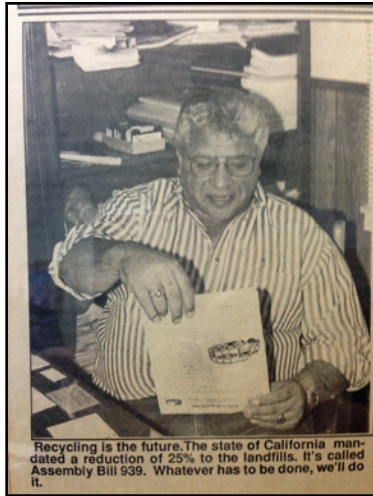


By Winona Campbell Klassen

Photos by Vick Adame

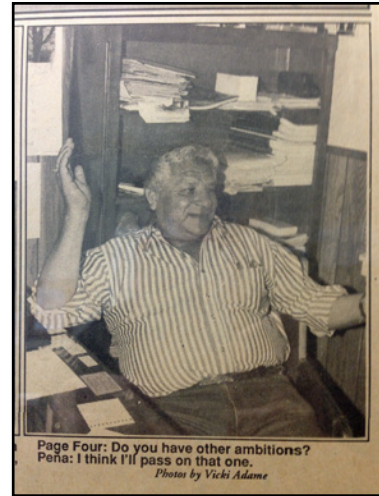
## Gabe Peña – A conversation with Tulare County’s visionary recycler about his involvement with Cutler-Orosi youth, his own childhood and his reactions to quotes from Alta District neighbors



Recycling is the future. The state of California mandated a reduction of 25% to the landfills. It's called Assembly Bill 539. Whatever has to be done, we'll do it.



It's like sorting on a produce line. Stuff comes on a conveyor, and people on the line take out paper, plastic, cans, three kinds of glass... it's all co-mingled.



Page Four: Do you have other ambitions?  
Peña: I think I'll pass on that one.  
*Photos by Vicki Adame*

*The office of Peña’s Disposal Inc. is neat as a pin, inside and out. Yvette Botello contacts her father on the two-way radio to let him know we have arrived.*

*Vicki Adame, the photographer for this session, and I look around Gabe’s office. The green carpet sets off dark furniture and Gabe’s maroon chair. Two of the walls are glass. The remaining walls are covered with Souvenirs of Gabe’s trips with the Cutler-Orosi Lions Club.*

*A shadow box contains a collection of Lions pins from U.S. cities and states. There are overseas mementos from the Far East and Australia. On bookcases and filing cabinets are trophies for classic car show entries, a scholarship fund for Viet Nam Vets, and the Alta District Hospital Foundation. The two latest additions are from Proteus; one is for the Community Youth Board, and one is for Peña.*

*A photo of his mother with a great-grandchild is on his bulletin boards alongside an invitation to a Halloween party. Esther Bernal from New Mexico married handsome Salvador Peña from Jalisco and raised an interesting family. If we were to express it as a Mexican dish, the flavors of the Southwest combine with the fiery chili salsas of Jalisco.*

*Meanwhile, outside the sliding glass door employees move quickly as they checking into the office. Yvette Botello runs a tight ship. A sign on her desk reads, “Garbage Is Beautiful.”*

*Soon we see a pickup, and the man who IS Peña, Inc. arrives. He was also born lucky, for he is in the right place at the right time.*

*Now that ecology and the environment are foremost in the country’s mind, Peña is in a position where he can make a difference to the quality of life here in the San Joaquin valley. Recycling is the new buzzword, and Peña will make his place in the future.*

**Page Four:** Where were you born?

**Peña:** Los Angeles.

**Page Four:** What prompted your parents to move to this area?

**Peña:** Well, they wanted their children to grow up in the country, so they moved into the valley from the city. They used to come down and follow the crops, like grapes... and so on.

**Page Four:** They did the hard work...

**Peña:** Yeah.

**Page Four:** Did they have relatives in this area?

**Peña:** No, they just like it here. They wanted to raise a family on a farm.

**Page Four:** I have a few quotes about you. The first is from Clarence Klassen, who remembers your mother driving your old Mercury into Alta Chevrolet to have it worked on. You kids had your noses stickin' out the windows.

What is your favorite memory of your mom?

**Peña:** My mother's a very generous person, you know, she's got a big heart. She's 83 and she's still the same way. She'd open her house to anybody.

People she's known throughout her lifetime always had a high regard for her because she always just opened her door to them as children. Their mothers had to work, and my mom took them in like they were her own.

### Memories of A Childhood Friend

**Page Four:** The next quote is from Paulie Romero. He was one of your first classmates at elementary school. He remembers the fights the Peña kids had when you arrived. Was it hard to be accepted here?

**Peña:** Yes, it was, because we lived in the country, and we didn't live with the local Hispanic population. Our friends used to be Caucasians, most of them, and we'd always hang around with them. So, when we'd go home these guys would follow us, you know. But it's just growing-up stuff. We all ended up good friends anyway.

**Page Four:** He said you always held your own, so you didn't come out too bad.

Another memory of his is when you (Peña) guys joined Shortie Soleno's band. Shortie and his daughter, Rosemary.

### A Soundproof Stone House

**Peña:** One of the things my dad did for us, he tried to give us all musical instruments when we were growing up. Not that we were really talented.

I asked him when he got older, before he passed away, "Why did you spend so much money.... Money has hard in those days... why did you spend so much money on those instruments?"

He says, "Well, it kept you out of trouble, didn't it?" That made sense.

**Page Four:** Ray played what?

**Peña:** The drums.

**Page Four:** Al...

**Peña:** Played saxophone and I played the saxophone.

**Page Four:** And then Paulie sat in with you on Sunday afternoons, and you practiced in the stone house.

**Peña:** And we made a lot of noise. It wasn't music per se, we just made a lot of noise. We would just enjoy making noise.

**Page Four:** But eventually you played with Shortie?

**Peña:** Al probably did. Not I per se. We used to play in the high school band. My brother and I would get up on the stage at some of these gatherings high schools had, and play "In The Mood".

**Page Four:** Tell me about your brothers and sisters.

**Peña:** First came Albert, then myself, my sister Mary and then Esther, my brother Ray, then Frank, then Becky. There's seven of us.

**Page Four:** Yvette, your daughter, was telling me that you have four grandchildren.

**Peña:** Yes, Clairisa, Michaela and Loretta Botello, and Elleanne Peña.

### **The Gentle Giant**

**Page Four:** You seem to have a lot of concern for children, Stan Carrizosa, the superintendent of Dinuba Public Schools, remembers that when he was a kid you were the gentle giant who patted his head when he walked by.

Did something significant happen to you that made you know that you'd want to contribute to kids. You've done a lot for the kids in Cutler-Orosi.

**Peña:** There was a coach, John Otto, during high school when I was a freshman who kept me in school. I played football at Orosi High School four years. I love football, I love track. Actually, I quit one year. I got one year behind because we had to help the family. I wanted to come back to school, and he encouraged me a lot. I remember Bob Agnew, too.

I always remembered that Otto said you gotta' help your kids. He drilled that in me. Since I can do it now, I believe you should always put something back in your community.

And I noticed a lot in these communities... maybe there is four times the population as when I was growing up... as you drive around you see these children with nowhere to go and nothing to do. They just hand around in gangs and that type of thing.

### **Putting Something Back**

**Page Four:** Could you detail some of the things you've helped to bring about in Cutler/Orosi.

**Peña:** One of the things that we have accomplished in the Culer/Orosi community is that we made something for the kids. I've been working with Heidi and Charles Harness, Richard and Sarah Salyer, Sho Katayama, Mary Berry, JoAnn Ruiz, Alan Borba, Sergio Gonzalez, Gene Etheridge who is our principal at the high school... and many other people who I can't name.

We knew that we had to do something, so we formed an association. We met with people from Turning Point. They tried to guide us along, and finally just pulled out. We were on our own.

Heidi Harness came up with the idea of having a Bingo game here in Cutler-Orosi. We've been doing it for about a year and a half now. Every Tuesday night at 7 o'clock we average from 140 to 150 people.

All these funds are going to support our youth centers, and through Mr. Harness's efforts we have built a really nice center in Cutler, right next to the fire station.

There's a trailer, it's a 60 by 40 wide, with a playground, basketball court, sand...it's run by a youth director from CSET, Martha Chavez.

Then through our Bingo funds, and monies we've been able to appropriate, we've made a deal with the high school to lease the old tennis courts. We put another module there.

There's an old house there that's going to be a career center for the adults, and we're presently working on a project to build bathrooms there.

**Page Four:** How long has this been in progress.

**Peña:** The youth centers aren't quite a year old. But we spent three years in meetings and fund raising before we opened them. They're good youth centers. The one in Orosi has a Proteus youth director. Her name is Alma Nino.

### **A Farmer At Heart**

**Page Four:** Stan Kalender says that he farmed next to you, and that you loved the land.

**Peña:** I still farm. I have about 60 acres...peaches, nectarines and avocados. But as you know, ranching is a hard way to make a living.

**Page Four:** Tell us about your newest project.

**Peña:** My company, which is Peña Disposal, Incorporated, has formed a partnership with Beavers Disposal Co. We recently signed a contract with the city of Visalia to recycle 100% of its recyclable product. We're going to build a recycling plant in Visalia. This has already been approved.

I also have a facility in Cutler. There are 13 employees there. We started our recycling process about two months ago.

**Page Four:** You're a busy man. How many hours of sleep a night do you need?

**Peña:** I still sleep well, and the reason I do is because I have good employees. Several have been working close to thirty years, since I started in the business. I've got a good working relationship with them.

### **Good Employees And Good Times**

**Page Four:** So you delegate.

**Peña:** Right, I delegate. My people are very efficient. They are very responsible. That's one of the things it takes to be successful in any business. So I have time to do a lot of things that other people don't.

Of course my family works for me. Yvette's very competent in the office. My son, Arthur, does the maintenance for trucks. He's very good at it takes care of the equipment. He runs the shop 100%.

**Page Four:** How many trucks do you have now?

**Peña:** Well, we probably have about 19 trucks all together. We run about 14 trucks every day.

**Page Four:** This quote is from your buddy, Sho Katayama. He says you're a big man with a lot of character, and you're honest. What does that mean to you?

**Peña:** I enjoy people and have a lot of fun. I have a lot of friends, and I hope I don't have any enemies. I don't care who the people are or where they come from, as long as they're friends to me, I'm friends to them.

### **The Peña Story In A Nutshell**

**Page Four:** When did you actually take over the family business?

**Peña:** I took over in 1967.

**Page Four:** And it had started in '50 when your dad....

**Peña:** My dad started collecting garbage for his hogs. He would go to some of the camps that were around here and pick up the garbage. Then people called him to haul their trash, too. To pick up extra money he started doing that.

We kids were growing up and going to high school. We were helping him out, too, to make a living.

As time went on, one of my brothers, Ray, he kind of ran the business. He was going on to school and so he turned it over to my brother, Frank. The Frank decided he wanted to go to college...they both graduated from Fresno State. So then they sold it to me, because they wanted out.

When I took over in '67, it was amazing...I asked my brother Frank, one day, "where do you have a list of all your accounts?"

He pointed to his head, and said, "Here."

So I had to sit him down, and my wife and I went through his head, actually, and got all the accounts he had. He didn't keep them on paper.

We finally got it settled. So I was farming and ran a one-truck operation.

Then in the late Sixties they closed the landfill in Orosi. We got a lot of phone calls then. My business grew. Ever since then it's grown to what it is today.

**Page Four:** Amy Isaksen said you move in areas where others are afraid to go. Is that true?

**Peña:** Well, I'd call myself a visionary because I'm looking toward expanding and trying to keep our company in business.

**Page Four:** When you eventually retire, do you have someone in line to take over?

**Peña:** My son and daughter, who are both very capable of operation this business without me.

So far, I handle the political side of it. I want to leave a future for them, and my grandchildren.

**Page Four:** Do you have other ambitions?

**Peña:** I think I'll pass on that one.