TREES SAVED, BUT ONLY IN PHOTOS
Photographer chronicles orchard’s demise

It made for a nice shot.
The abandoned orchard pressed against the low-slung, high-tech buildings of IBM’s former campus in South San Jose. The old and the new. The Valley of Heart’s Delight and Silicon Valley.

Photographer Angela Bunnenig took the picture in early 2003 and moved on.

But there was something about that orchard. Something about the 85 acres of trees, sentenced to death. The prune trees had been cast aside as unnecessary. Once part of the economic engine of Santa Clara County, the decrepit trees were in the way by the time Buening found them. Once producers of plump prunes, now they were silly old fools just taking up space.

Buening caught herself periodically changing her route, so she could drive past the orchard just off Highway 85 at Great Oaks Boulevard. She found herself thinking about the trees, about how she owed them something, about how she needed to preserve them. Not the way, say, Julia “Butterfly” Hill might save a redwood, by taking up residence in it. But in the way she saves things — by photographing them.

‘Got a hold of me’
“I really enjoyed being here,” Buening says, standing in the dry, tilled dirt of the orchard. “The place just kind of got a hold of me.”

Big hold. Soon after discovering the orchard, Buening knew what she had to do. She would photograph the trees. Every single one. Each an individual portrait. One thousand seven hundred and five.

Buening has been chronicling the rise and fall of Silicon Valley in photos since 2000 — whimsical shots of billboards, eerie shots of abandoned server rooms, mournful shots of vacant tilt-up buildings. (See www.angelabuening.com.) The orchard was a departure, a less industrial, more sentimental view

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CASSIDY: Prune trees preserved for posterity, but only in photos

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that surprised even Buennning.
But the artist in her had no choice.
And so she plotted the exact location of
each tree as she went. The graph paper
charting the orchard has been worn soft
from folding and unfolding.

"It was an endurance project," says
Buennning, who lives in Palo Alto with
Yahoo co-founder David Filo and teaches
at Eastside College Preparatory
School in East Palo Alto.
It was an endurance race, really.
Boom or bust, land is currency in Sili-
con Valley. A large undeveloped tract?
Pure gold. And the orchard was in play.

For decades, IBM maintained the
land as a working orchard. It was
cheaper than fancy landscaping and a
chance to keep the old valley alive.

Change arrives
But times change. IBM is gone now, hav-
ing sold the orchard land to a developer
and the buildings to Hitachi, which
bought Big Blue's disk-drive division in
2002. A New York company called iStar
owns the orchard now. But iStar isn't in
the prune-growing business. Its plan for
a commercial complex is making its way
through the city's approval process.

"I always had the pressure on my
mind," Buennning says, "that these trees
weren't always going to be here."

It's hard not to think of the orchard as
dying loved one. There is no doubt
about what is to come. Yes, there is time,
time to make peace, say goodbye, time
to make sure nothing goes left unsaid.

Time to etch in your mind or on film the
image of who or what you love.

Buennning wanted to remember the
trees at the end of life. She shot their
portraits only in winter — naked,
gnarled branches against gray, gloomy
skies. Hour after hour. Weekend after
weekend. Winter after winter. For three
years.

Yes, people thought she was nuts. She
wondered herself sometimes. But she
was determined to finish.

"The fact that the trees were still
here, it kind of felt like, OK, I can't let
them down."

In February, she finished. Finished
the photography, anyway.
Now Buennning would like to find a
public place to install her work. Her vi-
sion? A 6-foot-tall by 17-foot-wide wall of
small photos of the fruit trees.

Fruit trees, existing side-by-side. Just
as they do today.

For now.

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