

# Ralph, Dave and Carl

Ever since I had children, I have been acutely aware of my many blessings, and I resolutely try to count them every day. But 2004 ended on a melancholy note as I received word that Ralph Pinkerton had died. He was an avocado industry mainstay, first as the manager of the California Avocado Board and, later, the California Avocado Commission.

He was among the pioneers in helping to bring a new sophistication to produce marketing. He did everything from co-op ads to integrating recipes with promotions, developing trade dinners, integrating multi-media consumer campaigns, radio tie-ins and, perhaps, most famously, bringing Angie Dickinson's legs to the marketing of avocados.

At 84, he had lived a full and active life. He never really retired from the industry and attended conventions till his last days. He had the pleasure of seeing his achievements recognized in his lifetime, as he was universally respected in both the avocado trade and the larger produce industry.

I first met Ralph when he visited my family's produce company in New York. He had heard we were exporting avocados to France and wanted to know how he could help us export more.

But I really got to know him when we launched *PRODUCE BUSINESS* at the PMA in San Francisco in 1985. We had run a lengthy piece on citrus prorate and he read every word. He came by our booth to discuss it in depth. Then he congratulated me, wished me well and was on his way.

In addition to seeing Ralph at trade shows, he would call me two or three times a year to discuss columns I wrote or alert me to an article idea or give me the name of someone who should be advertising. We rarely disagreed, but when we did, he didn't bash me — he quietly tutored me. And I feel like a teacher of mine is gone.

I had never been to his home or even out to dinner with him. I don't know very much about his family and suppose it would be presumptuous to call him a friend, but I'm sure going to miss those phone calls.

He wasn't the only one in the produce trade I lost this year. Dave Stidolph, father of the broccoli floret, industry consultant with many companies, most notably Mann Pack-

ing, died at 80. Back in 1985 or early 1986 I was on a cross-country flight and anxious to get some sleep. But I saw Dave Stidolph in the lounge and when he learned I was born in Brooklyn and my great-grandfather had owned a produce wholesale operation there, he insisted we change seats and sit together. I sensed my nap was disappearing so I tried to object. But there was no objecting when Dave got his mind on something.

So five hours later, after he had drained me of every fact in my head and challenged me with, literally, hundreds of ideas, I felt I had a new teacher. I don't think I would do him any favor by telling you he was easy to get along with. I often found him infuriating. But he was a valuable teacher because he always told me the truth and didn't hesitate to let me know when he thought I was wrong. You don't have to be in business very long before you realize that the really valuable advice comes from those who challenge you to think differently. I'm going to have to do that without Dave Stidolph now.

I also lost one real friend in the industry when Carl Fields died. As vice president of marketing for Monterey Mushrooms, Carl had helped turn a small family farm into America's largest grower-shipper and marketer of mushrooms. We worked together in business but enjoyed each other's thoughts on things far afield from produce. Like so many friendships, ours was facilitated because our wives get along so well. Carl's wife Charlean, like mine, is an attorney and so they always enjoyed being part of, and yet apart from, the produce people.

We all would have dinner, and Carl and I would do career planning. He wanted to serve on Boards of Directors, and I was trying to make some introductions when he passed away. Carl was African-American and our friendship gave me a little window into a world that is difficult for a white person to understand. Carl was only 52, and we used to talk about doing a lot of things we will never do. We thought we had time. Perhaps in death he taught me the greatest lesson of all: Never assume you'll have the time to do it later.

One of the reasons I love my job is because it leads me to deal with the best and brightest in the business every day. How



BY JIM PREVORA

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fortunate I am to have had mentors and teachers, acquaintances and friends with real ideas and real accomplishments.

I am sure that in 2004 no more people in the produce industry died than in any other year. But the loss of so many I knew so well made me realize that I've now been in the business long enough to start losing a lot of people who were important to my career and important to me.

It is one of the great ironies of life that change is a constant and that the world we live in today is not the world we will live in tomorrow. And the most dangerous way to think about tomorrow is to extrapolate that whatever is going on today will simply continue tomorrow, only more so.

To build a business, as to live a life, one has to adapt and change. Take advantage of the moment to build and learn and be ready for the inevitable setbacks as the situation shifts. Then see reality anew, adjust once more and begin again. And try to imagine a tomorrow that is different than today extended. That is what I will think of when I think of Ralph, Dave and Carl.

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