyser, vice president of marketing for the California Avocado Commission, used similar words with the same thought when describing her interactions with Mr. Lloyd-Butler. "He was such a gentleman. He had an impeccable ranch and was always willing to give."

DeLyser recalled that CAC filmed much of its footage for the "California Hand Grown" campaign on his ranch, as he was always willing to share his time and his property for the betterment of the industry.

Of his father, Tom Lloyd-Butler said: "He knew what his values were, and he lived them with a tremendous amount of consistency."

Twenty-nine-year-old John Lloyd-Butler, the grandson of James and son of Tom, had much opportunity to interact with his grandfather over the years. Like his father, John spent summers working on the ranch and learning about agriculture from his grandfather. In fact, he has made it his career as he currently works in ranch management for Brokaw Nursery, which is in Ventura County fairly close to the family ranch.

“I spent a lot of time with him over the last four years,” John said, speaking of his grandfather’s farming skills. “For starters, he looked at the ranch from the finest detail. He looked at every tree. He had the unique ability to walk the grove and notice any change on a per tree basis.”

The younger Lloyd-Butler said his grandfather certainly slowed down over the years, but he still had a sharp eye for detail and was very much involved in the business end of farming. “Four months ago, he was working on some invoicing and asked my wife to check his math when we went over there. It was still spot on.”

He revealed that asking someone to check his work was true to his philosophy. “He believed in the Ronald Reagan saying... trust but verify.”

John is very grateful that he was introduced to farming by his grandfather and is very appreciative that his family has kept the ranch and has been active in agriculture for more than 150 years.

Tom Lloyd-Butler agrees and said his father’s stewardship will allow his family to continue its legacy in Ventura County.

He noted that while his father managed the ranch for the family for the past five decades, the next generation, including himself and his cousins, are getting involved and sharing the load. Though Tom lives in San Francisco and is in the financial industry, he has been more involved in the ranch in recent years and expects to take an even more active role as the result of his father’s death. He said other members of the extended family are like minded. “My father made the ranch more profitable and more productive, and his brothers were very supportive of his operational skills and vision.”

Thomas said the next generation has many different skill-sets and members of the family are interested in helping in a variety of ways. As they move forward, he expects the decision-making process to be a collaborative approach...with avocados continuing to be a cornerstone of the farming interest. Currently, the ranch has about 150 acres of avocado trees in production.

James Lloyd-Butler was predeceased by his wife Cynthia of 59 years in 2016 and his daughter, Camila, who died of cancer in 2018. 🍷



Jim and his team, the Romo Brothers: (L to R) José Romo, Ramiro Romo, James Lloyd-Butler and Arturo Romo (foreman). The Romos have worked on the ranch for 40 plus years.