

AGRICULTURE IN THE SANTA CLARA COUNTY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.INTRODUCTION.....	1
2.OHLONE INDIANS.....	2
3.WHEAT.....	2-3
4.GRAPES AND VINE.....	4-7
5.PRUNES.....	7-8
6.FARM LABOR.....	8-9
7.RAILROAD.....	9-10
8.UNIONS.....	10-12
9.NEW INVENTIONS.....	12
10.CONCLUSION.....	12
11.BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	13
12.SOURCES.....	14

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"John Muir captured the 1868 beauty of the Santa Clara Valley with these words, "It was the bloom time of the year..."¹ The Santa Clara County was an agriculture power in the U.S. before the industrial boom. Since then, the county has gone through great change during the last two centuries. In the nineteenth century, the big income was agriculture. This brought admiration to the county. In the twentieth century, the Santa Clara County gained international acknowledgement through the "Silicon Valley." Before the "Silicon Valley," the county was famous for its orchards. Whatever was planted, grew larger here than anywhere else. Orchards and the vineyards spread to every place that would hold them. The county became the envy of the nation. The history of agriculture will be briefly discussed in this report.

¹T.S. Begasse, "Santa Clara County Then and now", Home Life , vol. 1 (April 24-May 5, 1992), p. 3

The first inhabitants in the Santa Clara County were the Ohlone Indians who settled in the area about 1,000 years before the Spanish arrived (1769). They lived in a area extending from San Francisco Bay to Point Sur. "The Ohlone cultivated only one crop, tobacco. They mixed tobacco with leaves with lime and ate the mixture. The ones who were brave enough to try this concoction often vomited. Intoxication was another common side effect."² The Ohlone also collected berries and seeds for food, but the predominant source of food was acorns picked from trees. The ethnographic records indicates that the Ohlone Indians didn't fear starvation because of the ample supply of food. The life-style of this group of Indians stayed fairly constant until the Spanish arrived. The introduction of Hispanic settlers into the Santa Clara County destroyed the Ohlone culture. The Hispanics brought a new type of economy to this area, cattle.

The birth of two new types of agricultural products to this area came along in 1851 when an American farmer successfully grew barley and wheat. This provided a new way for Americans in the Santa Clara County to make an income. The rich Yolo loam soil in the northern central portion of the Santa Clara Valley allowed grain farming and the farming period began. The next season allowed

²Stephen M. Payne, Santa Clara County Harvest of Change, Northbridge, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1987, pg.13-14

farmers from around this area to plant grains. The soil was so rich in nutrients that many crops could be harvested with one sowing.

Throughout the 1850s, wheat was the dominant crop grown in the Santa Clara Valley. The farmers concentrates on growing wheat as the primary cash crop. "In 1868, the wheat produced in the county was 1,188,137 million bushels which was sufficient to feed the entire state. By 1974, Santa Clara County was California's fifth largest producer of wheat with 1,701,132 bushels of wheat harvested. The last large grain harvest was in 1881 when 2,312,600 bushels of wheat was produced."³ After this large grain production, the production started to decrease as midwestern farms came into the grain picture and took most of the business from the eastern markets. The first mechanical reaping machine in the Santa Clara Valley gave the farmers a more efficient way of harvesting wheat. Also contributing to the use of the machines was the outrageously high cost of manual labor. This rise in rates was due to the fact that the farm laborers wanted what they felt they could earn in the gold mines. Although the the mechanical reaper helped, the steam and gasoline farm equipment helped the farmer even more. "In 1875, the Joseph Enright Foundry of San Jose patented the Patent Wood and Straw-Burning Portable Engine. This machine used the grain stalks for fuel and was very efficient."⁴

³IBID, pg. 71

⁴IBID, pg. 72

Several nurseries provided the farmers with the needed fruit trees and wine grapes to begin the change of the valley from primarily grain fields to orchards, and vineyards. Antoine Delmas owned the best French nursery in the valley, Antoine Delmas' French Gardens. He followed the French immigrant patterns and bought his property from Antonio Sunol, and imported the first European grapesvines into the state in 1852. "His grapes won first place in the "foreign grapes category" in the 1855 California State Agricultural Fair in San Jose. Delmas repeated as the winner in the " foreign grapes category" at the Santa Clara County Fair in 1857."⁵ He also went on to dominate in this category at fairs and agricultural meetings for the next several years.

Delmas' technique of using sulfur gas to fight mildew on the grapes was used by grape growers everywhere. The viticulturists came to the county between 1849 and 1852 and planted their vineyards using the mission grape cuttings. These few years attracted many French settlers who realized immediately that the valleys and foothills had potential for an important wine district. One of the first French viticulturist to come onto the scene was Pierre Sainsevain, the son-in-law of Antonio Sunol. Sunol was very glad to see that so many Frenchman had come and began selling good vineyard sites at reasonable prices. His son-in-law at the end of the decade (1850) began promoting the valley. He claimed that it was the best wine- growing area in the state. After a one-third inheritance of his father-in-law's 2,219 acre ranch, Sainsevain

⁵IBID, pg.74

planted several varieties of grapes and began making red table wines in his Belle Vue vineyard.

However, the most important wine maker of them all was Charles Lefranc. In 1857, Lefranc married Marie Thee, the daughter of Bernard Thee, who owned property along the Guadalupe Creek. A year after their marriage, the Lefrancis owned one-half of the property and began making wine from the mission grapes. Dissatisfied with the grapes, Lefranc imported French cutting to graft onto the mission roots for his Sweet Grape Vineyard. By 1862, Lefranc had 40,000 vines. In later years, Lefranc continued to experiment with the vines and won many prizes along the way. His success allowed him to expand the vineyard to seventy-five acres, while his winery developed a 100,000 gallon capacity. His success also inspired farmers in the area to begin planting vineyards. During the 1870s, the vineyards continued to prosper. The development of one disaster and one law allowed Santa Clara County viticulturists to capitalize on the vine market. The disaster was a phylloxera root louse which destroyed the vineyards in France and other European vineyards. "Between 1877 and 1889, France's production of wine dropped 59 percent. At the same time in America, Congress raised import duties on foreign wines. This meant that wine lovers would have to be rich in order to buy wines. This forced wine buyers to buy from other sources, namely American wines."⁶ The best wines in America were found in the Santa Clara County. During the late 1870s, the prices on California wines began to rise. One of the most

⁶IBID, pg. 79

important wineries was John Doyle's Cupertino Wine Company. In 1870, one of Dolyes wines, the Cabernet Franc was the winner in the Columbian Exposition, and five years later, his dry red wines won a silver medal at a competition in Bordeaux, France. He was also honored at the Berlin Exposition in 1895. Tragically, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 destroyed the Wine Company and Doyle. That following year, Doyle died.

One of the largest winery was the Mirassou which was started by one of the Pellier brothers, Pierre. Pierre H. Mirassou established the Pellier vineyard. He married Henriette Pellier in 1880. When he retired in 1885, his daughter and son-in-law continued to manage the winery. Four years later, Pierre passed away which left Henriette with the children and a large debt on the ranch. Henriette remarried to Thomas Casalegno, who, along with the Mirassou boys helped to keep to business afloat. Two of the Mirassou brothers, Peter and Herman, bought a 100-acre wheat farm in 1911, and planted a vineyard called the Mirassou Winery. In the next few years, the Mirassou wine became a premium product. This allowed the winery to continue expanding. After World War II, the Mirassou partnership broke up with Peter keeping the winery and the other brothers began a new winery. Along with his sons, Peter built a 130,000 gallon capacity winery in 1937. When Peter died in 1941, his sons kept improving the winery. In the 1960s, the Mirassous expanded into the Monterey County to relocate.

While several viticulturists were the foundation of the Santa Clara County wine producing center, the man who made Santa Clara Valley into the leading brandy center in California was General Henry Morris Naglee. After the Civil War, Naglee decided not to go home but to take a detour to France. In France, he learned how to make brandy in Cognac. When he did return (around 1868), he planted a vineyard, winery, and a distillery on the east side of town. By the mid 1870's, Naglee was producing the second best brandy in the world (France being the best). "Professor Hilgard, the American wine expert and a professor at UC Berkeley, gave Naglee's Burgundy Brandy a rating of 100 on a scale of 1 to 100 and gave Naglee's Riesling Brandy an eightyfive. At this time, California brandy was usually getting a rating of twenty-six."⁷

Fruit orchards were the other successful agriculture products in the Santa Clara Valley. The orchards didn't make a big impact until the 1880s. Even though, during the 1850s, several farmers began experimenting with small orchards on their grain farms. On the Commodore Stockton farm, the workers planted peach, pear, apple, plum, nectarine, and apricots as well as strawberries.

However, prunes were a big cash crop during the 1880's. Although there were many varieties such as Sugar and Imperial Prunes, 85 percent of the valley's prunes were the French variety. By the 1900s, the valley had come to be known as the "Prune Capital of

⁷IBID, pg. 77

the World." E.L. Bradley was one of the first farmers to experiment with prunes. At first, he planted ten acres. Six years later, his prunes were being sold commercially for 2,500 to 4,000 dollars each season. This crop instilled in the minds of other farmers that this was a profitable crop. The farmers then began to allow more acreage for prunes, but, the key to prune success depended on the ability to get the fruit to the market. The population in California was small during the 1880's, and getting fresh fruit to the markets was costly. The only solution to this dilemma was to dry the fruit so it wouldn't spoil. However, the fruit usually would ferment (because of bacteria or yeast) and not dry quickly enough. In 1888, Will Anderson came up with the ingenious idea of making a prune dipper which dipped the prunes in a solution so it wouldn't ferment. But the real success in prune drying came after 1889, when the evaporators could not dry the season's crops and the farmers resorted to sun drying. Although the sun drying process worked well, the fruit would turn black. This problem was solved by Henry Coe, a Santa Clara Valley farmer, who found out that by gassing the fruit with sulfur the color of the fruit would be preserved. Another incentive was the insects were kept out of the fruit by the sulfur. This fruit was then able to be shipped to the East Coast and Europe.

The key element in the establishment of a vineyard is the inexpensive farm labor. During the grain period, the availability of farm hands was minute, but, once farmers began to planting vineyards, the need for farm hands increased. Most of the laborers were Chinese immigrants. The first Chinese came to the valley as

railroad workers on the San Jose-San Francisco Railroad in 1864. The Chinese were the only people who would work for less than a dollar a day. The Chinese farm workers were highly desired for farm labor because they worked hard for less money. The number of Chinese in Santa Clara County grew from twenty-two to a high of 2,723 in 1890. This was also the year that twenty-seven Japanese entered the valley. The Chinese workforce from this point on began to decrease in number as the Japanese laborers grew in number. When the Chinese Exclusion Acts were passed during the 1880s, the Japanese began filling the orchard jobs vacated by the Chinese. By the late 1900s, farmers hired very few Chinese because of the Japanese men and white women and children. The prune harvest in 1915 was done almost exclusively by Japanese workers who earned two dollars a day. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Filipino and Mexican migrants were used to keep the wages low. Poor whites trying to find work during the depression also entered the orchard workforce. The Japanese also got into vegetable and berry farming. In the early 1920s, Japanese (in the Alviso and Agnew area) cultivated nearly 60 percent of the valley's tomatoes and more than 80 percent of the spinach, and essentially all of the other vegetables grown for resale.

Now that the crops are harvested, they need to go some place to sell. "The completion of the San Jose-San Francisco Railroad in 1864, allowed farmers to ship their products to the San Francisco Produce Market, the latest produce wholesale market on the West

Coast."⁸ However, in 1872, the railroad discontinued the night train that allowed fruit picked in the day to be in the market by morning. In addition to this, the rates of freighters were increasing. To help the farmers with the railroad problem, the valley farmers established the San Jose Farmers Club and Protective Association and hired a steamer to leave Alviso for San Francisco at four in the morning. The farmers were able to get their products to the market in time for the auction and the rates for shipping a small chest of fruit dropped from one dollar to sixty cents.

The farmers joined together in 1874 to form the Farmers Union Corporation. The union spread to most of the valley's towns. The union supplied everything the farmers needed to buy such as shovels, hoes, and brooms. It also arranged credit on the season's crops. In addition to the Farmers Union Corporation, Orchard Supply Hardware was developed in the 1930s. This organization sold directly to farmers and remained a corporation until the membership sold the business to the W.R. Grace Company in 1980. Another union, the California Fruit Union was formed in 1885. This union lowered shipping costs and obtained higher prices on goods. Under the leadership of President John Z. Anderson along with U. S. Senator Leland Stanford, the union managed to lower railroad rates. The Japanese also got into the agricultural game. The Japanese sold their products to buyers from San Francisco, Oakland, Sacramento, and Los Angeles. The products sold by the Japanese were usually good

⁸IBID, pg.88

enough to collect cash from the buyer rather than wait to be paid by agreement. In 1908, the Japanese had a joining of tenant farmers into what is known as the Japanese Agricultural Alliance. This Alliance offered loans to those who needed it, help farmers in need, and promoted higher prices for their products. In Alviso, the Japanese celery growers formed the Celery Growers Association in 1931. The founder, Tomiju Takeda, got some Japanese farmers interested in growing celery . Takeda got the idea of growing celery after he saw a Chinese farmer growing it. The twenty-seven members of the Association paid a cent per crate to help provide the money for a managing secretary. The other part of the money came from the celery buyers. This Association sold their product throughout the San Francisco Bay and to midwestern and eastern buyers in Chicago and New York City.

The increased interest in orchards during the 1890s caused the several neighborhood farmers to form fruit growers associations. Two groups, the West Side Fruit Growers Association and the East Side Growers Exchange were established as early as 1891. In 1892, the Santa Clara County Fruit Exchange with Colonel Hersey as president was incorporated. Hersey realized that the valley farmers could get a better price from eastern buyers if they banded together.

The Exchange built a sixty by one hundred and fifty foot warehouse in 1896. At its peak, the Exchange had 436 growers who shipped 7,260 tons of fruit in 1902. Sadly, in 1916 this organization went out of business because its members were not obligated to sell

all their fruit to the Exchange. These members began to compete with the Exchange.

To help eliminate hand labor, the team of Anderson-Barngrower built a continuous can sterilizer which sterilized, cooked, and cooled cans in one process. This machine was manufactured for canners of fruits, vegetables, and fish throughout California. In 1928, Bean Spray Pump Company merged with Anderson-Barngrower and the Smith Manufacturing Company and formed Food Machinery Company. This company produced a pear machine which peeled, halved, and cored pears. They also developed an orange juicer machine. To help the orchards, Zepf Macabee built a gopher trap for the orchards. In October of 1900, Macabee received a patent for his trap and began manufacturing them out of his house in Los Gatos.

This was just a glimpse of the economic picture before the industry boom. The agricultural era will be remembered as a great source of income for many Californians in the Santa Clara County. The county was just like a page out of a storybook where anything that was planted grows. The place where ideas were plentiful and the work was abundant. This is truly one of the most economical counties in the world. I am so glad to be a part of it.

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