

The Rise and Fall of The Prune Empire



Orchards in Early Santa Clara County

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Part One: Introduction



**"Fruit however, is
destined to be the
ultimate glory of
California."**

**-Horace Greely, The New
York Tribune, 1859**

"[Santa Clara County] is a veritable Eden, a gorgeous garden of fruits and flowers... In early spring you can here behold over 100 square miles of trees in snow-white blossoms- prune, plum, cherry, olive, almond and with a dash of pink and red for the peach and apricot... In late March and early April the Santa Clara Valley is a dazzling, billowing sea of foaming white caps rolling towards us from the far away horizon."¹

The idyllic scene described by the travel writer in the above passage from the 1920's will never be experienced by the current inhabitants of Santa Clara County. Though many valley natives still remember the days when Santa Clara County was the self-proclaimed prune capital of the world, the hey-day of the orchards is fast receding in the public memory. Where prunes, peaches, and apricots once held sway, microchips, software and modems now reign. As recently as 1960 there were 65,000 acres of orchards in the valley; current figures count 6,000 remaining today.²

The valley has outgrown its agrarian past, but like all history, this chunk of our past must not be forgotten. The story of the industry and ingenuity of the first orchardists would fascinate county school children as much as that of any garage-born computer giant. The "orchard days" influence us still, from petty things like street names to more important political and philosophical attitudes. It is in this spirit of curiosity and preservation that this paper has been written, in an attempt to discover what our valley was like in the recent past, and to see how these experiences created the valley we know today.

¹R. F. Wilson, "The Santa Clara Valley," The Southern Pacific Bulletin, (April, 1920), p. 17, as cited by Eugene Sawyer, The History of Santa Clara County (Los Angeles, 1922), p. 193

²San Jose Mercury News. May 8, 1994, p.1B-2B

Part Two: The Seeds



**"The valley in the
summer forms an
almost unbroken
wheat field."**

**-Titus Cronise, The Natural
Wealth of California, 1868**

Life before Orchards

Though Santa Clara County's immediate agricultural past is exclusively orchards, there were in reality two very distinct periods of agricultural development preceding the start of horticulture.

Starting in 1769, when Spanish soldiers from Southern California discovered Santa Clara Valley, the area was dominated by the Spanish.³ Under the Spanish influence, the valley developed into a cattle ranching and light agricultural region. The mission fathers supervised the development of subsistence agriculture among the native inhabitants, and the Spanish government loaned "land sufficient for the planting of three bushels of maize, with a house-lot, ten dollars a month, and a soldiers ration's... a yoke of oxen, two horses, two cows, a mule, two sheep and two goats, together with all the necessary implements and seed, all of which were to be paid back in products of the soil" to all settlers in the new pueblo of San Jose.⁴ In addition to the small farming economy this created, the settlers tended large herds of cattle and horses, which were sold as hides to trading vessels using San Francisco as a port. At the same time, the mission padres began the first planting of fruit trees in county soil. In the late eighteenth century the first orchard was laid out at the Santa Clara mission, by a Father de la Peña.⁵ This original orchard had sixty trees, as the 1792 visitor George Vancouver says: "peaches, apricots, apples, pears, figs and vines, all of which excepting the latter promised to succeed very well."⁶ The fruit produced by these trees and their successors was sold in San Jose and San Francisco, in the first example of commercial horticulture in the county.

Though these forays into agriculture and horticulture were successful, it was not until the arrival of American settlers during and after the 1849 gold rush that Santa Clara County's full agricultural potential would be realized. This first wave of Americans brought the valley to its second stage of development: wheat farming. By all accounts, wheat and other cereals were considered to be the ideal crop for Santa Clara Valley, into the 1870's. Most of the valley land and large percentages of the foothills were planted in grains during this early portion of "The American Period." As Titus Fey Cronise put in in 1868 "From San Jose to Gilroy, a distance of nearly

³Charles Shortridge, ed. Santa Clara County and it's Resources, or Sunshine, Fruit and Flowers (San Jose, originally 1896, again in 1987), p.6

⁴Shortridge, p.10

⁵Santa Clara County History Scrapbook- Part III, California Room, Martin Luther King Junior Library, p. 234

⁶Sawyer, p. 46

thirty miles, the valley in the summer forms an almost unbroken wheat field." In Cronise's book, the growing of fruit trees is mentioned only as a pleasant avocation of valley farmers that had met with some success, but was certainly not destined to become the economic lifeline of the area.⁷ Wheat took well to the soil and it was difficult for anyone to imagine the fantastic soil of the county being used any other way. When one could reap 40 times the amount sown, in only two years, why change?⁸

The Pioneers of Horticulture

It would take the work of several brilliant pioneer orchardists to convince grain farmers that the destiny of Santa Clara Valley was in fruit trees.

By ¹⁸⁵⁰~~1950~~ five of San Jose's most prosperous and influential citizens began growing fruit trees on their property. Captain Joseph Aram, Judge William Daniels, E.W. Case, Louis Prevost and Louis Pellier all held orchard tracts near the modern downtown San Jose at this time period (Prevost's house is now a monument preserved by the San Jose Historical Society).⁹ None of these men grew fruit on anything close to a commercial scale. However, during this decade, the arrival of two different travelers in San Jose would precipitate the third dramatic change in Santa Clara County economic and cultural history.

The first of these visitors was Christopher A. Shelton, an employee of the fledgling nursery of Commodore Stockton, a former rancher who saw that the future was in fruit. When Shelton arrived from New York in 1853 he brought not only seeds for dozens of trees and garden products, but a young man by the name of B.S. Fox. Fox was a horticultural experimenter, who established his own nursery to aid the fledgling horticultural industry. He also decided that a field with such promise needed an organization devoted to its practice. With this in mind, Fox, Daniels and three transplanted Frenchmen, Prevost, Pellier and Jean Baptiste Bontemps, founded the Pioneer Horticultural Society in 1853.¹⁰ The Society's stated aim was to protect the nursery and orchard business by keeping up with all the latest developments in the field, and soon all the leading orchardists and

⁷Titus Fey Cronise, The Natural Wealth of California (San Francisco, 1868), p. 136

⁸Scrapbook, p. 234

⁹Clyde Arbuckle, The History of San Jose (San Jose 1986), p. 201

¹⁰ Arbuckle, p. 202

nurserymen of the area were members. Not only did the rest of the "Big Five" mentioned above join, but their ranks were made considerably more prestigious by the membership of J.Q.A. Ballou, who would later be one of the most successful orchardists. In 1857, the Pioneer Horticulture Society merged with a similar organization for farmers to become the Santa Clara Valley Agricultural and Horticultural Society.

Only one year before this second merge, the second crucial visitor came to the tiny city of San Jose. His name was Pierre Pellier, and what he brought with him would change the Santa Clara Valley forever. Pierre Pellier came at the order of his elder brother Louis Pellier, already an established resident of the county. Louis Pellier had an eye for profitable ventures. As one of the first miners to reach California after news of the 1848 gold strike, he quickly realized that the money and security were South of the gold fields, in San Jose and her environs. In 1850 he bought the first part of the large nursery later called "The City Gardens", bounded by the Guadalupe river and Market Street, and by Julien Street and Chaboya Avenue by today's maps. Pellier then sent his brother Pierre, back to their native France to bring back cuttings, seeds and live plants for his new nursery. Pierre returned in 1856, and brought with him the seeds of an agricultural revolution: the fruit known as *le petit prune d'Agen*. This tiny wunderkand of a fruit was encased in potatoes to keep the seed moist, and was planted like its fellows in the City Gardens upon Pierre's return. ¹¹

Pellier's City Gardens made him one of the more popular men in San Jose, and the beauty of his tiny oasis of fruit trees and flowers was well known among local residents. However "of all the plants and fruit that Louis grew in his City Gardens, the tiny prune was the least popular."¹² Only after Pellier's death at an old age did the prune begin to be recognized as the ideal crop for the Santa Clara Valley, and it would be thirty years before it attained its proper position as the most important export of the county.

The expansion of the orchards was aided by the establishment of several nurseries to provide farmers with the seeds and equipment they needed to start their own orchards. Fox, Pellier, Prevost, Daniels and Antoine Delmas were all active in this branch of the horticulture business. These men did not simply sell fruit trees to the people of the county, they sold the *idea* of fruit trees. Their work in the Pioneer Horticultural Society helped to

¹¹Patricia Loomis, Signposts (San Jose 1982), p. 68

¹²Loomis, p. 70

popularize the growing of fruit, and orchard products more than doubled between 1860 and 1870.¹³ Many of these men were also active in experimenting with imported fruit to make it better adapted to the local climate. F.C. Wilson created the Wilson's Wonder Walnut, Abraham King created King's soft shell almonds, and Sylvester Newhall, another nurseryman, created the Newhall peach.¹⁴

The second step on the prune's path to greatness was J.Q.A. Ballou's cultivation of the fruit , beginning in 1861, after graphing it to a domestic prune stem. In 1867 he received 500 pounds of fruit from only 50 trees, dried the fruit, and sold it at great profit in San Francisco. The very next year he shipped the dried fruit around the Horn to New York, with even better results.¹⁵ Ballou's success set off a huge movement within the valley's grain farmers to set out orchards, though few used the prune. The resulting bumper crop glutted the market, making the fruit almost worthless, and scaring many of the normally wary farmers out of the fruit market. The farmers of Santa Clara Valley could not be convinced to risk fruit again on a large scale until several years later in the early 1870's, when farmers again began to set out orchards, aided by the development of two new outlets for their crop.

The first and least popular of these markets was the fresh fruit market, which sprang into existence after the opening of the transcontinental railroad to the East from San Francisco, in 1869. Starting in 1869, with the innovation of Levi Ames Gould, a refrigerated car of fresh fruit was sent weekly during the fruit season. The second method proved to be much less risky and more popular. In 1871 Dr. James Dawson and his wife Eloise started a small canning business in the backyard of their Alameda home. At first they canned only their own fruit, but soon they branched out into commercial canning, starting the J.W. Dawson Canning Company.¹⁶ The success of the first cannery led to the establishment of dozens more within the next twenty years, until canning was the major industry of the valley.

¹³William James and George McMurry, History of San Jose, CA, Leland Library, p. 79

¹⁴Scrapbook, p.171

¹⁵Arbuckle, p.206

¹⁶Scrapbook, p. 246

The Rise of Orchards

Despite all these major advances in the craft of fruit trees, orchards would not become truly important to the economy of the valley until the 1880's. Until this time, the majority of the land was still in grains, which required less knowledge and labor, and still fetched high prices. However, new developments in the grain market forced many farmers into becoming orchardists. In the 1870's and 1880's the frontier of the Midwest was being settled and as these settlers established themselves and began to farm it was discovered that the Midwest was ideal for the growth of grain crops. Also, the Midwest had the major advantage of being closer to the key Eastern markets. This increased competition combined with the new advances in fruit preservation to make orchards seem more and more attractive to the grain farmer.¹⁷

These early orchards were set out largely in apples, with an occasional foray into peaches or pears. In 1868, this proportion changed drastically after a huge surplus of apples and pears was created, and a large part of the crop rotted under the trees before it could be taken to market.¹⁸ After this sobering experience, many orchards were converted into fruits which could be dried or canned like apricots, peaches and prunes. The switch to preserved allowed for further growth in the fruit market, by eliminating part of the orchardists' fear of overexpansion. Fresh fruit has an extremely limited time in which it must be picked, shipped and sold, but dried or canned fruit could be stored until a market was available. For the rest of the valley's orchard days, the emphasis would remain upon these preserved fruits.

The center of the early growth of orchards was the area then called The Willows, now known as Willow Glen. The rich soil found near the meeting of the Los Gatos Creek and the Gaudalupe River was perfectly adapted to the cultivation of fruit, after the thick underbrush was grubbed out. Into the 1880's, The Willows remained the center for the valley's agriculture, and the place where most innovation within the industry began.¹⁹ For some time it was believed that The Willows was the only part of the valley truly suited for orchards, but the

¹⁷Janet Humphrey, From Blossoms to the World, (Foothill Community College Press, 1970), p. 15

¹⁸Humphrey, p. 20

¹⁹Elizabeth Giarratana, Old Willow Glen (Palo Alto, 1977), p.27

Berryessa region began to be developed in the mid-1880's, and it was soon discovered that almost all of the valley land and much of the foothill land could easily support fruit trees.²⁰

One of the most important developments in the growth of orchards was the discovery of the prune as the most profitable crop. Though Pellier had experimented with the prune, and J.Q.A. Ballou had shown it to be profitable, orchardists needed more concrete proof before converting their orchards to the new fruit. This proof came in 1881, with the incredible success of the Bradley orchard. Starting in this year E.L. Bradley's Stevens Creek Road property, realized \$2,500 to \$4,000 a season, a fantastic price, and entirely in prunes.²¹ This success started a movement to set out prunes among local growers. This time, over-expansion of production capacity was avoided because of the already established canneries and dryers, which could absorb much of the excess crop. The prune market was extremely strong because few places in the world are suited to its production, and the only prunes available to the United States' market at the time were inferior and expensive European imports.

By the 1880's, orchards were firmly established as the primary form of agriculture in Santa Clara Valley. The number of fruit trees grown in the county increased wildly during the 1880's, and doubled to 4.4 million between 1890 and 1895.²² From this time until after the First World War orchard production would continue to increase, producing a prosperous and growing society, proud to call itself the Prune Capital of the World.

²⁰Sawyer, p. 209

²¹Stephen Payne, Santa Clara County: Harvest of Change (San Jose, 1987), p. 113

²²Payne, p.120

Part Three: Reaping the Fruit



"The valley then puts on a regal mantle, purple with prunes and plums, bright yellow with the colorful peach and apricot, giving it full right to the happy title, "The Field of the Cloth of Gold."

-Eugene Sawyer, The History of Santa Clara County, 1922

Note on this section of the report:

Though innovation certainly occurred in many areas of Santa Clara County's agriculture during this time, the nature of the subject ensures some constants. For this reason, when no date is specified in the detailing of a practice it may be assumed that the practice was universal within the trade for the period of prominence of the orchards.

Types of Trees

The primary type of fruit tree in cultivation in Santa Clara Valley from 1885 to the 1940's was the French prune, more specifically the petit prune d'Agen. Prunes were the most profitable and extensive kind of fruit tree and adapted extremely well to the climate and conditions of Santa Clara County. Though they were grown almost everywhere, prunes grew best in lighter soil, found in and near the foothills. Prunes had the advantage of being very easy to grow, and relatively easy to process after that. They were universally dried, though a constant debate raged about the relative merits of sun-drying and mechanical drying. Because prunes were dried and not sold fresh, they were a stable crop, and could be held for some time after processing to prevent a glut in the market. Prunes were planted 20' apart from one another, with about 108 trees per acre. About 100 pounds of fruit were produced from each tree.²³ This fruit was then dried by the farmer, or more likely sold to a dryer to be pitted, dipped, dried and packaged.

The next most popular fruit in the valley was the apricot. These were generally grown in rich soil, like that near riverbeds. Apricots were one of the more versatile fruits: small enough to be sun-dried or evaporator dried, but also fine for canning. However, they fetched less money per acre than prunes (generally), and did not pay for themselves until the fourth year of harvesting. Peaches ranked third in the hierarchy of fruit production. Like prunes they required light soil, and brought only slightly less than apricots on the market. Peaches were slightly more labor intensive for the orchardist, since they very often required extensive propping to prevent their fruit-laden branches from breaking and tended to have fragile fruit.

²³Charles Shortridge, Santa Clara County and its Resources (San Jose, 1896), p.33

Cherries, pears, oranges and apples were also grown in the county, usually with less success than the three types of fruit listed above. Cherries had the distinct drawback of not bearing until the seventh year, making them impossible as a start-up crop. Pears required tremendous amounts of water, which made them difficult to grow except in certain sectors of the county. Oranges also required a microclimate found in only some parts of the valley, preventing them from being grown extensively, though they met with great success in Los Gatos. Apples grown in the county were simply not of as high quality as ones grown in mountain climates, and fetched low prices.

Various other orchard crops were grown with success in Santa Clara County, namely nuts like walnuts and almonds, and sundry other fruits, like currants, pomegranates and nectarines.²⁴ For reasons economic or geographic, none of these crops ever caught on as well as the basic fruits above, and of those fruits, the prune was the undisputed star.

Growth of the Fruit

One look at the publications of Santa Clara County's orchard days reveals what they thought about the soil and climate of the area. "The air here is... peculiarly invigorating. The climate... is exceptionally healthful."²⁵ "Nowhere on earth is fruit produced so readily and bountifully."²⁶ "...a rich black mould, superior to any I had before seen in America."²⁷ "There is not an acre of the valley or hill land upon which many varieties of fruit and vine may not be grown."²⁸

These may seem like charming and patriotic exercises in hyperbole, but Santa Clara Valley does have a climate and soil that suited it perfectly for the cultivation of fruit. From the rich land of the Guadalupe River environs to the lighter dirt of the hill country, the soil quality was fine. In addition, the county has extremely moderate weather, with rare freezes and an extended growing season. According to a somewhat reputable source from the nineteenth century, certain species of prune and Barlett pears were known to actually ripen fruit twice

²⁴Shortridge, p.35

²⁵Shortridge, p.21

²⁶Horace Greely, New York Tribune (1859), as cited by James and McMurry, p. 3

²⁷George Vancouver (1792), as cited in Humphrey, p. 24

²⁸Advantages of the City of San Jose as a Manufacturing Center (San Jose, 1884), p.8

during a season.²⁹ In addition to possessing a fantastic climate and wonderful soil, the valley has the geographic advantage of a deep-water port and a major city to which to bring products for transport elsewhere nearby .

The first step in the fruit growing process was logically the purchase of land. The price of land in the county varied according to its proximity to San Jose, the quality of its soil, the resources available nearby (i.e. roads, water) and the development of the land. Most orchards began as efforts by grain farmers to convert to another crop, so that much of the land was already cleared when the orchards were first set out. [Nota bene: orchards are "set out" when first established, not "planted, a term used for annual crops.] However, as orchards became more prosperous and more people entered the market, many aspiring orchardists were forced to "grub out" their land, that is clear it of trees and scrubs.

The price of land rose continually in the valley, as it continues to do today. Land which sold for \$30 to \$50 per acre in 1881³⁰ brought a \$250 to \$300 profit per acre in 1884.³¹ By 1896 the best fruit land in the valley sold for \$600 per acre, and the sub-average for \$75.³² In 1921 the price for land with bearing trees on it was up to between \$800 and \$1500 per acre and the profits per acre per year were from \$500 to \$1,000.³³ This constant escalation of prices for orchard land shows not only inflation, but the increased prosperity of the county under fruit cultivation, and the increased profits of the orchardists. One more fact which must be noted in the purchase of land was the small amount of land required for a successful venture. Unlike the grain farms which proceeded them, orchards could be quite small and still be commercially successful. Some had holdings as small as a single acre or two, and the average orchard was probably about ten or twelve acres. There were a few huge orchards of more than 300 acres, but these were decidedly in the minority.

Though natural rain was sometimes sufficient for the growth of fruit, many orchardists employed artesian wells to add to the natural water supply. These, wells, which piped underground springs for water and relied upon natural water pressure to bring it to the surface, were first brought to the valley in 1854.³⁴ A strong belt of

²⁹Scrapbook, p. 171

³⁰San Jose Mercury News. March 24, 1881, p. 2-3 (microfilm)

³¹Advantages of the City of San Jose as a Manufacturing Center, p. 48

³²Shortridge, p. 190

³³Sawyer, p. 276

³⁴Sawyer, p.249

artesian water was discovered north of downtown San Jose and near Gilroy, and many orchardists were able to plug into this resource for their irrigation needs. They were normally dug to from 50 to 75 feet and simply allowed to run all day. However, an accident on the land of G.A. Dabney, in which his well flowed uncontrollably for six weeks before stopping on its own accord convinced many that regulations were needed on the usage of the artesian wells. To this effect police officers were enlisted to fine all those who let their wells run unattended during the day, but little progress was made.³⁵

After finally purchasing land, the orchardist's next step was to plow it in the fall, in preparation for planting. The soil was plowed deeply, then left unfurrowed through the winter to absorb the nutrients that would enter it through the annual decay. The orchard was then set out, in one of three basic patterns. The trees could be planted in basic rows, in quinciunx form, or in hexagonal form, yielding 108 trees per acre with square, 199 with quinciunx and 126 per acre with hexagonal.³⁶ It was essential that the trees be laid out in some kind of geometric order, to make spraying, pruning and picking easier later. Often farmers enlisted the aid of off-season fruit-pickers to help with this kind of work.

After plowing and planting, the orchardists next duty was to prune the grown trees. Some crops, like prunes, merely needed to be thinned out, but apricots and peaches came in so heavily that they normally had to be drastically cut back, and thinned again after the fruit had come out. Again, this labor was very often hired out.

Before harvesting, most trees were sprayed to prevent insects and fungus from attacking the trees. Paris green was used on pear and apple trees against the codlin moth, Australian ladybugs were imported to fight the brown scale, and the dreaded "San Jose Scale" was eradicated by 1900 using a locally developed spray.

After all this, the orchardist could finally harvest his fruit, starting in May for apricots and cherries, and going through August for most other fruits. At this time of year thousands were employed across the valley to pick the fruit, either off the trees or off the ground under them. Fruit's perishability made it imperative that the fruit get either to market or to the processing center immediately, and canneries and packers worked nonstop through July and August to keep up with the demand. In the early fall the last crops were picked : almonds and grapes.

³⁵Sawyer, p.251

³⁶Shortridge, p.190

Innovation by local citizens in the above tasks made these jobs easier and more efficient as the years went by. John Bean of Los Gatos started the Bean Spray company, the use of whose product eliminated the San Jose Scale. This company later diversified into other farm products, and remained successful into the twentieth century.³⁷ In the fruit drying industry, ingenious apparatuses were employed to sort the fruit, and small railroad cars were used to bring the trays of fruit to the fields to be sun-dried.³⁸ In all facets of the orchard business Santa Clara County orchardists adapted to their new trade by inventing new products and processes.

Processing of Fruit

From the start the fruit produced in the orchards of Santa Clara County was dealt with in one of three ways: dried, canned or sold fresh, depending on what sort of fruit it was. In each case the fruit was almost always sold to a processing plant or packer to have this work done, before being shipped by railroad to the proper market. These middlemen were a crucial part of the industry; it was their job to see that the crop produced by the orchards was put into a form which consumers would purchase.

Since prunes were the most important orchard crop in the valley, and drying was the only way to process prunes, it follows that drying was the most important method of processing valley fruit. Prunes and often apricots were pitted, cut and then dried for sale, in one of two methods: sun-drying or mechanical drying.

Sun-drying and mechanical drying vied for dominance from the start, with the pendulum of popularity swinging between the two for most of the orchard years. Sun-drying was by far the simplest method. The fruit was pitted and cut, and then laid out on huge trays in the drying fields to be dried by the late summer sun. In mechanical drying, the fruit was pitted and cut, and then put in large evaporators to be dried out.

In the early years of the orchards, sun-drying fell into disfavor, because the fruit sometimes fermented and rotted while out on the trays. Thus, in the 1870's, most fruit was dried with the service William Cozzen brought to the county: the mechanical evaporator. This device allowed orchardists to

³⁷James and McMurry, p. 209

³⁸Interview with Evelyn Cannon, San Jose Historical Museum volunteer, San Jose, California, April 14, 1995

easily and quickly preserve their fruit, and led to a great setting out of fruits for drying, like prunes and apricots. For many years the vast majority of the country's fruit was mechanically dried. This balanced changed drastically in 1887, when a bumper crop was produced and the evaporators could not handle one third of the fruit. In desperation the orchardists reverted to the sun-drying method and set their fruit out in trays to be dried by the sun. The fruit produced this way was of such good quality that in the ensuing years the majority of the crop began to be sun-dried.³⁹ This movement to sun-drying was made possible by the development of two new processes that made the fruit dry faster and prevented the fermentation problems mentioned earlier.

Originally pioneered by J.Q.A. Ballou and George Tarleton, the lye process involved dipping the fruit in a weak lye solution to crack its skin. This made the fruit dry faster and more uniformly under the sun.⁴⁰ In 1888 Luther Cunningham made this procedure easier by inventing a machine that dipped the prunes into the solution and took them out, cracked.⁴¹ Though Antoine Delmas had used sulphur earlier on grapes, Henry Coe was credited with re-discovering the sulphur treatment of fruit around this time period.⁴² Used by the Egyptians and other Mediterranean peoples to preserve linen and raisins respectively, this process involved spraying the trays with sulphur gas to preserve them.⁴³ The sulphur treatment aided the development of sun-drying by preventing fruit from fermenting and making it possible to sun-dry apricots and sliced peaches and pears.

Though these methods helped to make sun-drying the dominant method of preserving fruit, they could not save it when it rained in September of 1918 and destroyed over one half of the year's prune crop. The fruit fermented and rotted on the ground, producing a sweet and sickening smell across the valley for weeks.⁴⁴ After this experience most dryers switched back to evaporators, and they remained dominate until the decline of the orchards in the 1940's.

³⁹Giarratana, p.151

⁴⁰Frederic Hall, The History of San Jose and Surroundings (San Francisco, 1871), p. 523

⁴¹Payne, p.132

⁴²Payne, p.134

⁴³Humphrey, p.28

⁴⁴Ralph Rambo, Pen and Inklings: Nostalgic Views of Santa Clara Valley (San Jose 1984), p.42

However the fruit was dealt with after being prepared, the preparation process was much the same for both drying methods. The fruit was first sorted, sometimes by hand with a card to indicate standard size, but more often by machine. These machines were long wooden apparatuses into which the fruit could be poured, and which were then rocked back and forth to force the fruit into the proper hole, according to size. From these holes the fruit dropped into baskets below the machine, sorted by diameter. The fruit was then placed in mesh baskets and lowered into the lye solution, to crack it. In the sun-drying operations the fruit was then laid out on trays six feet by three feet, pitted by hand, and taken out to the drying fields on small railroad cars. On the field, the fruit was turned with special rakes once a day for the eight days it normally took to dry it. In mechanical operations the fruit was laid on smaller trays and brought to the evaporator.⁴⁵

As if the controversy between the two methods were not enough, the drying business was beset by the agrarian discontent that wracked the agricultural communities of the nation every now and then. In the 1890's, during the height of the Populist movement, Santa Clara County experienced its own minor revolution. For years orchardists had complained of the low prices the dryers paid for their fruit, so in 1891 the growers of the Willows formed the West Side Growers Association. Those in Campbell followed suit one year later with the Campbell Fruit Growers Union, followed by the East Side Growers Exchange in Evergreen. In 1892 these three co-ops merged to form the giant Santa Clara County Fruit Exchange.⁴⁶ This co-op pooled the money and capital of its members to build a drying plant in which all members could dry their fruit, free of extortion and of the high costs of processing fruit individually.

Though these ventures were successful for a time, they were often mismanaged and most failed within ten years. From 1900 to 1917 there were no large co-ops to which orchardists might belong to for protection. This changed in 1917, when the orchardists indignation was once again raised. It was discovered in 1915 that a group of "packers" (fruit dryers), were buying up the prune crop for three cents a pound, having already sold 35% of it to speculators for three and a half cents a pound.⁴⁷ The furor

⁴⁵Interview with Evelyn Cannon, San Jose Historical Museum volunteer, San Jose, California, April 14, 1995

⁴⁶Arbuckle, p.395

⁴⁷Arbuckle, p. 396

caused by this discovery led to the formation of the California Prune and Apricot Growers in 1917. By 1919 this powerful association controlled 75% of the state's prune and apricot acreage, and 80% by 1921.⁴⁸ It survives today, as Sunsweet, but has moved its headquarters from San Jose to Stockton.

Compared with the contentious world of the fruit dryers, the crucial canning industry seems rather calm. The impetus to the canning industry came in 1858, when John Mason of great Britain patented his Mason jar, for home canning. This crucial invention allowed people to can out of their own homes and sparked widespread interest in canning in general. It did not become available in the United States until some years after being patented, but caught on quickly once introduced. Though the Mason jar was not widely used by the valley's canneries, who normally used aluminum cans, the Mason jar was used in the home, a crucial detail, because the Santa Clara County canning industry started in a home.

Started in 1871 by Dr. James Dawson and his wife Eloise in their Alameda home, the canning industry was a close second to the dryers in terms of importance to the valley. Eloise Dawson began the canning industry in a 12' by 16' shed in her backyard, canning apricots, peaches and Barlett pears from her own yard and those of her neighbors, with the help of her husband, two children and two Chinese servants. In the first season the family canned 360 cases of fruit, which they sold to a San Francisco based company. The next year the Dawson's employed 25 to 30 neighbor women, who helped the growing factory increase its output and sell its own product.

Though the Dawson company, eventually called the San Jose Fruit Packing Company, burned down in 1886, the repercussions of the discovery were endless.⁴⁹ Dozens of new canneries appeared all over the valley, to can the apricots, peaches, pears and some of the cherries produced by the growing orchards.

These canneries were the pride of the valley, and none more so than the J.H. Flickinger cannery. This most famous of local canneries was started by the owner in 1885 as a revolutionary attempt to bring the cannery to the fruit instead of the other way around. Flickinger built his cannery in the middle of his vast orchard holdings, allowing the fruit to be picked at peak ripeness, and canned the very same day. The

⁴⁸Sawyer, p.164

⁴⁹Scrapbook, p.246

operation also produced all its own cans and jars, and was known for a fancy glass jar in which it shipped fruit to England, with great success. This cannery, like the other large establishments of its day, employed hundreds of people during the height of the season, including all of the girls from the nearby San Jose Normal School.⁵⁰

The third and least popular method for the marketing of fruit was fresh or "green" fruit. Started by Levi Ames Gould in 1869, this process involved the packing of fruit into refrigerated cars for a fruit-starved Eastern market. It is disputed if Gould was the first to use refrigeration in this way, but after a few risky years the industry caught on, and soon regular trips East were made carrying the precious fresh fruit. The fruit, usually cherries or pears, was wrapped individually in paper, put in crates and then loaded onto the refrigerated cars, to prevent spoiling. By 1871 30 carloads were sent East in a single season, and the number only increased as transportation became better.⁵¹

Labor in the Fields and Fruit Barns

Though the methods of production for orchard industries varied little over the years, the workers who facilitated these procedures changed radically. Beginning with Dawson's cannery, the drying, canning and packing plants employed valley women almost exclusively. These ladies, always pictured with neat hair, clothes and hats, were rarely working to support their families. Rather, they worked to earn "pin money": a little extra money for their families or themselves. The work these ladies did was the light labor of the process: the sorting and cutting of apricots and prunes, and the placing of these on the drying trays. The business was completely respectable, lasted for only a few months, and since many women participated, was something of a social event. As Amaury Marc, an impressed Frenchman, put it in 1901: "During the summer season, all women desirous of employment apply to the various establishments engaged in the process of drying and shipping fruits."⁵² Children too were included in this

⁵⁰Patricia Loomis, Signposts II (San Jose, 1985), p. 27-28

⁵¹Arbuckle, p. 277

⁵²Amaury Marc, Reminiscences of Santa Clara Valley and San Jose (San Francisco, 1901), p.198

quest for "pin money." Generations of valley children grew up "cutting 'cots" in the cutting sheds during the summer, under the watchful eye of an adult supervisor.⁵³

As the industry grew and prospered, the demand for workers also increased. This demand was supplied by the many immigrant groups who flooded into California between 1880 and 1920. In 1880 the Chinese who had been brought to California to work the railroads comprised 40% of Santa Clara County's agricultural workers, the rest being mostly local women and children. The Chinese worked for low wages and were highly industrious, and were the major source of immigrant labor until 1903, when they were overtaken by laborers from Southern and Eastern Europe. The fruit barns were still manned mostly by women and children, but they were more often than not Italian or Portuguese, and their men dominated the packinghouse work. As the Italians and Portuguese moved up economically and became the owners of their own orchards, they were replaced by Japanese workers, around 1915. By the 1920's the Japanese too had graduated from working in the fruit barns, and now dominated the "truck" or fruit and vegetable garden business.⁵⁴

The next stage in this chronology of labor was the migrant labor population, which currently dominates California's agricultural labor pool. During the 1920's and 1930's the orchards were worked largely by Filipino, Mexican and Oklahomean families displaced by poverty from their homes. As before, the men worked gathering the fruit and stacking the crates of finished fruit, while the women and children sorted, cut, dipped and laid out the fruit. While the Filipinos and Oklahomeans lived in California already, the Mexican families migrated North from Mexico in late spring of every year, to catch the early apricots in June, and stayed through the prune crop of late August. Prunes were picked off the ground, while apricots required a stepladder and special hanging bucket.⁵⁵

Transportation of Fruit

⁵³Rambo, p.84

⁵⁴Payne, p.204-209

⁵⁵Rudy Calles, Champion Prune Pickers: Migrant Worker's Dilemma (Los Alamitos, 1979), p. 4

The ready availability of reliable transportation out of Santa Clara Valley was one of the most important factors in the success of the orchards. It was no coincidence that the number of orchards did not grow until after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Before the railroad made the markets of the world accessible, the only market Santa Clara County had was the relatively small one of San Francisco, or the tiny one of San Jose. By 1896 a fast train left San Jose every morning during the fruit season, bound for Chicago, via Sacramento. It reached its destination in only 127 hours, and charged ¢50 per 100 lbs. of canned fruit, \$1.20 per 100 lbs. of bagged dry fruit, and \$1 per 100 lbs. of boxed dried fruit and green fruit.⁵⁶ Dozens of rail stations were created all over the county, to make it easy to get the crop to the railroad. These stations created population centers, and were responsible for the birth of towns like Los Gatos, Mountain View, Campbell, Alma, Wright's Station, Sargent's Station, Lawrence Station, Lexington, Madrone, Coyote Station, and Agnews.⁵⁷

But like farmers all over the nation, local orchardists also saw the negative side of the railroad business. The extreme perishability of the fresh fruit crop made it easy for railroads to charge exorbitant fees to carry the fruit. Here, as elsewhere, they charged less for short hauls than for long ones and because the fruit season was so short, they charged up to \$700 to get a single car East during the fruit season.⁵⁸

Transportation on a local level was also important to the success of the orchards. Santa Clara County had a fine road system, and the creation of almost all of the roads was due to pressure from farmers for a reliable way to transport their product to the processing centers, and from there to the railroad stations. In the late 1860's, just as orchards began to come to public attention, the county experienced a road building boom: the Alameda was taken over by the county, the road to Alum Rock Park was enlarged and a road was built from Alviso to Milpitas.⁵⁹ All of these roads were dirt at first, and many of them had

⁵⁶Shortridge, p. 76-133

⁵⁷Edwin Beilhaz and Donald DeMers, San Jose: California's First City (Tulsa 1980), p.181

⁵⁸Arbuckle, p. 250

⁵⁹Loomis, Signposts II, p. 4

the added advantage of being "sprinkled" roads. They were sprinkled with water from specially designed trucks every few days in the summertime, to keep them in good condition.

Circa 1896 there were 280 miles of these roads, commanding \$100,000 annually for their maintenance, indicating the importance which county residents placed in them.⁶⁰ When a road was unavailable to a desired location, orchardists often banded together to lobby the county to build one, like the first road extended to what is now called Agnews. If the county refused, in several cases they fielded the money themselves and built it, deeming it more important to have a road to move their crop than to save the money and wait for the county.⁶¹ As late as 1928, orchardists were still demanding the creation of new roads to support their burgeoning fields. To this end Blossom Hill Road was created, and named after its fine view of the valley in blossom in the spring.

With the dual resources of good roads and a strong railroad system, the orchardists were able to reach markets around the world. The market to local metropolises like San Francisco was very limited, because it was easily flooded with too much of a product to keep prices high. The market back East, to centers like Chicago and New York was more steady. Because fruits like the apricot and the prune were grown almost exclusively in California and some, like the prune, were grown almost exclusively in Santa Clara County, the market to the East remained strong.

Though affected by the agricultural depressions of the 1890's and 1920's, orchardists here felt its impact more lightly than farmers elsewhere. The specialized nature of their market, and the limited competition, helped to reduce the hardship felt in the county during this time. Internationally, the fruits of the Santa Clara Valley were found all over the world. The high quality of Santa Clara County's products kept them strong in foreign markets, where they often beat out their foreign competitors. During the First World War and the Second World War, the Santa Clara Valley exported canned goods to the armies of our foreign allies, and helped to feed our own troops.

⁶⁰Shortridge, p. 28

⁶¹Loomis, Signposts, p. 6

Part Four: The End of an Era



"California is fast becoming the Mecca of all those who seek health, climate, and opportunities for profitable investment. The popularity and therefore land values, will necessarily increase in a progressive ratio."

**-Santa Clara County and Its
Resources, 1896**

Society era, orchardists were hit hard by new regulations on their trade which put them under previously unknown government control. Traditionally the darling of San Jose and Sacramento, the orchard lobby watched in horror as its influence was eroded by a new leader: industry.

Enter Industry

In earlier years, what industry had existed in Santa Clara County had been strictly focused on some necessary accessory to the orchards. A pamphlet published by the city of San Jose in 1884 to encourage business to relocate their industries to San Jose reveals the true character of the county's industrial development. The pamphlet was sponsored by several real estate agencies (many listing fruit lands as a speciality), a nursery, a hardware store and a land loan office.⁶⁹

By 1896 conditions had hardly changed. The Mercury News' catalogue of the county's largest industries in that year produced this list: a flour mill for wheat, a brewery for local wheat and hops, one lumberyard, a farm equipment factory, two brick yards, a mill that produced paper in which to wrap fruit, a box factory that produced fruit crates, a tannery for the livestock from the South County and a laundry.⁷⁰ This, the county's own complete assessment of its manufacturing status, is extremely revealing. If we assume that the lumberyard and the brick yards were both focused on agricultural building, as they probably were, that leaves Santa Clara County with one industry in 1896 that was not dependent on agriculture: a laundry.

By the Great Depression little had changed in the relation of industry and agriculture in the valley. Though there were more canneries than earlier, there was still very little manufacturing whose products were not connected with orchards, or whose products even left the county. The sole exception was Moffett Field, built during this time to house the War Department's dirigibles. However, during the Second World War the industrial portfolio of the valley changed radically. Not only was there a boom in canneries, but about 70 new industries moved to Santa Clara County. The federal government spent \$8.5

⁶⁹Advantages of the City of San Jose as a Manufacturing Center, p.1-70

⁷⁰Shortridge, p.156-164

million in San Jose alone on defense contracts, and between 1945 and 1965, 550 new industries moved into the county.⁷¹

As the orchards began to collapse all over the valley, the county's canneries, who had seen a huge boom during the Second World War, began to feel the effects. As less and less fruit was produced in the county each year, the canneries, in order to keep up production, had to bring in fruit from other areas. This increased cost and lowered efficiency, and one by one the large canneries moved away from the valley. In 1960 Santa Clara County was still the world center for fruit and vegetable processing, with 215 fruit processing operations in business. Only 25 years later, in 1985, there remained only seven canneries in the county. Of these seven, only one, Sun Gardens, used fruit grown in the valley. The dryers were hit even harder by the end of orchards in the county. By the mid 1980's only three dryers survived, and those three only because they switched to specialty dried fruits, and away from the bulk drying of the past.⁷²

This explosion of industry was another of the major factors behind the downfall of the orchards. Not only did the employment opportunities further raise land prices, but they cushioned the transition from orchards to industry. A major economic revolution took place, but because the cast-offs from the fruit trade could find employment in the new industries, the blow of the change was softened.

Horticultural Hold-Outs

Today the face of local industry has changed slightly, but it continues to keep land prices high and thus still drives the last survivors out of horticulture. The orchards are not yet completely gone. Almaden was one of the last sections to see its agriculture replaced by track homes, and there are still pockets where orchards continue to grow as they have here since the 1870's. In the South County, near Gilroy and Morgan Hill, there are still acres of prunes, apricots, peaches, cherries and walnuts growing and migrant laborers still arrive every year to pick and process the fruit.

⁷¹Payne, p.267

⁷²Payne, p.265

There are signs that this is beginning to change, as Gilroy strives to industrialize and move away from agriculture. In addition to its popular outlet stores, developers plan to build a additional 125 acres of shops and a new recreation center. Councilman Pete Valdez calls the attempted switch to a retail economy "survival," but many see it as the end of agricultural dominance in the area, and by extension, the end of agricultural anything in the county.⁷³

Half of one of the only orchards remaining in the rest of the county, the Olson cherry orchard on El Camino Real in Sunnyvale, was recently sold to developers. Though the original plans called for the building of 342 apartments, neighbors fought this so hard that the plans were changes to 59 homes, on the 10.3 acre lot.⁷⁴ The other part will remain a cherry orchard, as long as the owners can afford to keep it. The price of orchard land in Berryessa recently reached \$500,000 an acre, making it virtually impossible for the few remaning orchardists to stay.⁷⁵ One of the last large prune orchards remaining in San Jose proper was sold this March by the packing association which owned it to make way for as many as 1,000 new homes. The former owners, the Valley View Packing Company intend to move their headquarters north, as do the owners of the Dried Fruit Association of California, which is still headquartered in Santa Clara.⁷⁶ The city of Sunnyvale, in a panic over disappearing orchards during the 1970's, bought a ten acre orchard, so that residents could remember what the rows of fruit trees looked liked after they all disappeared.

⁷³San Jose Mercury News. May 31, 1993 (retrieved on-line)

⁷⁴San Jose Mercury News. November 17, 1993 (retrieved on-line)

⁷⁵San Jose Mercury News, April 12, 1996, p.5B

⁷⁶San Jose Mercury News, March 24, 1996, p.1A

Part Five: Conclusion



**"There is a bonanza in
these broad acres as
was never dreamed of
on the Comstock."**

The Advantages of the City of
San Jose, California as a
Manufacturing Center, 1884

The orchard days of Santa Clara Valley are a telling and fascinating period in our local history. During those years between 1875 and 1950 the county grew and prospered as never before. Immigrants from all over the world and the nation made the Valley of Heart's Delight their destination, and settled here to benefit from the wealth and beauty of the Garden County. The new field was marked by innovation from valley residents who had brilliant solutions for local problems: the patented gopher trap of one Almaden resident comes to mind.⁷⁷

It can truly be said that Santa Clara County raised fruit, but also that the fruit raised it. A cultural pattern of horticulture developed over the years of raising fruit. All the members of the large families of the day helped in some way with the raising, processing and selling of the fruit, either picking it like Ralph Rambo⁷⁸ or selling at the family fruit stand like Deborah Olson.⁷⁹ Whole families and communities united in a common cause during picking season: get the fruit off the trees and get it to market, fast.

There developed a hierarchy of leading valley families, who owned large and successful plots and whose children filled the ranks of Stanford and the University of Notre Dame (then located in San Jose). Just as these families were above the average orchardist, below him there developed another class: the laborers who aided in the fruit production. Here it should be noted that in Santa Clara Valley, as in much of the West, none of these classes remained such for long. All the immigrants, first the Italians and Portuguese, then the Japanese and Okies, moved up through the ranks of labor to owning their own orchards, to the point where today these groups dominate the remaining county agriculture.

In the microcosm of this county, a study of the orchard days reveals a local aspect of the national trends found in history books. The Grangers and the Populists were both strong here, and during those years the orchardists tried to cut the railroads down to size. During Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, Santa Clara County residents joined the rest of the nation, and took their new wealth and leisure time to the park, in this case Alum Rock Park, or to the races at the Race Street Velodrome. Valley orchardists swelled the war parades for both World Wars, and made brave speeches about the importance of canned fruit to armies

⁷⁷Sawyer, p.266

⁷⁸Rambo, p.56

⁷⁹San Jose Mercury News, May 8, 1994, p.1B-2B

to encourage the local troops. During the Depression the fruit growers suffered as much as any others in the nation, and had the characteristic strikes of labor and surges of violence.

All in all, the Santa Clara Valley, even during the height of its self-importance in the glory days of the prune, was simply a slice of American life. People here lived and reacted to national trends, in a manner dictated by their somewhat unique agricultural situation. When the nation dictated that the day of fruit was over, that the time had come for the West to industrialize, that unique situation, those orchards, disappeared forever. Never again will this county witness a spring in which "this fair land appears... decked in flowers white as bridal robes,"⁸⁰ but it may see a year in which every household in the valley has an Internet hook-up, thanks to the ingenuity of local engineers. Hopefully someday it will know if the trade was worth it.

⁸⁰Marc, p. 3

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ORCHARD HOMES!

SANTA CLARA VALLEY FARM AUCTION

(FROM 1880 WOODCUT)

\$70.00 per acre—50 acres rolling foothill land, in warm belt, 7 miles east of San Jose, on a fine road. A No. 1 soil. Nicely located.

\$2,600. 5½ acres in 3-year-old white cherries; good house, barn and well. Five miles from San Jose, on a very good drive. Terms to suit.

18 ACRES all French prunes, four years old, 7 miles west of San Jose, on Tantau avenue; one of the finest prune orchards in the valley. Price, \$400 per acre; terms easy. This is a good speculation.

7¼ ACRES in the Willows, in full bearing cherries, prunes and peaches; some oranges. Near street cars. Nice cottage, barn, carriage shed, etc., all in first-class condition. Price, \$8,500. This piece paid \$2,600 this season.

\$3,500. Five acres in full bearing orchard—cherries, prunes and apricots. Nice house of 5 rooms, partly furnished; good barn and tool-house. Nicely located on very popular road, but one mile from San Jose. Only \$1,000 cash required. A beautiful and profitable home cheap.

We have three very pretty 5-acre lots, fronting on Julian street, two miles out. Nicely adapted for suburban homes. Within a stone's throw of the Pala graded school. Price \$1900 each, on installments of \$25 per month. This is a good place to put your monthly earnings into—better than any savings bank.

POPULATION S. C. CO. 1870

SAN JOSE	12,346
SANTA CLARA	3,039
GILROY	3,036
MILPITAS	645
ALVISO	585
ALMADEN	1604
SCATTERED	3,909

(HALL'S HISTORY SJ. 1871)

LOCAL REAL ESTATE VALUES IN THE 1880'S

ADS
CUT FROM
SAN JOSE MERCURY
JANUARY 1, 1890

The beautiful Shaw orchard at Berryessa, three miles from San Jose, adjoining the celebrated Flickinger orchard—all in full bearing prunes, apricots and peaches—is now placed on the market to settle up the Shaw estate. The orchard is subdivided into 5 and 10-acre lots; and we offer this property in quantities to suit at \$500 per acre. A graded school, a postoffice and a large cannery and dryer, all located adjoining this property. There is no better opportunity to secure a nice orchard home in this valley, and it will pay 15 per cent interest.

We have 13 beautiful 10 and 20-acre home sites left in the E. G. Hall tract, six miles from San Jose, near the pretty little village of Evergreen, which we can sell for \$125 and \$165 per acre. This is first-class fruit soil, and it is the prettiest location in the valley; on a gradual ascent, just high enough to overlook the valley and the San Francisco bay. Orchards are being planted, and several of the tracts are being nicely improved. We call particular attention to this and guarantee it a good investment as a home or a speculation.

WOOSTER & ENSIGN, 83 W. SANTA CLARA ST., SAN JOSE.

Prices of orchard land in 1890. Note the small parcels in which the land was sold and the understanding of what fruit the land is suited for.

Source: Rambo's Pen and Inklings. Copies from microfilm of same era were blurry.

The Santa Clara Valley

God touched the earth in kindness and lo, it dimpled where
It felt His mighty finger, and a valley nestled there,
And He told the angel artist to paint a sky more blue,
Than ever dainty violet or airy bluebell knew,
And to stretch it o'er that valley, as a promise from its God
That peace and plenty there should spring, like flowers from its sod,
And He set the mighty mountains to guard that happy vale
Where the autumns touch the springtimes and the summers never fail.

Then all the birds came singing to where the valley smiled.
And all the suns came shining, by all its peace beguiled;
And from the hidden canyons the brooklets sparkled down
To cheer the future's exiles from the city or the town;
And the gray earth loved its flowers as the flowers love the sun
And the glory of the daytime into even's glory run;
And the live oak wore its banners through all the year unfurled
And so was Santa Clara's vale first given to the world.

And then a man came from out the East, and lo, the valley smiled,
And she took him to her bosom and she loved him as her child.
She blessed him with her orchards and she cheered him with her vines,
She fed him with her bounty and she gladdened him with wine.
He builded there an alter and a happy home, I ween;
And his temple unto learning on gray Hamilton was seen.
Ah, blessed was he by nature past man's allotment here,
In that rarest, fairest valley; in that home of peace and cheer.

Then Gilroy smiled to San Jose, and Saratoga's spring
Called all the happy songsters just to hear the waters sing;
Adown Los Gatos' fairy vale a silver brooklet ran,
And Santa Clara seemed a dream to bless the soul of man;
And Almaden lay smiling, as a babe its mother cheers,
And so peaceful were the moments of the onward-tripping years
That the heart of man was gladdened, and he said: "I love thee best"-
And so was Santa Clara's vale by God and nature blessed.

By A.J. Waterhouse, from Santa Clara County and Its Resources [Sunshine, Fruit and Flowers], 1896