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Purple gold : the prune industry in Santa Clara County, 1850-1940

William Bauerle
San Jose State University

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PURPLE GOLD:
THE PRUNE INDUSTRY IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY, 1850 - 1940

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
William Bauerle
December 1998

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Daniel Cornford

Dr. Daniel A. Cornford, Professor

E. Bruce Reynolds

Dr. E. Bruce Reynolds, Professor

Billie B. Jensen

Dr. Billie B. Jensen, Professor

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

William Fisher

ABSTRACT

PURPLE GOLD: THE PRUNE INDUSTRY IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY, 1850 - 1940

by William Bauerle

Once upon a time, in the Valley of the Heart's Delight, Santa Clara County rocketed to the top of the world in prune production. Enticed by the fertile soil of the Santa Clara Valley, early horticulturists experimented with a variety of fruits targeted for the rapidly expanding markets of northern California. By the 1890s, prunes replaced wheat as the primary commodity in an agricultural dominant economy, and by 1900 the county was recognized as a world leader in prune production. Despite such fame, the reality for most growers was bittersweet. Fierce competition and constant concerns over environmental, labor, and business issues made the small fruit farmers life harsh at best. Battered by the Great Depression and overrun by a high-tech military economy, in the end the orchards of the Santa Clara County were replaced in much the same way that prune blossoms once displaced miles of golden wheat fields.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century, Santa Clara County suddenly emerged as a major producer of prunes for national and international markets. Early horticulturists experimented with prunes in the mid 1850s and the county witnessed its first commercial orchards in the 1860s. In 1890, 15,090 acres in California were planted in prunes; of these 6,175 acres, approximately forty-one percent, were in Santa Clara County.¹ By 1910, the prune acreage in Santa Clara County had more than doubled, to 12,697 acres, and equaled sixty-nine percent of the California total. In 1929, at the peak of prune production, 299 square miles of prune orchards blossomed in California, and more than 103 square miles of these orchards flourished in Santa Clara County.² During its most productive period — the fifty years from 1900 to 1950 — Santa Clara County led the nation in prune production. Forty years later there were almost no commercial prune orchards in Santa Clara County. Figure 1 summarizes the abrupt rise and more gradual decline of the prune acreage of Santa Clara County in relation to that of California overall, from 1880 to the present.

Sources: See endnote 3

Figure 1. California Prune Acreage Compared to Santa Clara County Prune Acreage, 1886 — 1997³

Figure 1 shows the enormous changes that took place in the economy of Santa Clara County. A number of factors were necessary for the rapid growth and the sustained success of the Santa Clara County prune industry: favorable climate and soil; horticultural innovation; an adequate supply of affordable labor; enough capital to create the requisite economic infrastructure; and, of course, a ready and reachable market. Other than the soil and climate that were, indeed, suitable for a wide range of crops, none of these factors were in place in Santa Clara County in 1850. When California joined the Union, there was nothing to indicate how specialized the economy of Santa Clara County would become in the next thirty years, or how long that specialization would endure.

This thesis examines the development of the prune industry of Santa Clara County and assesses the factors that made it a dominant force in the California agricultural economy. The second chapter explains the geologic and climatic forces that, over the course of approximately a million years, produced the county's rich prune-nurturing soil. The third chapter reviews fruit production and trade during the Spanish and Mexican periods of California history and discusses factors leading to the transition from a wheat-growing to an orchard-based economy. Chapter Four details the development of the social and economic infrastructure that supported prune production in Santa Clara County. Chapter Five describes the county's early prune planting, growing, harvesting, and marketing processes. Chapter Six discusses the prune growers' on-going struggle to secure affordable labor and analyzes the social forces that permitted farmers to exploit cheap, reliable harvest labor. Chapter Seven explains the issues and events that resulted in the reorganization and consolidation of the county's early prune packing and marketing organizations and analyzes the failure of the first county prune growers' cooperative. Chapter Eight reviews organizational and marketing issues that led to the development of the California Prune and Apricot Association. Chapter Nine looks at the serious environmental, economic, and management problems that plagued the industry from 1918 to 1940. Chapter Ten explores the characteristics of the migrant labor that supported prune production and describes some of the educational and housing issues associated with state and local migrant labor. Chapter Eleven examines the factors contributing to the decline of the Santa Clara County prune industry and reviews the findings of this thesis.

This paper was developed using a variety of primary and secondary historical sources. Records kept by the State of California, the United States Government, and Santa Clara County provide important contemporary and retrospective material. State, federal, and county census reports contain the raw data needed to develop a production model for the county and state prune industry. The United States Agricultural Census also provides specific information about national and local farm sizes and acres in prune production. Reports from the California State Agricultural Society and the State Board of Horticulture dating back to the late 1850s appear in the *Journal of the Senate Assembly*. These reports provided farm owners and prune-industry associations with necessary information about issues affecting the harvesting and marketing of state farm products.

Other important primary sources are local newspapers. Among these, the *San Jose Mercury* and the *San Jose Herald* (later merged as the *San Jose Mercury Herald*), promoted local agriculture interests and reported information of concern to the prune industry. Perhaps no California newspaper provided more thorough and significant agricultural information than the *Pacific Rural Press*. This weekly San Francisco publication presented readers with pages of articles about agricultural associations, laws, production, transportation, labor, pest control, and social issues. Beginning publication in the 1880s, it regularly included monthly reports by the Santa Clara County Horticultural Society, which worked to advance all aspects of agriculture in Santa Clara County.

Valuable primary information used in this thesis also includes interviews conducted with Joseph J. Ferrari, Ray and Lee Lester, and Dr. Stephen Janes. Joseph Ferrari was born in San Jose on February 19, 1921, and has remained a resident of Santa

Clara County for his entire life. His memories include his father's founding the San Jose Citrus and Produce Company in 1932 and picking prunes himself as a child on his uncle's ten-acre prune farm in San Jose. He is currently employed as an agricultural biologist by Santa Clara County. Ray and Lee Lester manage one of the last prune orchards in San Jose. Their great-grandfather, Nathan Lester, purchased thirty-one acres of prune orchards in 1883. By the mid-1970s Ray and Lee owned 470 acres of Santa Clara County prune orchards. Dr. Janes, who received a doctorate in paleontology from the University of California, Berkeley in 1984, provided an understanding of the geological processes that made the county's soil and climate ideal for the growing of prunes and other deciduous fruit.

Among the most useful secondary sources are Kevin Starr's epic histories, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915*; *Endangered Dream: The Great Depression in California*; and *The Dream Endures: California Enters the 1940s*, which provide a comprehensive record of the California experience and give useful background information on the development of the history of the Santa Clara County prune industry. Daniel Cornford's anthology, *Working People of California*, furnishes insight into the social relationships and the cultural diversity present in California's workforce during the period of rapid agricultural growth in Santa Clara County. Of particular interest in Dr. Cornford's anthology are the introduction and Sucheng Chan's essay, "Chinese Livelihood in Rural California." David Potter's *People of Plenty* examines the American national character and individual values. Robert Couchman's corporate history of Sunsweet is perhaps the best secondary source of information on the state and county

prune industry. *Bitter Harvest* by Cletus E. Daniel and *Factories in the Fields* by Carey McWilliams detail the struggles and issues related to the migrant farm workers whose muscle was critical to the rapid growth of the state and county agriculture. Jacklyn Greenberg's dissertation, *Industry in the Garden: A Social History of the Canning Industry and Cannery Workers in the Santa Clara Valley, California, 1870-1920*, provides details about the early agricultural history and the role of women in the burgeoning agricultural economy of Santa Clara County. A rich source of early Santa Clara County history compiled in 1888 by H. S. Foote, *Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World; or, Santa Clara County, California* includes 950 biographical sketches of county residents. In addition to these sources, other books, academic articles, and professional journals noted in the bibliography of this thesis form the historical record of the rise and fall of the county's prune industry.

NOTES

¹ Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story: A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc., 1967), 14.

² Ibid.

³ Since 1919 the California Department of Agriculture has maintained an annual record of prune acreage by county. Before 1919, the federal and state governments determined the value of fruit orchards by counting the number of orchard trees; unfortunately, however, annual data regarding the number of prune trees grown in Santa Clara County and throughout the state before 1919 do not exist; what do exist for this period are random reports in the Federal Census, in the publications of the California Horticulture and Agricultural Society, and in some agricultural journals. The common practice used to convert prune tree counts into orchard acreage prior to 1918 was to divide the total tree population of a fruit farm by 100. This practice was confirmed by Charles Howard Shinn in "The Fruit Industry in California," *The Popular Science Monthly*, (New York: D Appleton and Company, 1894), 208, and by an interview with Lee Lester conducted on June 6, 1997. To create Figure 1, four sources were used for data before 1919: (1) *California Appendix to the Journals of the State Assembly of the 21st Session 1875: Transactions of the California State Agricultural Society During the Year 1873, Schedule S, Number of California Fruit Trees by County, 1873* (Sacramento: State of California, 1875), 61; (2) *California State Board of Horticulture, Annual Report* (Sacramento: State of California, 1892), 97; (3) *Official Report of the 28th Fruit-Growers' Convention 1903*, (Sacramento: State of California, 1904), 74; and (4) *California Appendix to the Journals of the State Assembly of the 39th Session 1911: Report of the State Board of Equalization for 1909 — 1910, Schedule S, Number of Fruit Trees Growing in Spring of 1910* (Sacramento: State of California, 1911), 94. Two sources were used to develop that data in Figure 1 from 1919 through 1997: (1) The California Crop And Livestock Reporting Service, *Special Publication 257, "Acreage Estimates California Fruit and Nut Crops 1919 — 1953"* (Sacramento: State of California, 1954), 210.; and (2) *California State and County Census of Agriculture Data, Specified Fruits and Nuts by Acres* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 1997).

CHAPTER 2

THE FERTILE SOIL OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

For nearly all of its 147-year existence, Santa Clara County has been an economic success story. Located at the southern tip of San Francisco Bay (Figure 2), today the county is best known for its high technology industrial base that has earned its trendy title, Silicon Valley. Yet for well over two-thirds of its history, agriculture provided the county with its primary economic base, with deciduous fruit, specifically prunes, being its most profitable commodity. Encouraged by climate and soil ideal for fruit production, the yield of Santa Clara County prune orchards increased to a level of thousands of tons annually beginning in the 1890s and continuing into the 1950s.

Source: Drawn by William Bauerle after information from Santa Clara County Department of Planning and Development

Figure 2. Santa Clara County 1998

In 1792, sixteen years after its founding, the English navigator Captain George Vancouver visited the Franciscan mission at Santa Clara. In his diary he observed that the Santa Clara Valley "is situated in an extensive, fertile plain, the soil of which, as also that of the surrounding country, is a rich, black, productive mold, superior to any I had before seen in America."¹ Ninety-five years later The Honorable Judge David Belden published a description of the Santa Clara Valley in the June, 1887 issue of the San Francisco *Overland Monthly*:

The county of Santa Clara has an area of rather more than a million acres. Of this, about two hundred thousand acres is valley — the ancient lake bed, or the alluvial deposits of existing streams — three hundred thousand acres of rolling hills and mountain slopes, well suited for fruit; the residue pasture principally for pasturage. In what is now, or has recently been, the lower portion of this plain, the soil is black, tenacious clay, known as "adobe." It is very fertile and productive, but requires much care as to the time and manner of cultivating it, and is well adapted to hay and grain. The higher lands of the valley are a light, loamy, and sometimes gravelly soil. This is easily cultivated and is well adapted to all the cereals and to most varieties of fruit.²

The natural processes, resources, and time required to produce an ecological environment capable of producing so much fruit began long before humans existed.

Figure 3 is a topographical model of the South San Francisco Bay and Santa Clara County lowland region. The region is geologically active and is distinguished by plate tectonic and fault activity, processes which have continued for the last million years.

Source: Drawn by William Bauerle after information from Santa Clara County Department of Planning and Development

Figure 3. Topographical Map of the Santa Clara Valley Lowlands

Continent-sized tectonic plates carry the earth's crust beneath the Pacific Ocean eastward toward the North American Continental Plate. The California coast is the western edge of the North American Plate. At the point of contact, near the coastline and beneath the Pacific Ocean, gargantuan forces drive the Pacific Plate beneath the North American Plate. As the Pacific Plate is forced down, it lifts the North American Plate upward, to form the coastal mountains. As geologist Stephen Janes explained, "The Diablo Range, like the other ranges that surround the Santa Clara Valley, grew in size by folding and uplifting, not only the surrounding sea floor, but also the margin of the vast alluvial plain that extends from the Great Valley to the California coast."³

Tectonic pressure also caused parallel stress faults (fissures in the earth's crust) extending the length of the California coast and beyond. The San Andreas Fault and the Hayward Fault are stress faults that run north to south on opposite sides of the Santa Clara Valley. The San Andreas fault, which runs through the Santa Cruz mountains of the San Francisco peninsula, is separated from the Hayward Fault by a distance of about thirty miles.

A depression between these two faults, known as a graben, defines the Santa Clara Valley (Figure 4). "Over the millennia, fault activity occurring on the San Andreas and Hayward Faults caused this broad area of land to subside slowly between the Santa Cruz and Diablo Mountain Ranges,"⁴ observes Janes. In the early eighteenth century, Spanish missionaries named this graben the Santa Clara Valley.

Source: Draw by William Bauerle after information provided by Arthur D. Howard, *Geologic History Of Middle California*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 55.

Figure 4. Santa Clara Valley Graben

The geological development of the Santa Clara Valley graben was critical to the accumulation of fertile soil in Santa Clara County. Climate is also a significant

contributor to the formation of the valley's rich soil. Storms, usually formed in the Pacific, eroded the mountain ranges bordering the valley, eventually wearing a mixture of tiny fragments of rocks and minerals into soil. Over time, rain flushed this soil from the mountains and into the valley. The natural shape of the valley allowed the accumulation of thick layers of alluvial materials to build up and to spread farther and farther over the valley floor. Rain encouraged plant growth that over time enriched the sediment with organic material. Over the last 500,000 years geologic changes such as mountain uplift, earthquakes, and landslides changed the courses of rivers, and fresh water from the rivers repeatedly flooded the valley floor. These processes helped to spread the developing soil and introduce additional organic material into it.

The geographical location of the Valley at forty degrees north latitude places it in an area of optimum rainfall for growing deciduous fruit. To the south, deserts get too little rain, and to the north mountainous areas get too much rain which strips their soil away. The climate in the Santa Clara County region, known as Dry Mediterranean, is distinguished by mild winters, warm summers, and moderate rainfall. "When Pacific storms carry heavy levels of rain into this region, a process known as 'Rain Shadow' (i.e., the mountains' sheltering the inland valley from heavy rain), causes the brunt of the precipitation to fall on the Santa Cruz Mountains and protects the valley soil from excessive amounts of rain that leach out its vital nutrients."⁵

For hundreds of thousands of years geological and environmental conditions were ideal for organic growth. Long before the first hunter-gatherers walked onto the valley's rich loam, the region had evolved into one with extremely rich food-producing potential.

It took all the natural processes — a temperate climate, tectonic processes, and organic evolution — working over geological time to produce a soil so rich that it would one day support the most successful deciduous fruit-producing region in the world.

NOTES

¹ H. S. Foote, ed., *Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World; or, Santa Clara County, California* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1888), 30.

² Ibid., 21.

³ Stephen Janes, "A Conversation with Dr. Stephen Janes," Interview by William Bauerle, 16 May 1998, Santa Cruz, California.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

AMERICAN VALUES: ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH AND CREATION OF COMMUNITY

Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything, . . . for 'tis the only thing in this world that lasts, . . . 'Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for — worth dying for.¹

— Gerald O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*

Over three-quarters of a century before prunes were brought to Santa Clara County, Spanish missionaries first cultivated deciduous fruit in California. The eighty-two years between the founding of the first Spanish mission at San Diego in 1769 and the establishment of Santa Clara County in 1851 witnessed the evolution and demise of the particular Spanish and Mexican social and economic institutions in California. They were replaced by an American value system predicated on the national and individual desire for the acquisition and accumulation of wealth and the establishment of social order. These values brought from the eastern United States shaped the development of the agricultural economy in Santa Clara County. James Wilson Marshall's serendipitous discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill reinforced these values and allowed Californians to create the social and economic conditions, and eventually the infrastructure, needed for the Santa Clara Valley's rapid transition to a fruit-based economy.

The first California mission was constructed at San Diego in 1769. Under the direction of Don Jose de Galvez, appointed by the King of Spain as secular head of the

expedition to establish missions in California, seeds of fruit, vegetables, grains, and flowers were brought to the new territory for planting.² The fruit served several needs. The majority was consumed by the mission populations, and surplus fruit was transported to nearby presidios to be eaten by Spanish soldiers and to strategic ports established by the Spanish, to help reduce the incidence of scurvy that had long ravaged their ships' crews.

In 1777 the Spanish established the first pueblo at San Jose. The pueblo was intended as an agricultural community that could provide resources and food to the San Francisco presidio. Reports indicate that as early as 1805 the production of fruit by the San Jose pueblo had grown so large it could not all be locally consumed.³

Established in 1797, Mission San Jose was the last Spanish agency established in the region that is now Santa Clara County. Upon visiting it in the early part of the nineteenth century, Edward Bryant wrote that he was "surprised to find that Mission San Jose had an enclosure, with adobe brick walls up to eight feet high, of 15 to 20 acres, all of it planted to fruit trees and grapevines. There were 600 pear trees and a large number of apple and peach trees, all bearing an abundance of fruit."⁴ Bryant was also impressed by the well-engineered aqueducts watering the orchards of the San Jose mission.

After gaining independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico took possession of California in 1825. During the period of Mexican control, from 1823 to 1846, California saw changes in the patterns of labor use and land ownership. Unlike the earlier Spanish settlers who had shown little interest in private enterprise or in extensive private land ownership, the Mexicans were eager to own land and to expand their hide and tallow

commerce. The dissolution of the missions by the Mexican government allowed the new Mexican landowners to expand their holdings. In the early post-mission years, a large proportion of the best land that had been used by the missions or had been part of the unused public domain was apportioned in very large units for private use. These loosely defined land grants, known as ranchos, and cattle-raising on an immense scale characterized the Mexican settlement of the Santa Clara Valley. Beyond the San Jose pueblo lay miles and miles of rich grazing land on which cattle, horses, and sheep fed.

As had Spain, Mexico prohibited the local Native American population from owning land. Instead, the Mexican ranchers pressed the local Native Americans into forced labor. This pattern of large Mexican ranchos worked by Native American labor existed in the Santa Clara Valley from around 1833 until just before Santa Clara County was officially established in January of 1851.

The valley's agricultural products during this period were grown primarily for local consumption. Wheat, beans, maize, melons, and pumpkins were the primary crops. The productivity of the mission gardens waned rapidly after the missions, including Missions San Jose and Santa Clara, were secularized in 1834. The missions had provided the only fruit available in the Santa Clara Valley at this time. In 1847 James F. Reed — a leader of the disastrous Donner expedition — began managing the farm and the gardens at Mission San Jose. Records indicate that between 1847 to 1849 “he harvested the apples, pears, and peaches, dried some of the pears, and shipped both fresh and dried fruit to the Hawaiian Islands.”⁵

Until the end of the Mexican-American War cattle ranching dominated the floor of the Santa Clara Valley. In 1848 and 1849 several events occurred in quick succession that resulted in the rapid Americanization of California and in many radical changes to the social and economic structure of the Santa Clara Valley. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War, ceded California, and indeed all Mexican territory north of the Rio Grande River, to the United States. In 1848, James Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's Mill, and the pressures of a burgeoning national population, still largely clustered east of the Mississippi River, made conditions ripe for a mass migration of Americans westward to California.

The effect on the population of California was immediate and dramatic. In the spring of 1846, California's non-Native American population consisted of between 8,000 and 12,000 Mexicans and Californians of Mexican or Spanish descent and approximately 2,000 foreigners, chiefly Americans. By 1849 the population had increased five times, to 106,000 (Figure 5).⁶ The majority of the newcomers were from the eastern parts of the United States, but they also included people from many European nations, from South America, and from the Far East. To these opportunists, California was not a distant abstract dream; rather it was a potential source of prosperity and happiness.

Census Source: Ed Borgna Brunner, *1998 Information Please Almanac*, (Boston: Information Please LLC, 1998), 826.

Figure 5. U. S. Population Growth Related to Santa Clara County Prune Production

In his study of the American migratory movement during this period, Daniel Boorstin challenges the American myth of the loner moving west across the land.⁷ It can reasonably be argued that the westward bound American pioneer, rather than trying to break away from society, was working to extend and improve it. For Americans migrating thousands of miles in wagons through difficult and hostile territory, community was an essential survival strategy. As Boorstin explains, “The wagon was plainly a community vehicle; everything about it required traveling in groups. To cross deep streams or climb steep slopes the ox teams had to be doubled and the wagons managed one at a time. Many ways were found to use the group’s total resources to conquer obstacles and reduce risk.”⁸

From the start, farmers arriving in Santa Clara County from the United States were interested in commercial agriculture rather than subsistence farming, and they

brought to California values, skills, and knowledge tailor-made for free-market production. They were on the westernmost edge of the great American land rush, pioneers eager to move to the Far West to build homes and seek their fortunes. Frederick Jackson Turner captured an important aspect of the American westward experience when he wrote:

The homestead law increased the tide of settlers. The improved farm machinery made it possible for him to go boldly on to the prairie and to deal effectively with virgin soil in farms whose cultivated area made the old clearing of the backwoodsman seem mere garden plot. Two things resulted from these conditions, which profoundly modified pioneer ideals. In the first place the new form of colonization demanded an increased use of capital; and the rapidity of the formation of towns, the speed with which they developed, made men the more eager to secure bank credit to deal with the west. This made the pioneer more dependent on the eastern economic forces. In the second place the farmer became dependent as never before on transportation companies. In this speculative movement the railroads, finding that they had pressed too far in advance and had issued stock too freely for their earnings to justify the face of the investment, came into collision with the pioneer on the question of rates and discriminations.⁹

Thus, even prior to the formation of Santa Clara County in the mid-nineteenth century, the American pioneer was dealing with highly-developed free market agricultural systems that required advanced socio-economic structures, supporting technologies, and transportation facilities. These farmers were developing and using complex machinery and production processes geared toward accumulation of surplus for mass consumption. It was these immigrants from the eastern and midwestern states, and from Europe, hoping usually for gold but finding instead richness in the soil, who brought the skills, knowledge, innovation and values that eventually developed Santa Clara County into the most successful prune-producing region in the world. The rapid growth of the Santa

Clara County prune industry could not have happened without the critical knowledge, social infrastructure, and production and marketing knowledge that came with these pioneers.

In 1863, fully a decade before California had acquired the social and economic infrastructures needed to achieve national and global agricultural dominance, Governor Leland Stanford, opening the tenth annual State Agricultural Fair, spoke of these possibilities. “While a portion of our country,” Stanford declaimed, “is shaken with the conflict of contending armies, the farmers of the West are ploughing up their boundless prairies, and each year preparing a harvest that is to feed millions of their countrymen, and other millions of other lands.”¹⁰ To support his argument, Stanford referenced the federal census of 1860 that revealed that California farm values had risen by \$43,000,000 (the equivalent of \$717,000,000 in 1997 dollars) during the past decade.

Nothing in Stanford’s speech, however, was more revealing of the period’s aggressive capitalism, nor possibly more persuasive to the gathered assembly, than was his appeal to the national value of personal accumulation of agricultural wealth. Quoting a letter sent by George Washington to a friend, Stanford read, “I think with you, that the life of husbandry of all others is most delightful. It is honorable, it is amusing, and with judicious management it is profitable.”¹¹ Stanford saw accumulation of wealth as a primary obligation of all citizens; a man had a responsibility to society to produce more and more. He argued that technology — most especially his railroad — promised California farmers their best chance of increasing productivity and becoming rich.

The Americans who came to Santa Clara Valley between 1842 and 1870 brought with them the values, knowledge, tools, and skills necessary to develop a strong social infrastructure capable of supporting what would become a rapidly expanding deciduous fruit industry. Some of these values would merge comfortably with those of the Spanish and Mexican periods; others would not. These American values were well suited for the rapid social and economic growth that would put Santa Clara County on the map, impelled by technology, expanding fruit markets, and social change.

NOTES

¹ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With The Wind* (New York: The MacMillan Publishing Company, 1936; reprint, New York: The MacMillan Publishing Company, 1996), 36 (page reference is to reprint edition).

² Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story: A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc., 1967), 5.

³ Ibid., 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ed Borgna Brunner, *1998 Information Please Almanac* (Boston: Information Please LLC, 1998), 826.

⁷ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 51. "Of all American myths, none is stronger than that of the loner moving west across land. Without having thought much about why, we have taken for granted that, on landing, the colonial immigrants travelers no longer needed community. The pioneering spirit, we are often told, is a synonym for 'individualism.' The courage to move to new places and try new things is supposed to be the same as the courage to go it alone, to focus exclusively and intensively and enterprisingly on oneself. Only so, we hear, could the threatened pioneer survive. And so, it is said, an American way was born."

⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publishing, 1996), 274.

¹⁰ *California Journals of Senate and Assembly; Transactions of the California State Agricultural Society* (Sacramento: State of California, 1863), 47.

¹¹ Ibid., 45.

CHAPTER 4

VISION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

In 1863, a transcontinental railroad was at the center of California Governor Leland Stanford's vision. The railroad would be a means of bringing more enterprise-minded farmers to California and a powerful instrument for distributing California's bountiful harvest to expanding markets. Driving home his point at the State Agricultural Fair in 1863, Stanford asserted:

By it [the railroad] the attention of the world will be attracted to our State; its population will be augmented; new fields of industry will be explored, and new markets opened for the products of our soil. Indeed, with the construction of the Pacific Railroad — its inducement for immigration — the vast commercial relations it must establish — the great bay cities which, as one of its results, will in twenty-five years have a population of a million inhabitants — all these will create for the farmers of our State a market that will be almost illimitable in extent. It is well for agriculturists to consider the mighty future of the Pacific slope, and the consequent influence upon their own future so closely connected with it.¹

Appealing directly to the Santa Clara County orchard interests, Stanford predicted that "in proportion to our population, the State of California will have, in five years, more orchard production than any other state or country in the world."² Emphasizing the need to act quickly to ensure that an adequate infrastructure existed to support increased

orchard production, Stanford added: “and it will be a question with the farmer what to do with them,”³ that is, how to get those agricultural surpluses to market.

Even in 1863 Santa Clara County had already witnessed remarkable agricultural expansion. In 1856, the same year that the French prune was first brought to the county, the county’s wheat harvest produced 180,000 bushels. By 1861, when the County Assessor reported the county’s first 200 prune trees growing on less than two acres, it also reported that 25,000 acres of county soil had produced 500,000 bushels of wheat. And for 1863 the Assessor reported that Santa Clara County had 77,000 (29 percent) of the state’s 263,000 total acres of wheat, and that it had produced 1,250,000 (30 percent) of the 4,125,000 bushels grown in California.⁴

In a very real way, the burgeoning national and global demand for wheat drove the rapid development of local and national infrastructures that would, in less than twenty years, allow Santa Clara County farmers to corner the market on prunes. In Frederick Jackson Turner’s words, if we:

Study the maps showing the transition of the wheat belt from the East to the West, as the virgin soils were conquered and made new bases for destructive competition with the older wheat States, we shall see how deeply they affected not only land values, railroad building, the movement of population, and the supply of cheap food, but also how the regions once devoted to single cropping of wheat were forced to turn to varied and intensive agricultural and to diversified industry.⁵

The demands of the state’s grain industry spurred the development of the state’s farm implement industries. At the Sacramento Fair of 1863, firms named after their proprietors — Baker & Hamilton, W.B. Ready & Brothers, and George Kelton —

displayed an increasing variety of farm machinery including two- and four-gang plows, cultivators, and freight wagons. One of the earliest recorded wheat harvests using a mechanical combine-harvester took place at Mission San Jose in 1854.⁶ “As a rough estimate, the hand methods prevailing at the middle of the nineteenth century took at least 60 hours per acre. The machine methods of 1900, including the use of the combine harvesters, cut the time to less than three hours in California.”⁷

While it is true that orchardists, because of the nature of their crop, would never realize such a dramatic technological reduction in labor requirements, it is also true that many of the newly developed farm implements were readily adapted to fruit growing. For example, the “two-bottom” plow, drawn by four or six horses, was adapted from the large gang plows pulled by from six to eight horses and was universally employed in the orchards. Other tools originally developed for bonanza wheat farming that were later applied to orchard farming were harrows, levelers, and earth-moving equipment.⁸

New technologies and marketing practices were similarly adapted to the sale and distribution of orchard crops. In October 1853 the first telegraph line was connected between San Francisco and San Jose. This link was vital to San Francisco merchants such as Isaac Friedlander, nicknamed the “Grain King,” who worked directly with the county farmers. During the 1860s and 1870s he controlled more than three-fourths of the county’s wheat harvest. Friedlander chartered ships to sell wheat all over the world and lent money to farmers to finance ongoing production. Later, merchants such as Freidlander would recognize the value of the fruit crops and would apply the same

marketing practices to the early prune industry. Yet, before that happened, two issues turned the general public against the large wheat growers and eventually released the county from their economic stranglehold.

The huge wheat farms, a monopolistic form of land ownership that perpetuated the great cattle ranchos of the Mexican period, blocked the agricultural opportunities for newcomers who were accustomed to the smaller scale farming of the eastern and Midwestern United States. Prior to statehood, a small number of pioneers had purchased large land grants from the Mexican government, and the United States government recognized these grants after acquiring California. Of these pioneers, the most notable in Santa Clara County was Martin Murphy, Sr. The Murphy family migrated overland to California from Missouri in 1844. Traveling to San Jose, Martin Murphy, Sr. purchased the Rancho Oja de Aqua de la Coste. Martin's oldest son, Martin Murphy, Jr., was able to amass a fortune in the gold fields that enabled him to purchase most of what is presently the city of Sunnyvale.⁹ By the early 1850s the Murphy family owned about 150,000 acres of fertile Santa Clara Valley land. As did other valley farmers, the Murphys planted acres upon acres of grain. Of these large-scale agricultural ventures, California historian Timothy J. Lukes writes: "it is evident that the development of intensive agriculture in the Santa Clara Valley was looked upon by the participants in much the same way as they looked upon their mining interests — as a speculative venture with the potential of quick profit."¹⁰

Newcomers to the Santa Clara Valley — squatters, and hopeful farmers — generally resented the large land owners. Not only was the cost of land in Santa Clara County kept high because the large land owners had no interest in selling any of their acreage, many small farmers alleged that speculative wheat farmers, operating on a large scale, both underutilized and neglected the valley's fertile soil, a prodigious resource.

The frustration many Santa Clara County residents felt towards the wheat growers appears in their letters to the Secretary of the California State Agricultural Society. In 1864, William O'Donnell of San Jose wrote: "it was astonishing to me last summer, in driving through our valley, to see so many acres of wheat and barley not worth cutting — the effect of shallow ploughing and late sowing."¹¹ Joseph S. Waller, criticized the wheat farmers' lack of attention to proper soil care: he cited a tract of three thousand, five hundred acres lying west of Mountain View, annually "sowed to grain:"

After careful inquiry, I cannot learn that one acre of land in this section of Santa Clara County has ever been summer fallowed. I refer to all the land lying west of Mountain View within a circuit for six miles, in which about three thousand five hundred acres of land are annually sowed to grain, chiefly wheat. . . . I am not a farmer, having always been accustomed to city life till within the past six years, and during my residence in the country have not raised a pound of grain, devoting my time wholly to pomological and horticultural pursuits; yet my experiences in working the ground of my orchard fully satisfy me that if the farmer in this county would be successful, he must summer fallow his grounds.¹²

With the possible exception of access to good land, no issue concerned Santa Clara County fruit growers in the developing years of the county's fruit industry more than transportation. In early California, fruit production for market was almost entirely

restricted to locations that had easy access to water routes. The population explosion of the gold rush created the first large-scale demand for fruit from Santa Clara County. We have seen that in the 1840s James F. Reed had resumed cultivation of the orchards of Mission San Jose that had become part of the public domain when the Mexican government disbanded the missions. In 1850 they were purchased by J. W. Redmond. Shortly afterwards, Redmond was selling his fruit for fifty cents a pound. Word of Redmond's success spread quickly, and local farmers, hoping to equal his success, began planting orchards of deciduous fruit in and around San Jose in the early 1850s.

Ancillary businesses and small-scale industries were formed throughout Santa Clara County in response to the blossoming fruit industry. Between 1851 and 1853 a number of nurseries were established, among them the Hope Nursery, the Railroad Nursery, the San Jose Valley Nursery, and the Stockton Ranch Nursery. Of particular interest is the Stockton Ranch Nursery, because among its founders was Louis Pellier.

Louis Pellier was a professional horticulturist who immigrated to San Jose from France in 1848. His brother Pierre joined him in 1853. Pierre returned to France shortly afterwards to marry, but also to acquire a long list of nursery stock requested by his brother. In 1856, Pierre Pellier returned to San Jose with his new bride and the nursery items that Louis had requested. Among the scions [tree graftings] was the hardy bud, *la petite prune d'Agen*, more commonly known as the French prune. Upon receiving the prune scions, Louis grafted the cuttings to native plum rootstocks and to Damson plum rootstocks that had been brought from the East by earlier settlers. These experiments

proved very successful, but the small fruit initially attracted little attention from growers producing larger, varieties of fresh deciduous fruit.

John Q. A. Ballou was one Santa Clara County orchardist who showed an early interest in the French prune. In 1853 Louis Pellier and Ballou were among a group of a dozen or so serious horticulturists who formed the Santa Clara Valley Horticulture Society, which met weekly to discuss all matters of fruit growth and production. Considering the early success of fresh fruit production, it comes as little surprise that the earliest focus of the Horticultural Society was on apples and pears.

During this period, fresh fruit growers who were able to carry their harvest by wagon to the port of Alviso, at the southern tip of the San Francisco Bay, and then transport it by way of the Sacramento River to the gold country could expect a reasonable to extraordinary return on their investment. Reports of fresh fruit selling for prices ranging from seventy-five cents a pound to, on rare occasions, three dollars *a piece* in and around Sacramento, spurred a period of orchard expansion and heavy production in Santa Clara County during the 1850s.¹³ So flourishing was the county's fruit production that fruit farmers were shocked by what happened near the end of the decade.

The harvest of 1858 exposed a major weakness in the California fresh fruit industry: production had exceeded consumption in central California, and fresh fruit glutted the market. Farmers who had received soaring profits in the mid-1850s now saw as much as half of their crop rot beneath the trees for lack of markets. In the course of only one season, growers in Santa Clara County were faced with the reality that, if they

did not find ways to extend the edible life of their fruit and find means to reach beyond the nearby markets, their prosperity was in jeopardy.

Although some growers in Santa Clara County turned to other occupations after the 1858 setback, county fruit production did continue to increase during the 1860s. By 1861, the number of deciduous fruit trees in the county had risen to more than 120,000. Adding to local fear of a repetition of the 1858 fiasco was the competition growers now faced state-wide. Sonoma County had more than 200,000 apple trees; Calaveras County had almost 300,000.¹⁴ A glimmer of hope for increased access to markets appeared in 1860 when rumors surfaced regarding the construction of a railroad between San Jose and San Francisco.

Rumors soon became fact when a group of San Francisco businessmen with interests in the Santa Clara County cattle and grain industries issued a \$200,000 bond to fund the building of a railroad from San Jose through Redwood City and San Mateo to San Francisco. Fruit growers rallied with wheat and cattle interests to pass the bill. The measure passed in the spring of 1861 with 1,495 votes in favor of the bond subscription, and 725 votes against. Work on the new San Francisco & San Jose Railroad began immediately and was completed in a flurry of fanfare and local rejoicing as citizens relished the sight of the first train chugging between the two cities on January 16, 1864. Expectations were raised even higher when plans were announced for a second San Jose-to-San Francisco line that promised even greater market access.

In 1863, the Western Pacific Railroad Company began building a portion of the transcontinental railroad between Sacramento and Oakland. Knowing the desire of local cattle and grain producers for direct access to the national line, the railroad company asked Santa Clara County residents to underwrite a \$150,000 bond to construct a branch of the new railroad from Niles to San Jose. Again, county residents were quick to approve the bond, and the new railroad was completed in September 1864. However, to the disappointment of local fruit growers, neither of the two railroads proved particularly beneficial to the county's developing fruit industry.

Owned by the Northern Division of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, the two South Bay railroads only skirted the perimeter of the Santa Clara County's fruit-producing district, forcing shippers to haul their fruit by wagon to San Jose, Santa Clara, or Milpitas before it could be shipped by railroad to San Francisco. In San Francisco the fruit would be reloaded onto wagons for transport to market. These transfers resulted in bruised and injured fruit and great loss to the farmer. During the 1860s, while the railroads had extended the markets for Santa Clara County fresh fruits, they had also revealed this serious drawback.

Nonetheless, fresh fruit production increased steadily throughout the decade until, in 1868, Santa Clara growers again faced an unfortunate fact: fresh fruit production in the state greatly exceeded market demand. As had happened a decade previously, so much fruit was grown that as much as fifty percent of the local crop was left to rot under the trees. Adding to the problems of over-production was the perishable nature of fresh fruit.

Lacking the technology for cold-storage transportation, fruit growers were limited to markets within a few hundred miles of their farms. However, not all county fruit growers were unprepared for the 1868 disaster.

From the time that John Ballou purchased fifty French prune tree scions from Louis Pellier in 1855, he began experimentation with methods for drying prunes. With his neighbor George W. Tarleton, Ballou experimented with a process of dipping the fresh prunes in a solution of lye and water. To their delight, they found that the skin of prunes dipped in the lye solution developed perforations that, when exposed to direct sunlight, allowed the prunes to dry several days faster than had previously been possible. In addition, the process did not darken the amber flesh of the fruit or cause the fruit sugar to caramelize. The result was a dried prune that was superior in appearance and color to any imported or domestic fruit available in the East. Marketing the fruit was the next challenge.

As early as 1859, Ballou shipped 130 pounds of dried prunes to San Francisco. Eight years later he shipped 500 pounds of dried fruit to eastern markets. Most impressive to the local growers was Ballou's shipment of eleven tons of dried prunes to the East Coast in 1868 — the year that other county orchardists farmers saw half their livelihood rotting under their trees because of glutted local markets. Ballou received eighteen to twenty cents a pound for these prunes.¹⁵ The orchardists were quick to understand the advantages of a less perishable crop that could withstand longer shipment.

These facts, together with statistical data accumulated for the dozen years after 1862, reveal an important trend.

Developing new orchards takes time. Figure 6 shows that, despite the setback of 1868, the production of all types of deciduous fresh fruit other than apricots increased between 1862 and 1874. This on-going increase signaled the local growers' confidence that they could overcome the challenges posed by a fresh fruit economy. Indeed, some of these difficulties were alleviated by the development of the local commercial canning industry that started in 1872. However, Figure 6 also shows the emergence of prunes as an up-and-coming commodity in the fruit culture of Santa Clara County. During the next decade more and more farmers adopted prunes as their fruit of choice. (It is interesting that the official agricultural census failed to record Ballou's small orchard of 200 prune trees in 1861. It was noted, as we have seen, by the Santa Clara County tax assessor.)

Year	Number of Trees						
	Apple	Apricot	Cherry	Pear	Peach	Plum	Prunes
1861*	60,000	10,000	3,000	25,000	15,000	5,000	0
1874**	10,437	3,724	19,397	36,117	45,836	30,412	6,531

Sources: *State Of California, *Journal Of Senate and Assembly*, (Sacramento: State of California, 1862), Table 3.

**State Of California, *Journal Of Senate and Assembly*, (Sacramento: State of California, 1874), 210.

Figure 6. Deciduous Fruit Trees in Santa Clara County 1862 and 1874

Adding to the favorable conditions that would rocket Santa Clara County's fruit production during the next two decades was the decision by local businessmen to fund

construction of a third railroad in the county especially to provide rapid transportation of Santa Clara County fruit to distant markets. In 1876, the Santa Clara Valley Railroad Company, privately funded under the leadership of A. E. Davis, provided a line from San Jose to the Alviso wharf. There, fast steam ships carried the fruit from Santa Clara County to the major transportation centers in San Francisco. The first run of the Santa Clara Valley Railroad was in May, 1876, and its success was immediate and lasting. With both improved processing and improved transportation facilities at the beginning of the 1880s, the Santa Clara County prune industry was ripe for an economic boom.

With hindsight, it is interesting to note that Leland Stanford was largely correct in his predictions. He was right on target in his forecast of population growth, technological advances, capital investment, and transportation, and in his conviction that California would become a national and world leader in the output of agricultural goods. Of this output, Santa Clara County prunes formed a not-too-modest part.

NOTES

¹ *California Journals of Senate and Assembly; Transactions of the California State Agricultural Society* (Sacramento: State of California, 1863), 45.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Legislature of the State of California, *Appendix to the Journals of Senate and Assembly of the Thirteenth Session of the Legislature of the State of California*, Table Of Statistics, Table 3 (Sacramento: State of California, 1858), 16.

⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publishing, 1996), 329.

⁶ April Halberstadt, "Orchard Tractors in Santa Clara County" (unpublished essay, San Jose Public Library, April 1997), 7.

⁷ Alan L. Olmstead, "An Overview of California Agricultural Mechanization, 1870-1930," *Agricultural History* 62, no. 3 (1988): 89.

⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁹ Timothy J. Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway: Reform Politics in San Jose, California, 1880-1920," *Southern California Quarterly* 74 (Spring 1994): 396.

¹⁰ Ibid., 380.

¹¹ *California Journals of Senate and Assembly; Transactions of the California State Agricultural Society* (Sacramento: State of California, 1863), 218.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story: A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc., 1967), 15.

¹⁴ Legislature of the State of California, *Appendix to Journals of Senate and Assembly of the Thirteenth Session of the Legislature of the State of California*, 274.

NOTES Continued

¹⁵ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 12.

CHAPTER 5

GROWING PAINS

The 1880s and 1890s was a time of phenomenal growth and turmoil for the Santa Clara County prune industry. Social and economic change, fueled by a rapid shift to small farms and the planting of over 3,000,000 trees, dramatically reshaped the county landscape and patterns of land ownership for decades to come. In addition, the increased fruit production, coupled with improved marketing and transportation systems, allowed California prunes to displace millions of tons of foreign prune imports. In Chapters Five and Six we will examine the ways the specialized requirements of the prune industry influenced the development of labor and marketing practices. In this chapter, we will look at the tasks the farmer faced in producing his crop.

Raising prunes, a farmer could expect to support himself and his family on a smaller plot of land than a wheat farmer could. But doing so was not a job for a novice. In a report sent to London in November, 1892 titled *Fruit Growing in California; A Warning*, the British consul to San Francisco, William Roberts, cautioned that “the public is warned most strongly against accepting the very highly colored statements as to the profits to be derived from fruit growing in California.”¹ Roberts emphasizes the difficulties of fruit farming: “The land requires the most thorough farming . . . Add to this the most careful and skillful gardening which the management of fruit trees requires, and

there are two occupations combined, each of them requiring much hard work, much knowledge and experience.”² He analyzed the operations needed to support an established fruit orchard: plowing the land twice, harrowing once, hoeing around each tree once, cultivating four times, pruning each tree, thinning each tree, and when required, irrigating the fields — thus the hard work. A report from the California State Board of Agriculture, published in the same year as this warning, pointed out the need Roberts detected for “much knowledge and experience.” The report makes it obvious that raising a successful prune crop was an occupation for an orchardist with specialized skills, not for an agricultural generalist.

Although its analysis of the process did not completely agree with Roberts, the report of the California State Board of Horticulture confirmed the labor-intensive character of fruit growing, detailing the planting, cultivation, and processing of prunes. The report, which read like an instructional guide to prune production, began by addressing the soil requirements of a new orchard: the farmer should select a light, deep, sandy loam, well drained and not too moist. Preparation of the land should begin in early fall with a deep plowing:

If it is desired to plant the land immediately after breaking up, the work should be commenced as early in the fall as it is possible to do deep plowing, and the ground should be stirred to a depth of ten to twelve inches or more, if practicable, and should afterwards be thoroughly harrowed. If it is still early, cross-plow deeply and follow with subsoil plow, working to a depth of fourteen inches or more. Harrow again thoroughly and the land is ready for trees.³

Roberts’ report advised the planter to consider three objectives in laying out the orchard: symmetry of appearance, economy of space, and facility for future care. It also

indicated that of the three systems of planting in general practice, hexagonal, quincunx, and square, the square pattern was preferred. The goal was to plant the trees in straight rows with enough space for growth and ongoing cultivation — 108 trees to an acre with a distance of twenty feet between trees.⁴ Accomplishing this seemingly simple goal required significant skill and knowledge.

The California State Board of Horticulture advised that after the orchard had been surveyed, spikes should be driven into the spots where the root stock would be planted. The preferred root stock in Santa Clara County was the French Myrobalan, also known as the cherry plum (*Prunus myrobalana*). The trees were planted in round holes approximately one foot deep. After the root stock was secure in the ground, three or four buds were grafted to the root stock.⁵ The French prune, *la petite prune d'Agen*, was the bud of choice for grafting.⁶ After grafting, the trees were cut back to approximately eighteen inches. During the first year, lower bud growth was usually trimmed off to encourage the growth of a higher stalk that provided shade necessary for the new tree.⁷ The budding season occurred from the beginning of July to the end of August.

During the first three years of its life the tree required expert pruning to ensure proper growth. The report suggests that the “idea of pruning the prune tree is to make a handsome tree with plenty of limbs, and prune it back so that it will give limbs the great strength and bearing space. . . . [T]he tree should not be thinned out much unless the limbs cross, because when they begin to bear the tree opens very nicely.”⁸ There were two schools of pruning: high pruning or low pruning. Farmers who preferred high pruning argued that during cultivation horses could more easily pull plows through an

orchard with high branches, allowing them to till closer to the trees and thus reducing the need for manual hoeing near the trunk. Advocates of low pruning argued that tree limbs heavy with fruit could be supported by the ground, and that the fruit picking was much easier. When the report was issued in 1892, low pruning was the preferred method. With either approach, pruning was a labor-intensive process that was annually necessary for maximum production.

Another labor-demanding process facing the county prune farmer was irrigation. In 1890 the eleventh United States census report on *Agriculture By Irrigation* noted that in Santa Clara County, “irrigation is practiced to a small extent.”⁹ This observation is understandable when one compares the 6,686 acres irrigated in Santa Clara County with the 168,455 acres irrigated in Tulare County. However, it is important to consider that the Santa Clara County Assessor’s Report for 1878 and 1879 reported no irrigation in the county in the previous decade. Therefore, it seems that the majority, if not all, of the irrigation reported in Santa Clara in 1890 had been initiated during the 1880s and was to a large extent serving fruit growers. Prior to the 1880s county growers either planted fruit trees on land with adequate water supplies, or they failed. Of the two forms of orchard irrigation, row and basin, basin irrigation was universally used throughout Santa Clara County.¹⁰

Basin irrigation required the irrigator first to survey the orchard, determine level areas, and define them by marking the bordering trees of a level area with an X of a specific color. Depending on the contour of the land, an orchard might contain only a few or many different level sections. Once these level sections were identified, workers built

berms between the like-colored Xs to create level sections. They then dug one or more irrigation ditches through the orchard so that the ditches fed each of the different level sections within the orchard. When water was channeled to the ditches one-by-one, the level sections would be flooded. The moisture had to penetrate at least seven inches into the fertile soil. The common practice was to irrigate an orchard twice, once in the early spring and once in the summer.¹¹

Lee Lester, whose family has been producing prunes in the Santa Clara County since 1883, explains that once the irrigation process began, it required round-the-clock management. Customarily, the first irrigation began around April 20 and ended by May 15. The second started by June 1, the goal being to complete all irrigation before the first week of July. Fruit that was under-watered would be predictably smaller than that receiving adequate water. Watering too late in the season could cause the skin of the prune to crack prematurely, resulting in dried fruit of an inferior quality.

Watering mistakes were not the only problems that plagued farmers. Insects and disease were constant worries. During the course of an average year, growers faced the possibility of having to replace between three and ten percent of the trees in an orchard as the result of pestilence.¹² Of particular concern was the destructive tree scale. "Some orchards," it was reported by the State, "have not produced good crops on account of having been so badly infested with these pests, the quantity of scale preventing fruit from growing large and being marketable."¹³ Farmers found themselves in the role of detective and exterminator — but they were not alone in their struggle. By the mid-1880s, state and private agencies were focusing on the pest problem. In 1887 the State of California

requested that farmers with questions regarding infestation write “the State Fruit Inspector and send him a specimen bug and he will aid you.”¹⁴

Need fostered innovation. In 1883, John Bean migrated to Los Gatos from Springfield, Ohio. After purchasing an orchard, he found it plagued with scale and began searching for a spray applicator capable of resolving the problem. To his frustration, the only pumps available were extremely small and practically useless. Bean, having earlier invented a continuous-flow turbine pump for windmills, began developing a pump capable of delivering a high-pressure spray. He improved his design over a number of years, and the sprayer proved very popular at numerous state fairs in the late 1890s. To the delight of local farmers, the pump was eventually patented in 1904.

Harvesting prunes was an arduous task that consisted of picking and grading the fruit. The fruit was usually allowed to fall to the ground. Crews of pickers started at one end of the orchard and moved beneath the trees, stooping over as they worked the orchard from one end to the other. After completing the first picking, field workers would repeat the process as many as eight or ten times, gathering the ripest fruit each time.¹⁵ Workers, who often included the farmer’s wife and children as well as hired hands, labored continually through the harvest season that began in early July and ran into August.

Once the fruit was picked, it was graded by size before drying to ensure uniformity of evaporation, because fruit of similar size tends to dry at the same rate. Grading devices were made with wire screens or some other sturdy mesh. The grader also removed twigs, leaves, or other foreign material.

After grading, the prunes were dipped — submerged for about thirty seconds in a mixture of boiling lye and water — to remove the bloom, fill the pores, and at the same time crack the skin of the fruit so that the evaporation process would take place more rapidly. When the fruit was removed from the boil, the scalded prunes were dipped into a vat of fresh water to cool the fruit and remove any excess lye in preparation for drying.

A number of evaporating machines were tried in the county before 1885, but none proved more effective than the sun. Sun drying required a vast area that had full sun exposure throughout the day. Prunes were spread out in a single layer onto large, flat trays that generally required two men to move. The Frank Buxton Packers in Campbell were typical dryers who would lay out as many as ten thousand trays over twenty acres of land.¹⁶ The sight of thousands of trays spread out with dark, shiny prunes attracted many visitors to the Santa Clara Valley in the early fall.

Finishing was the final step needed to complete the prune drying process. It consisted of dipping the prunes into a second bath of boiling solution, this time a brine of water and salt. This second bath destroyed any contamination from insects during drying, softened the fruit, and gave it a fresh, polished appearance.¹⁷ When the drying process was complete, the fruit was ready for packing.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century prunes were packed in a variety of ways depending on the intended market. Much of the fruit was packed in boxes of ten, twenty-five, or fifty pounds for shipment to local markets. Larger quantities were packaged in hundred-pound sacks for shipment to eastern and foreign markets. Great care was taken to ensure that all visible moisture between the layers of fruit had

evaporated. Damp packs would result in mold that lessened or destroyed the pack's value.

County fruit growers realized quickly that the intensive capital and labor requirements needed to grow fruit generally necessitated smaller farms than had grain production. Faced with increased competition in the national and global grain market and with declining local yields, grain farmers in Santa Clara County began selling off large parts of their estates in the late nineteenth century. When portions of the Murphy and Dunne estates were subdivided around 1890, tens of thousands of new acres were put into orchards. The effect of these transactions on the size of the typical farm in Santa Clara County is dramatically shown in Figure 7, which charts the steady increase in the ratio of small farms to large farms from 1880 to 1920. An analysis of the United States Agricultural Census of 1910 indicates that seventy percent of all Santa Clara County farms operated with less than fifty acres of land, and that trend continued for decades to come. Ultimately, the relatively small size of most prune-producing operations led to greater competition among the increasing number of farmers who were migrating to California with hopes of making their own fortunes in the fabulous prune industry of the Santa Clara County.¹⁸

Decade	Less Than 100 Acres	More Than 100 Acres
1880	721	771
1890	1,421	750
1900	3,057	938
1910	3,390	825
1920	4,390	626

Source: Jan Otto Marius Brooke, *The Santa Clara Valley, California: A Study in Landscape Changes* (Utrecht: Uitgevers, 1932), 82.

Figure 7. Number of Farms in Santa Clara County, Classified by Size, 1880 — 1920¹⁹

These farms may have been small compared to the great wheat farms they supplanted, but they were indeed valuable. In his history of the Sunsweet fruit packing organization, Robert Couchman quotes contemporary sources that claimed “an ordinary good orchard in Santa Clara County will yield a net profit of \$125 an acre, and generally more than this. Very frequently, it reaches from \$300 to \$500 an acre, and instances are not rare where \$800 to \$1000 has been realized from a single acre.”²⁰ In 1894,

Couchman points out, profits for bearing orchards in Santa Clara County were:

Held at from \$500 to \$1000 an acre, according to character. Take those of the highest price and compare them with improved farms in the East that are held at \$100 per acre. It is an exceptional case where the eastern farm will produce a net profit of \$5 per acre. The Santa Clara County orchards will regularly produce a net profit of from \$250 to \$400 per acre. . . . A first class eastern farm of 100 acres will cost \$10,000. A first class orchard of 10 acres in Santa Clara County will cost the same amount of money. The eastern farm will yield a net annual income of \$500 while the income from the orchard will be \$2,500.²¹

Biographical sketches in the 1888 vanity publication, *Pen Pictures From the Garden of the World; or, Santa Clara County, California*, provide information on a number of county orchard transactions in the 1870s and 1880s that substantiate some of Couchman's data regarding the cost of orchard land. In 1884, for example, Nathan Lester purchased 31.4 acres of orchards on the corner of Lincoln and Curtner Avenues for \$13,000, or \$414 an acre.²² In 1895, John P. Kock purchased eleven acres of orchards for \$750 dollars an acre;²³ Thomas B. Keesling reported buying twenty acres for \$500 an acre;²⁴ and Martin S. Gibson paid \$6,500, or \$382 an acre, for seventeen acres covered with prunes, apricot, peach, and cherry orchards.²⁵

The reports that *Pen Pictures* presents of the income realized from these acres are less glowing. Professor George W. Worthen wrote that in one unspecified year he "sold a crop of French prunes, gathered from three-quarters of an acre, for \$650."²⁶ More typical, however, are accounts such as those of Rawley E. Dent, who reported receiving \$100 dollars an acre for his 1884 prune and apricot crop.²⁷ In 1887 Edward J. Delaney of San Jose reported receiving payment of \$1,500 (\$200 per ton) for his 15,000 pounds of prunes.²⁸ In the same year, William Shelly of Los Gatos received \$715 (\$42 per ton) for his seventeen-ton prune crop,²⁹ and the Reverend L. W. Krahrl sold twenty-four tons of prunes that year for \$960 dollars (\$40 per ton).³⁰

The California State Board of Horticulture reported for 1891 that, with nature's cooperation and a lot of hard work, "the average yield of Santa Clara prune trees was about three hundred pounds per tree. In some instances six hundred to eight hundred pounds."³¹ At the lowest of these estimates, a farmer who had performed an average job

of orchard management would harvest 30,000 pounds of fresh prunes per acre. Figure 8 shows that in 1890 fifty-four percent of Santa Clara County farms were smaller than forty acres. It also suggests that many Santa Clara County prune farmers were producing average harvests in excess of 300,000 pounds (150 tons) of fruit annually.

Number Of Tracts	Acreage
1,398	10 acres or less
1,448	10 to 40
252	40 to 60
588	60 to 100
563	100 to 160
307	160 to 240
209	240 to 320
169	320 to 400
309	400 or more

Source: *Commercial History Of San Jose* (San Jose: Pacific Press for Metropolitan Publishing Co., 1892), 57 — 58.³²

Figure 8. Santa Clara County Farm Size, 1890

By 1890 nearly 3,000,000 of the county's 4,495,945 fruit trees were prunes, and the industry had developed some political influence.³³ Federal tariffs, promoted largely by California interests, effectively reduced foreign prune imports from 34,281,322 pounds in 1891 to only 443,457 pounds in 1900 — a loss for foreign importers that was largely replaced by competitively-priced California prunes.³⁴

When John Ballou shipped eleven tons of dried prunes to the East in 1867, he was directly involved in planting, cultivating, harvesting, dipping, drying, and shipping his product. What Ballou and other early county orchardists learned from their experience dating back to the 1850s was that prune production was labor and capital intensive. These labor intensive and specialized processes — the orchard management, the

harvesting, and the prune drying and packaging — resulted in opportunities to use transient seasonal labor and to develop ancillary industries that we will discuss in the following chapters.

NOTES

¹ William Roberts, "Fruit Growing in California: A Warning," *Fortnightly Review* 55 (1893): 621.

² Ibid.

³ State of California, *Annual Report of the State Board of Horticulture for 1891* (Sacramento: State of California, 1892), 98.

⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵ Ibid., 113 — 14.

⁶ Ibid., 104 — 5.

⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ United States Population Census for 1890, "Report on Agricultural by Irrigation in the Western Part of the United States" (Washington DC: GPO, 1894), 79.

¹⁰ Lee Lester, Interview by William Bauerle, June 6, 1998, San Jose, California.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Legislature of the State of California, *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Twenty-Eighth Session*, vol 6 (Sacramento: State of California, 1903), 211.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶ Ibid., 120.

¹⁷ Ibid., 121.

NOTES Continued

¹⁸ Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story; A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc., 1967), 22. In 1890, the California Bureau of Labor Statistics listed five Santa Clara County fruit processing plants. Couchman references a correspondence from the California Fruit Growers Association indicating that by 1907 Santa Clara Valley growers were within transport distance of about fifty dried fruit packers, all of whom were financially strong.

¹⁹ Jan Otto Marius Brooke, *The Santa Clara Valley, California: A Study in Landscape Changes* (Utrecht: Uitgevers, 1932), 36.

²⁰ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² H.S. Foote, ed., *Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World; or, Santa Clara County, California* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1888), 576.

²³ *Ibid.*, 579.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 517.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 448.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 426.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 514.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 388.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 424.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 462.

³¹ State Of California, *Annual Report of the State Board of Horticulture for 1891*, 117.

³² *Commercial History of San Jose* (San Jose: Pacific Press for Metropolitan Publishing Co., 1892), 57 — 58. The data in this figure does not agree with that of Brooke presented in Figure 7, but both sets of figures demonstrate the pronounced trend towards smaller farms.

NOTES Continued

³³ Clyde Arbuckle, *History Of San Jose* (San Jose: Smith & McKay Printing Co., 1985), 162.

³⁴ State Of California, *Official Report of the Twenty-Eighth Fruit-Growers' Convention* (Sacramento: State of California, 1903), 61.

CHAPTER 6

DIRT CHEAP

We have degraded a certain class of labor, and there isn't a man who lives in any agricultural locality who wants to get in and do this work¹

— A.N. Judd, Watsonville prune grower, 1902

As Santa Clara County moved from a wheat-based to an orchard-based economy in the second half of the nineteenth century, an adequate supply of cheap seasonal labor became essential to an orchardist's financial success. Applying capitalist principles, a farmer could argue that he had the right, if not a moral obligation to his consumers, to secure the cheapest possible labor to harvest his crop. Applying the same principles, the farmer could reasonably contend that once the laborer left his farm, the interaction between the laborer and society was of little concern to him. The Santa Clara County prune growers found the necessary labor in a succession of immigrant groups. However, the pool of cheap labor that kept the orchardist in business represented a threat both to the workers, whose wages were undercut, and to the later-arriving and land-hungry smaller farmers, who felt that existence of the established large-scale orchardists strangled their economic opportunities. Therefore, each immigrant group in turn was subjected to ridicule, violence, political attacks, and social rejection while it worked for wages no one else would accept at jobs no one else would perform.

During harvest season, abundant labor was crucial to the prune growers' commercial success. The perishable nature of prunes requires that after ripening the entire crop must be picked within a matter of weeks. A farmer might need as many as fifty or more additional workers to harvest his crop, depending on the number of prune-producing acres. Holding down labor costs was essential to the growers, because it was the one significant expense that farmers could directly control. Santa Clara County farmers learned early that both labor costs and prune production benefited from an accessible, dependable, and abundant labor supply. There is little wonder that acquiring and protecting a source of cheap, competent labor was a continuing concern of local growers.

Santa Clara Valley labor costs rocketed immediately after gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in 1848. Within days, virtually every male living in San Jose migrated to the Sierra foothills.² Labor, which by the 1870s would be available for as little as one to two dollars a day, suddenly cost between ten and eighteen dollars daily. "Grandma" Bascom, a Santa Clara County pioneer, paid her head carpenter sixteen dollars a day to build her Santa Clara home in 1852. Reflecting on the inflated economy of the gold rush days, Bascom recalled in 1887 that "the house cost us \$10,000. It would cost \$1,000 today. We bought seeds to plant a garden and an ounce of onion seed cost an ounce of gold! A mule cost \$300; a horse, \$400."³

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, most efforts to attract labor to California were targeted toward the white farmers of the midwestern and eastern United States and Europe. In January 1857 the *California Farmer* reported that a group of Californians was

in New York attempting to encourage immigration to California.⁴ In 1869 the California Immigrant Union was incorporated to encourage men with small farms in the midwestern and eastern United States to come to California in the hope that they would supply the required agricultural labor.⁵ By 1870 the Union was distributing its pamphlet *All About California* throughout the eastern United States.⁶ That such farmers did in fact successfully migrate to Santa Clara County during this period is chronicled in the numerous biographical sketches appearing in *Pen Pictures From The Garden of the World*, published in 1888.⁷

Typical of the hundreds of stories of Americans and Europeans migrating to Santa Clara County from 1850 through much of the 1880s is a biographical sketch of William Booth. Lured by tales of California wealth, William left his father's farm for California in 1851 and upon arriving in Sacramento immediately secured work mining gold. Quickly disenchanted with the arduous work, Booth quit the mines after only five days. Unsuccessful at finding better work in Sacramento, impoverished, and sick, Booth moved to Santa Clara County in the autumn of 1852.

In the spring of 1853, having regained his health, Booth was ready to test the county's economy. He first worked as a laborer for wheat farmers. In time Booth was able to save enough money to purchase land in the Alviso district. By 1888 he owned a farm of 640 acres, 23 acres of which were dedicated to orchards, with prunes the predominant crop. Booth's very success demonstrates that ambitious and industrious immigrants from the East did not represent a reliable, long-term supply of agricultural labor available at wages low enough to keep Santa Clara County fruit competitive. As a

result, the established orchardists turned to Chinese labor to harvest the expanding production.⁸

Before the Chinese provided a surplus of agricultural labor between 1869 and 1881, fruit farmers approached harvest time with persistent labor concerns. Finding temporary help during prosperous times was difficult because of the arduous, low-paying nature of the harvest work. To acquire the help necessary to harvest their fruit, farmers had to negotiate independently with individual laborers, typically providing housing and paying wages consistently higher than the Chinese later asked. Furthermore, white laborers were considered unreliable — too independent and prone to grumbling, and there was no guarantee that they would remain throughout the entire harvest. Although white laborers would always form a component of the agricultural work-force, their ability to move into better jobs and to draw higher wages made them less attractive employees to farmers than the powerless workers who were obligated to harvest fruit for whatever wages the representative of the Six Companies negotiated. With the arrival of large number of Chinese laborers in the late 1860s, the outlook for fruit farmers improved rapidly.

Like their European and American counterparts, many Chinese looked to the Golden State for economic opportunity and began migrating to California in significant numbers.⁹ A few Chinese had, or were able to borrow from relatives, the money needed to finance the passage to America. However, most were forced to turn to merchant brokers who formed part of a “credit-ticket” system.¹⁰ Indebted immigrants who reached

San Francisco immediately fell under the control of the Chinese Six Companies in that city.

Formed in the early 1850s, the Chinese Six Companies assumed the leadership of the Chinese community in America. In addition to providing legal and housing assistance to Chinese, the Companies acted as a labor networking organization for American businesses wanting Chinese laborers. Wealthy San Francisco merchants, in connection with even wealthier Chinese merchants, provided the Six Companies' leadership; they were in turn supported by a hierarchy of interpreters, agents, gang foreman, and laborers.¹¹

Some California farmers recognized early the potential of Chinese labor. In 1854, when California wheat production was increasing faster than the labor available to harvest it, one farmer suggested that the Chinese farm worker should "be to California what the African has been to the South."¹² Employers argued that Chinese workers were docile, industrious, trustworthy, and reliable. "Moreover, the Chinese were said to be experienced at agricultural tasks, to live very simply, to be willing to accept seasonal employment, to be employable through gang bosses or labor contractors who also provided immediate supervision, to be available in unlimited numbers if actively recruited and, most important, to work for lower wages than any other group of laborers in the state was willing to accept."¹³ So important were the Chinese to California agriculture that in his landmark 1939 history, *Factories in the Field*, Carey McWilliams writes: "It is quite apparent . . . that the transition from wheat to fruit acreage would have

been delayed for a quarter of a century, had it not been for the presence of the Chinese in California.”¹⁴

The Six Companies' ability to provide large quantities of affordable labor on demand resulted in an increased reliance on Chinese labor throughout the 1850s. Impressed with the cheapness and performance of Chinese labor, California businesses began distributing leaflets in Canton that promised Chinese “good wages in Gum San.”¹⁵ The Six Companies had such a powerful influence over the shipping lines between California and China that a universal protocol existed on the Pacific Coast under which no Chinese was allowed to leave California for China without a clearance from the Six Companies.¹⁶

The organized Chinese labor force was ideal for the intensive, temporary labor demands of fruit farming. As farmers approached harvest time, they needed only to contact the local Chinese boss or “head boy” to negotiate an employment contract that included the number of workers needed, the price, and the start date. A Chinese labor unit would arrive on the specified day and work until the harvest was complete. All transactions between the farmer and the Chinese laborers, including hiring, discipline, firing, and payment, were made through the “head boy.” When their work was completed, the Chinese vanished, moving on to other jobs or back into a Chinese settlement.

The growth of the Santa Clara County Chinese population during the 1860s was dramatic. Between 1860 and 1870 the overall population of Santa Clara County increased from 12,000 to 28,000. Over the same period, the Chinese population

increased from 22 to 1,525. In 1870 the largest concentration of Chinese residents (532 people) in the county lived in San Jose's Chinatown.¹⁷ White laborers felt threatened not only by the number of Chinese immigrants, but also by their ability to organize and compete effectively for work once performed by white labor. The rapidly growing Chinese population of Santa Clara County became a pawn in the struggle between entrenched interests and county residents who were dissatisfied with the status quo.

Newly arrived settlers, who had come to the county with hopes of owning their own farms, instead found large tracts of land already owned by a few prominent families — the Murphys being the most notable. By 1861, the publisher of *The San Jose Mercury*, James J. Owen, was using his daily newspaper to promote the development of San Jose. Anxious to attract new money to the county, Owen argued that the price of land was too high and lobbied for improved city services that would attract new businesses.¹⁸ These attempts came into direct conflict with the Murphy empire.

The Murphy family presented the comforting vision of a landed Irish California aristocracy, men of baronial holdings whose broad acres contrasted so sharply with the landless impoverishment of the Irish in their homeland."¹⁹ By 1870, Martin Murphy, Jr., owned 90,000 acres of choice county farm land, of which only 3,000 acres were actively farmed in any given year.²⁰ The Murphys considered the existence of Chinese labor a direct threat, because Chinese labor could be employed cheaply to clear fields and plant orchards. Where that land would come from worried the Murphys.²¹

Recognizing the need for cheap labor to support the county's burgeoning orchard production, Owen wrote in the *San Jose Mercury* on March 4, 1869, that "the labor which

we employ them [Chinese] to perform would go unperformed if prevailing rates for white labor were required to be paid for that class of work. On the other hand we think it can be shown that the white laborer is actually benefited, and the sphere of his opportunities for employment actually enlarged by the employment of Chinese labor.” By these comments, Owen unwittingly provided fuel for a fierce anti-Chinese campaign by local labor interests and the Murphys. Steven de Lacy, writing in his *Democratic and Workingmen's Herald*, labeled Owens and his associates “morally depraved and un-American.”²² The *San Jose Herald*, mouthpiece of the Murphy interests, ran numerous articles during the 1870s denouncing the Chinese and promoting white superiority. In one case, the *Herald* informed its readers that “there is nothing curious or strange about the fact that the opposition to Chinamen in this country comes from the laboring classes.”²³ The Murphys and other anti-progressive, anti-Chinese interests were able to portray the Chinese as the common enemy of large land-owners and white workingmen alike and eventually to force action by the state government.²⁴

The potential effect of the socio-political pressures against the Chinese on the prune growers' profit was enormous. Throughout the 1870s, despite the united efforts of organized labor and large land interests to reverse the steady flow of Chinese immigration, the Chinese population of Santa Clara County increased 175 percent, from 1,525 in 1870 to 2,695 in 1880,²⁵ giving the county the third largest increase in Chinese population in California.²⁶ Only the cities of San Francisco (9,715) and Sacramento (1,296) experienced greater growth. In addition to the resident labor force, other Chinese workers rode the train south from San Francisco to work in the county's fruit industry.

Sucheng Chan has estimated that, based on the manuscript census and other data, in the peak harvest days of 1880 as much as 55.2 percent of the farm labor in Santa Clara County was performed by Chinese workers, the great majority of it in orchards.²⁷ During the prune harvests of that decade the Chinese settlements of Santa Clara County doubled in size. San Jose's Chinatown was especially active, as several thousand new workers arrived right at harvest time.²⁸

As Carey McWilliams explains: "From the growers' point of view, the situation was not only desirable, it was well-nigh perfect. The Chinese, being a despised minority fighting for the mere right to exist in a hostile territory, could be employed at subsistence wages."²⁹ The extent to which local growers exploited this labor can be seen in the comments of an 1868 fruit grower who wrote: "Poor John spreads a dirty tent in some corner of the field near water, sleeps on the ground, works by the star-light, lives on rice of his own cooking."³⁰ Although county prune growers did not at first denounce anti-Chinese rhetoric, their behavior reflects a steady resistance to any power that would impede their ability to exploit cheap labor.

Active state and local farmers' resistance to anti-Chinese actions and rhetoric materialized in the late 1870s and lasted well after the Chinese were no longer a viable labor source. In direct opposition to white labor interests, the *Pacific Rural Press*, a leading farmer-advocate journal published in San Francisco, reported in 1872 that "it is a notorious fact that numbers of white men who claim to be competent farm hands, and hire themselves out for labor in the harvest fields and in the plowing season, are positively not as intelligent as regards the prosecutions of ordinary farm labor as are the darker colored

'heathen Chinese'."³¹ William Blackwood, an orchardist who ardently defended the use of Chinese labor both before and after the Exclusionary Act of 1882, argued that large-scale agriculture in California could not survive on a profitable basis without an adequate supply of cheap Chinese labor.³² A Congressman-elect announced on his departure to Washington in December 1881 that he had been approached by "quite a number of fruit raisers who protested against the exclusion of the Chinese."³³

However, these protests were unavailing. Responding to increased anti-Chinese pressure, Congress formed a committee to investigate the problems associated with Chinese immigration. Over the loud criticism of California farmers, the committee presented Congress with the Fifteen Passenger Bill, under which no vessel was allowed to take on board more than fifteen Chinese passengers with the intention of bringing them to America.³⁴ The committee's final product was the Chinese Exclusionary Act, signed on May 6, 1882. This act suspended the entry of Chinese laborers to the United States for ten years and required identification and registration of Chinese nationals already in the United States. However, despite pressure from organized labor groups and threats of boycott, prune growers in Santa Clara County continued to employ Chinese labor. More and more farmers began to realize how deeply the loss of cheap labor would cut into their overall wealth.³⁵

Farmers in the 1880s had good reason to be seriously concerned that reduced access to cheap Chinese labor would severely reduce the value of their farms. By 1880 California orchard land was valued at between two hundred dollars and three hundred dollars an acre. Estimates included in the notes of the California Fruit Growers

Convention during the 1880s projected that had this orchard land been used for any other purpose, its value would have plummeted to between twenty-five dollars and fifty dollars an acre.³⁶ But to keep the land in productive orchards, cheap seasonal labor was necessary. Seeing their prosperity linked to that of the orchardists, state business associations renewed their efforts to attract more acceptable forms of labor to the state.

Approximately a year after the Chinese Exclusionary Act became law, the *Pacific Rural Press* extolled the “vigorous work” being taken by the Immigration Association of California to encourage immigration to California from the eastern United States and from Europe.³⁷ The Association, sponsored by San Francisco businessmen, reported that it had purchased the personal addresses of over 20,000 farmers, from every county in the western, middle, eastern, and New England states, and had sent out more than 25,000 pamphlets describing opportunities in California. In addition, the Association had sent its pamphlets, translated into the native tongue of the recipients, to most European countries. Included in the pamphlet was a listing by county of public land available in California. The pamphlet represented Santa Clara County as having 150,000 acres of available public land offerings,³⁸ but arriving settlers often found something less than had been promised.³⁹ Although extremely beneficial to Santa Clara County real-estate interests, the Association's immigration program heightened, rather than reduced, the demand for cheap farm labor. The number of Santa Clara County farms increased between 1880 and 1890 by 685,⁴⁰ while the Chinese population rose by only twenty eight persons, to 2,728.⁴¹

During the first five years of the decade there were no apparent signs of a labor shortage, but Santa Clara County farmers realized that hard times might well be ahead. At the September, 1883, meeting of the California State Horticulture Society, fruit growers discussed the obvious fact that they were planting in excess of future labor supplies and urged slowing the expansion. From 1884 to 1886, the industrial depression, although centered in the eastern United States, appears to have augmented the local labor supply. On March 17, 1883, shortly after the Exclusionary Act was signed, the *Pacific Rural Press* published a half-page article under the simple title, "Tramps." During certain times of the year, the article asserted, when the days turned "warm" and the weather was "beautiful," the state found itself besieged "from all parts of the country with the annoyance from tramps." To the *Pacific Rural Press*, these were not the yeoman farmers the Immigrant Association sought to encourage. Rather, to the *Pacific Rural Press*, there was "no doubt about the fact that such beggars and bummers we have described are public nuisances, and should in some way be removed from society."⁴² Such attitudes served effectively to devalue a source of seasonal labor — most commonly referred to as "tramp labor" — on which the growers in Santa Clara County would come to rely heavily.

The anticipated labor shortages did not appear until late in the decade. As the number of farms increased and competition for the remaining Chinese labor grew more intense, local farmers became more sensitive to renewed anti-Chinese activity. It can be safely assumed the displaced white industrial labor force fostered anti-Chinese feeling.

By the mid-1880s, anti-Chinese attacks resumed and intensified. In March 1886 the Non-Partisan Anti-Chinese Organization met in Sacramento to promote the absolute prohibition and removal of all Chinese from California.⁴³ That same month, San Jose Mayor C. W. Brefogle and the entire city council approved a public order declaring Chinatown a “public nuisance.”⁴⁴ Fueled by sensationalized local newspaper stories of Chinese intemperance and horrendous crimes, local contempt for Chinese culminated when, in May 1887, the second arson blaze in as many decades destroyed San Jose’s Chinatown.⁴⁵ In response, the Santa Clara Horticultural Association resolved that organization must confront organization. Consequently, in the following month the Fruit Growers and Citizens Defense Association of Santa Clara County was organized with the purpose of preventing interference with county fruit production and resisting boycotts.⁴⁶

The county fruit growers’ protection of Chinese labor was too little, too late, and by the late summer of 1887, local prune growers were trying to find new sources of cheap labor. To harvest the largest-ever prune and apricot crops, fruit growers in Santa Clara County worked out an arrangement with the trustees of the local schools to extend summer vacation so that women and children could work in the fields. One witness to the 1887 harvest lamented: “Last year [1887] Chinese, school children, tramps, and all were unable to prevent hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of fruit from wasting.”⁴⁷

By the end of the 1888 prune harvest local growers were dissatisfied with their pool of cheap harvest labor. Juveniles, especially boys, required the farmers to exert an entirely new level of discipline and supervision. Employing women and children presented new requirements for food, water, housing and sanitation that farmers had not

previously had to provide. To the good fortune of prune producers in the Santa Clara County, local labor unrest, initiated by San Francisco labor unions in 1889, resulted in strikes and boycotts just at the onset of a national depression. Accordingly, agricultural economist Varden Fuller writes: "This long period of labor strife and depression was to be the principal factor in providing agriculture with an abundant labor supply, with the result that specialization and intensity of cultivation were not only enabled to be perpetuated but also to be expanded."⁴⁸

Evidence of this expansion was reported by the California State Board of Horticulture. In 1892 the Board estimated that "when the [prune] trees now growing in Santa Clara County alone shall have matured, the annual product will be over forty million pounds of dried fruit . . . and while Santa Clara is still, and probably will always be, the center and most important section of this industry, it is not now the only prune county of the State."⁴⁹ When the United States Department of Agriculture conducted its first California labor supply survey in 1892, it reported, "no instance of real shortage, and in most localities supply exceeded demand."⁵⁰

Anti-Chinese activities continued. In June, 1893, anti-Chinese radicals damaged the property of some of the county's most prestigious prune growers. On the evening of June 8, 1893, the barn and approximately sixty tons of hay belonging to R. D. Fox, a prominent county nurseryman and an active member of the Santa Clara Valley Agricultural Society, were destroyed by arson. The same night, the barn of J. Z. A. Ballou, one of the county's foremost prune specialists and the first grower to ship prunes east in 1867, was destroyed by anti-Chinese elements. Other victims included A. Z.

Edwards of Alviso, whose cabin built with the support of Chinese labor was torched; Mrs. Ogier, who lost her hay barn and between thirty and forty tons of hay; and others who continued to employ Chinese labor despite public opposition.⁵¹

In 1893, after the passage of the Geary Act, that demanded sterner enforcement and a ten-year extension of the Exclusionary Act, anti-Chinese agitation appears to have had only minor effect on state and local dried prune production.⁵² Figure 9 shows that dried prune production in 1893 and 1894, the two years of the most intense anti-Chinese agitation, exceeded 40,000,000 pounds annually and that, with only minor fluctuations, production climbed to a new record of 174,000,000 pounds in 1900. A significant reason for the continued increase in production during this unsettled period was the rapid inclusion of Japanese labor in California's prune industry.⁵³

Source: *Statistical Report Of The California State Board of Agriculture*, 1915, 157.

Figure 9. Santa Clara Dried Prune Production 1891 to 1900

Japanese labor could not have arrived at a more opportune time for local prune farmers.⁵⁴ The Chinese labor force had been declining in California since 1883, while

prune production was expanding. The first reports of Japanese working in the county appear in 1894, when a gang of Japanese were reported working for fifty cents a day without board.⁵⁵ During the next decade, by undercutting other sources of labor and efficiently handling the majority of the county's prune harvest, the Japanese supplanted the Chinese as the primary source of Santa Clara County harvest labor. By 1910, the Japanese population of Santa Clara County had increased to 2,299, while the Chinese population dropped sixty percent from its 1890 high, to only 1,064.⁵⁶ During the period of transition from a predominantly Chinese to a predominantly Japanese seasonal labor force, two brothers emerged as leaders of the prune growers in Santa Clara County and focused hostile attention on the issue of Japanese labor.

Orley (J. O.) Hayes and Everis Anson (E. A.) Hayes came to Santa Clara County in 1887 as practicing lawyers. To diversify their investments, they planted 240 acres of prune trees in San Jose's Eden Vale district. Astute in politics and business, the brothers also purchased two of the county's more influential newspapers, the *San Jose Mercury* and the *San Jose Herald*. In 1897 the Hayes brothers joined with other influential business leaders to form the Good Government League. The League, which comprised major components of the county's orchard economy, boasted a membership of 1,404 by 1901 and had the power of the Hayes' newspapers behind it.⁵⁷

When dealing with the issue of Japanese labor, the League's goals were not always crystal clear. Officially, the League opposed the Japanese presence, although it can be reasonably assumed that most League members relied on Japanese laborers to harvest their fruit after the turn of the century. By 1908 Japanese labor crews performed

nearly all the picking jobs in Santa Clara County.⁵⁸ In less than a decade, the Japanese had become as important to the harvesting of fruit in Santa Clara County as the Chinese had been in the early 1890s. Yet, the public stance of the League was radically anti-Asian.

E. A. Hayes' own personal and political dealings appear to be contradictory. During a heated campaign for a seat in Congress in 1902, his opponents attempted a smear campaign, circulating rumors that Hayes not only employed Asian laborers at his Eden Vale ranch, violating the League's policy, but had been observed by a reputed "former employee" eating at table with Asians — while being served by a white woman! Hayes had even, it was charged, said words to the effect that "a Chinese man is just as good as a white man."⁵⁹ In the *San Jose Mercury* E. A. Hayes publicly denied the rumors, somewhat disingenuously avowing that any Asian laborers on the ranch were in the employ of his brother, J. O. Hayes.⁶⁰

Elected to Congress, E. A. Hayes attained the dubious distinction of making the first-ever anti-Japanese speech in the House of Representatives, in December 1905. In 1913 Hayes realized one of the primary goals of the Good Government League with the passage of the Alien Land Laws, which denied land ownership and long-term tenancy to Japanese farmers.⁶¹ Historian Timothy J. Lukes points out that "once the land laws were in place, concern over the Japanese presence in the valley, especially in the *Mercury*, seemed to disappear."⁶² As a pool of agricultural labor denied the opportunity of economic advancement, the Japanese could be tolerated, it seems. However, even with

the arrival of Japanese labor, by 1902 California farmers were again complaining of labor shortages.

Labor concerns headed the 1902 agenda of the twenty-seventh meeting of the California Fruit Growers Convention, as opposing strategies for attracting labor divided the conference attendees into factions. In a speech to the convention, Sacramento orchardist H. P. Stabler discounted Chinese, Japanese, and European labor as viable sources for California's future agricultural needs. Stabler suggested that Chinese and Japanese "lack intelligence" and showed a "lack of interest in the welfare of our business."⁶³ Dusting off an old theme, Stabler said that while he was "aware that there is no surplus of farm labor in the East, the great advertising California has received during the past few years has placed our advantages and greater possibilities before the Eastern people generally, and I am persuaded that a united effort on our part would result in a large immigration of a desirable class of settlers."⁶⁴

Stabler suggested that commitment and a united effort by established state fruit growers was needed to ensure career opportunities for young white men and women who would be willing to leave their eastern farms to come to California. "An intelligent, thrifty, strong, steady, young white man who was raised on a farm," Stabler claimed, "can do more work than any laborer a fruit grower can secure."⁶⁵ Driving to the heart of his strategy, Stabler told the assembled farmers that it would be:

Selfish of us to expect them to accept our offer of employment if the only inducement held out was the dollar a day and board usually paid orchard workers. The further fact that after two or three years spent in an orchard or vineyard will fit the earnest and energetic young man for places as foreman at better wages, eventually leading to positions as superintendents

and managers, at salaries equal to men in similar capacities in commercial houses, will induce many of them to come to California.⁶⁶

A. N. Judd, a Watsonville grower, rejected Stabler's proposals as empty theory and suggested that a more practical solution would be to remove all restrictions on Chinese immigration. "We have learned by long experience," Judd declared, "that the Chinaman gives satisfaction as a common laborer in the business where his services are most needed. He is industrious, patient, docile, and generally reliable."⁶⁷ Assessing the status of the state's agricultural labor, Judd admitted, as we have noted before, "We have degraded a certain class of labor, and there is not a man who lives in any agricultural locality who wants to get in and do this work."⁶⁸

Judd's assertion was accurate: few white men with agricultural experience wanted "to get in and do this work." Surveys taken from 147 farmers in 29 counties during the 1905 harvest season by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that sixty percent of all farm laborers were white; however, white men held only thirty percent of the seasonal jobs.⁶⁹ Santa Clara County history suggests that the percentage of white orchard workers fluctuated with the economic conditions of the country, increasing during periods of industrial depression and high anti-Chinese activity, and typically consisted of displaced industrial laborers, students, and women. The California State Board of Labor Statistics in 1905 reported that Chinese fruit pickers were being paid \$1.25 per day without board, while similarly employed white men were paid \$1.50 to \$1.75 per day.⁷⁰

When Judd insisted that Congress needed "to admit a sufficient number of laborers from China . . . if California farm employers were to succeed in finding labor

adapted to their 'peculiar wants',”⁷¹ those “peculiar wants” were a competent, reliable, temporary, just-on-time, tractable, labor force that did not require board and that could be secured at wages lower than white laborers. Such “low wages,” Judd declared, “disagreeable living conditions, and seasonal employment that [keep] most farm laborers moving from crop to crop in search of work opportunities [are] hard and immutable facts of the state's agribusiness economy, whether or not the employers [wish] it so.”⁷²

Pressed by the problems associated with transient and alien male labor, and faced with increasing prune production throughout much of the 1910s, state and local farmers used women and children whenever practical. It was reported during World War I, that state agencies assisted farmers by recruiting Y.M.C.A. youngsters to work in the fields.⁷³ Summer vacations were often extended so that children could work with their families picking fruit during the annual harvest;⁷⁴ and of this period Carey McWilliams reported: “Fruit never rots in California: the growers always find someone to pick it.” In a camp of Chinese girls, who, incidentally, had been “rescued” from the “slave” traffic by the Presbyterians, the labor recruits were taught “patriotism” and “how to be self-supporting.” They were also given an opportunity, as their leaders put it, “to enjoy the summer sunshine of the Santa Clara Valley.”⁷⁵

In the highly competitive, rapidly expanding prune market of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the success, and often the economic survival, of local growers was tied directly to cheap farm labor that was available on an as-needed basis and was easily dismissed. With each new labor crisis, Santa Clara County orchardists were resourceful in applying any form of labor available to pick prunes cheaply and

efficiently. Racial bias, social ostracism, and economic oppression were all forces that benefited local farmers by providing them competent, dedicated labor at low wages.

While it is perhaps possible that local farmers held none of the racial or social prejudices prevalent at the time in other parts of society, it is also true that they directly benefited from them. There is ample evidence in the journals of the California Fruit Growers Union that local farmers would have preferred to employ stalwart, white, male laborers were they available, affordable and tractable. Lacking acceptable white help, local farmers hired any labor force available that met their cost and production requirements.

In 1998, the California Prune Board published a five-and-a-half-page report, *Black Nuggets of California*, containing history, stories, and forecasts concerning the California prune industry. Included is an anecdote that supposedly occurred in a Santa Clara Valley prune orchard near the turn of the century:

In 1905, one grower thought he had the answer to rising labor costs. He would import workers that required room and board but no pay! He brought 500 monkeys to the Santa Clara Valley from Panama to pick prunes. Organized into gangs of 50, with a human foreman overseeing each crew, the monkey pickers were set loose into the fields to scamper up the trees and do their work. Unfortunately, the monkeys picked according to plan but the growers never saw the harvest since the monkeys ate the fruit as fast as they could pick them, with nothing left.⁷⁶

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¹ State of California, *Official Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Fruit Growers Convention* (Sacramento: State of California, 1901), 276.

² Timothy J. Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway: Reform Politics in San Jose, California, 1880-1920," *Southern California Quarterly* 74 (Spring 1994): 386.

³ H. S. Foote, ed., *Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World; or, Santa Clara County, California* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1888), 74.

⁴ Varden Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, Pursuant to Senate Resolution 266, A Resolution to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with the Rights of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively*, Seventy-Sixth Congress, Third Session (Washington DC: United States Bureau Of Agricultural Economics, 1940), 19799.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19800.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Foote, *Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World*, 274.

⁸ Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy; Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1971), 7. At a time when California was short on labor and long on work, the Chinese offered wheat farmers, land reclamation projects, factory owners, and railroad construction companies an abundant supply of muscle. They also provided the predominantly male gold-seekers who had rushed hastily to California with little regard for personal comfort, a large supply of domestic labor. This seemingly boundless and tractable labor source, that was willing to perform extremely arduous, dangerous, and servile work for low wages, posed a direct threat to the livelihood of California's entrenched, white laborer. With the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, thousands of displaced Chinese workers created an imbalance in the labor market, effectively reducing the cost of labor. Although the Chinese population represented only about nine percent of California's population in 1870, it in fact comprised a much larger percentage of the total workforce. Saxton details how significant the Chinese presence was in the California labor market: "The 1870 census estimated California's gainfully employed as 239,000 in a population of somewhat over 570,000. There were, by the same count, slightly fewer than 50,000 Chinese, almost all of whom must, as a necessary condition of their coming to California, have been

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gainfully employed. If we exclude Chinese women (one in every thirteen), we find that Chinese males constituted approximately one-fifth of the total number of persons gainfully employed. But this figure is too small. The census category included entrepreneurs, independent farmers, supervisors, businessmen — and these we can assume to have been more numerous among non-Chinese than among the Chinese. If then our concern is primarily with wage workers, it would probably not be far wrong to estimate that one-quarter of all available for hire in the early seventies must have been Chinese.”

⁹ Sandy Lydon, *Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region* (Santa Cruz, California: Capitola Book Company, 1985), 21. Of this time Lydon wrote, “Farmers were forced to give up their land and virtually became serfs as more land came into the hands of the wealthy few. The tenant farmers and their families faced starvation after a bad year, and countless numbers perished in times of famine. In the midst of such immense suffering, news of riches and opportunity in California ignited hope among the Cantonese.”

¹⁰ Connie Young Yu, *Chinatown San Jose, USA* (San Jose: San Jose Historical Association, 1993), 4. A combination of natural and man-made occurrences sparked a massive emigration of Chinese to California during the late 1840s and throughout the 1850s. Yu writes, “Initially, it was gold fever that caused the Chinese to flock to California.” During this period, the quality of life in Kwantung province had worsened as the result of revolt, civil war, and economic hardship. Droughts, floods, inflation, greedy landlords, and ruthless bandits plagued the small farmers of Kwangtung.

¹¹ Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 8.

¹² *California Farmer*, May 25, 1854, 164.

¹³ Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farm Workers, 1870 — 1941* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 27.

¹⁴ Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 67.

¹⁵ Yu, *Chinatown San Jose, USA*, 2.

¹⁶ Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 8.

¹⁷ Yu, *Chinatown San Jose, USA*, 19.

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¹⁸ Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway," 383.

¹⁹ Ken Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850 — 1915*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1986.) 191.

²⁰ Mary Jo Ignoffo, *Sunnyvale: From The City of Destiny To The Heart Of Silicon Valley* (Sunnyvale: California History Center Foundation, 1994), 11.

²¹ Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway," 380.

²² *Ibid.*, 386.

²³ *Ibid.*, 384

²⁴ California State Senate Special Committee, "An Address to the People of the United States upon the Evils of Chinese Immigration" (Sacramento, California Senate Special Committee, 1876), 3. Sensitive to the growing public opposition to Chinese Immigration, the California State Senate commissioned a Special Committee of five senators to investigate the concerns associated with Chinese immigration. That the committee's initial objective was to convince the United States Congress of the need to ban Chinese immigration is apparent in its first resolution: "That said committee . . . shall prepare a memorial to the Congress of the United States, which memorial must set out at length the facts relative to the subject of this inquiry, and such conclusions as the committee may have arrived at as to the policy and means of excluding Chinese from the country." Upon completing the report in 1876, the committee promptly copied and mailed ten thousand copies of the report, "An Address To The People Of The United States Upon The Evils Of Chinese Immigration," to members of "Congress, Governors of States, and to the Newspapers of the Union." Vice and labor competition were the two most serious concerns addressed in the committee report. The report explicitly portrayed Chinatowns as dens of iniquities and as serious threats to public health. In one searing testimony, uncharacteristic of the day's moral conscience, a state witness reporting on the practices of Chinatown prostitutes explained that these women entice "by the cheapness of their offers, thousands of boys and young men to enter their dens, very many of whom are inoculated with venereal diseases of the worst type. Boys of eight and ten years of age have been found with the disease, and some of our physicians treat a dozen cases a day." (Special Committee, 25.) On the question of the Chinese influence on the labor market, another witness reported: "We admit that the Chinese are exceedingly expert in all kinds of labor and manufacturing and that they are easily and inexpensively handled in large numbers . . . Our people have families, a condition considered of vast importance to our civilization, while the Chinese have not, or if they have families they need but little

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to support them in their native land. Our laborers cannot be induced to live like vermin, as the Chinese." (Special Committee, 46.)

²⁵ *Compendium Of The Eleventh Census of the United States, 1892*, "Part I, Population," Table 14 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1894), 516.

²⁶ *United States Population Census for 1890* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1894), 161.

²⁷ Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway," 385.

²⁸ Yu, *Chinatown San Jose, USA*, 18.

²⁹ McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 70.

³⁰ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19803.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19809.

³² Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 48. The Chinese Exclusionary Act of 1882 suspended the entry of Chinese laborers to the U.S. for 10 years and required registration and identification of Chinese already in the U.S.

³³ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19812.

³⁴ Shih-Shan Henry Tsai, "American Exclusion Against the Chinese," *The Californians* 26 (March/April 1988): 36.

³⁵ Fuller, 19799. Reduction in cheap farm labor directly affected two sources of wealth for county prune growers. The most obvious was the immediate increase in production costs incurred when fruit growers had to pay higher wages. Labor cost comparisons conducted in the 1870s and 1880s showed that fruit producers, employing Chinese and other groups of disadvantaged laborers, paid on average between \$1.00 to \$1.25 per day for their services. By contrast, grain and hay producers, whose labor requirements were less seasonally intense and who seldom employed disadvantaged laborers paid laborers between \$2.00 and \$3.00 per day.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19817.

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³⁷ *Pacific Rural Press*, April 21, 1883 362.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19825. Fuller quotes John S. Hittell who wrote in 1882, "Men who come to California . . . often complain that they have been deceived, that they have been led to believe that they could get rich with little exertion, and that life would be much easier for them than it had been in the Eastern states whereas they find that they are, in fact, subjected to keener competition than they ever witnessed before, and that instead of getting rich with little work, they remain poor even with hard work."

⁴⁰ Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway," 882.

⁴¹ *Compendium Of The Eleventh Census of the United States, 1892*, Table 14, 516.

⁴² *Pacific Rural Press*, March 17, 1883, 236.

⁴³ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19815.

⁴⁴ Yu, *Chinatown San Jose, USA*, 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19815.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 189813.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 189818.

⁴⁹ California State Board of Horticulture, *Annual Report of the State Board of Horticulture for 1891* (Sacramento: State of California, 1892), 97.

⁵⁰ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19818. The passage and the subsequent ineffectual execution of the poorly constructed Geary Act in 1892 heightened state and local labor tensions over the Chinese issues. The Act extended the provisions of the Chinese

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Exclusion Act of 1882 and provided for the deportation of all Chinese who were illegally in California. The Act's passage was encouraged by the recent arrival of thousands of immigrants from the eastern United States, who learned that despite promotional campaigns to the contrary, there were few industrial jobs to be had in California, no cheap land, and that the local farm wages would relegate to the status of tramp any white man who relied on them. By 1893, of the 85,000 Chinese residing in California, only 12,483 had registered according to the Act's instructions. When it realized that implementing the deportation clause would cost more than ten million dollars, Congress hastily rescinded the deportation requirement. Congress' poor handling of the Geary Act ignited local anti-Chinese violence and property destruction with a new twist. In the past, the destruction of property had almost entirely targeted the Chinese settlements. In the summer of 1893, it was as likely to be inflicted on property owners who employed Chinese. Such was the case in Santa Clara County. Also see McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 74.

⁵¹ Yu, *Chinatown San Jose, USA*, 46.

⁵² Tsai, "American Exclusion Against the Chinese," 39.

⁵³ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19829.

⁵⁴ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19827. Immigration of Japanese labor into the United States was first legalized in the United States in 1885. By 1888 Japanese were being employed in California agriculture. Prior to 1902 most Japanese came directly from Japan in search of employment and land opportunities. After 1902 most Japanese coming to America came from sugar plantations in Hawaii. Fuller points out that: "The number of Japanese coming to the mainland by way of Hawaii during the seven years 1902-1908 is estimated as being more than 37,000 as against 46,779 who immigrated from Japan or other countries during the seven years, July 1, 1901 to June 30, 1908." Three-fourths of the Japanese who migrated to the United States were under thirty years of age. Up to 1909, nine-tenths of the population were males. Of those who arrived between 1901-1909, two-thirds were laborers and farmers, and within that group more than half were farm laborers.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19817.

⁵⁶ *California State Board of Agriculture, Statistical Report, 1915*, Table 3 (Sacramento: State of California, 1916), 20.

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⁵⁷ Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway," 388.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 388.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 389

⁶¹ Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 257.

⁶² Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway," 393.

⁶³ Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 52.

⁶⁴ State of California, *Official Report of the Twenty-Seventh Fruit Growers Annual Convention*, 268.

⁶⁵ Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 52.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁸ State of California, *Official Report of the Twenty-Seventh Fruit Growers Annual Convention*, 276.

⁶⁹ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," 19831.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19823.

⁷¹ State of California, *Official Report of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Fruit Growers Convention*, 269.

⁷² Ibid., 269.

⁷³ McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 178.

⁷⁴ Yvonne Jacobson, *Passing Farms, Enduring Values; California's Santa Clara Valley* (Los Altos: William Kaufmann, Inc., 1963), 133.

⁷⁵ McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 178.

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⁷⁶ California Prune Board, "Black Nuggets of California" (Pleasanton, CA: California Prune Board, 1998), 2.

CHAPTER 7

THE COMPETITIVE WEDGE

In *Full House*, although he is discussing living systems, Stephen Gould presents two maxims which could summarize the dynamics operating in the history of the Santa Clara County prune industry. Gould observes that “*complex* systems improve when the best performers play by the same rules over an extended period of time, and as systems improve, the equilibrium and variation decreases.”¹ [italics mine] Inherent in the increased complexity of any system are increased interdependencies that become potential points of failure for the entire system. Increasingly, layers of complexity were added to the prune production processes in Santa Clara County as farmers struggled to deal with the need for improved marketing, labor management, land and water management, production, distribution, and quality.

Before the 1890s, most growers assumed the responsibility for selling their own fruit, relying on San Francisco fruit brokers, called “jobbers,” to buy and dispose of their surplus crop. Since the gold rush, jobbers and commission merchants had established offices in San Francisco. However, dependence on San Francisco fruit buyers as middlemen became burdensome for county growers. Most of the San Francisco firms handled the sale of dried fruit on a commission basis and had little interest in developing broader markets for such commodities.² As one early grower explained, “The fruit

grower ships his fruit to San Francisco and the commission merchant has everything his own way.”³ Before the 1890s, the selling arrangements between growers and buyers were generally verbal and thus invited dispute, another source of aggravation to the grower. As local growers’ confidence in San Francisco merchants waned, Santa Clara County fruit producers began to explore ways to reduce their marketing costs. By the mid-1880s Santa Clara County had evolved into a major California center for fruit production, and local interests began looking for ways to assume the marketing roles and the resulting profits of the San Francisco jobbers.

Improvements to the county’s business infrastructure helped the growers gain greater control of local fruit marketing processes. Describing these improvements, one local enthusiast reported in 1880 that “rates of interest have materially lessened, the country is more thickly populated, means of transportation have increased and improved.”⁴

Concerned by rising railroad rates and feeling increasing market pressures to reduce costs, growers formed the Santa Clara County Fruit Union in 1885. Dealing primarily in fresh fruit, the Union helped to set the standard for future cooperative ventures and at the same time improved transportation and marketing practices that benefited the dried fruit interest. Under the leadership of John Z. Anderson, the Union worked with United States Senator Leland Stanford to reduce railroad rates. Perhaps more importantly, the Union introduced the auction system for marketing county fruit and by doing so eliminated the middleman buyer.⁵

By the 1890s a number of Santa Clara County dried fruit buyers had responded to the increasing consumer demand for dried fruit by forming the Fruit Dryers and Packers Association. A primary goal of this innovative association was to establish standards for the buying of fruit from county growers. They replaced the practice of verbal purchase agreements with written contracts. Before the Association was formed, the verbal sales agreements between growers and packers generally called for payment thirty days after the packer received the fruit. A grower's request for immediate compensation would be accommodated by a purchase price one percent lower than the thirty-day price.

The 1890s brought increasing pressure for local growers to improve their marketing practices and prune packaging quality. From 1890 to 1892 California growers' profits were affected by heavy competition from prune imports from France and Austria-Hungary (Figure 10). Consumers could choose between premium expensive French prunes that were packaged in ornate boxes and glass jars or prunes actually produced in Bosnia and Serbia but called by the trade name "Turkeys" that had an exotic appeal to many consumers who believed they were grown in Turkey. This competition exposed serious quality problems with California prunes, as many consumers willingly chose the higher-priced, more attractive imports to "any of the dirty, flyspecked, sundried fruits" processed in California.⁶

	US Prune Imports Pounds	US California Production Pounds	Annual Total
1890	34,281,322	16,200,000	50,481,322
1891	10,869,797	27,500,000	38,369,797
1892	26,414,112	22,500,000	48,914,112
Regional Total	71,565,231	66,200,000	

California Fruit Growers, Twenty-Eight Annual Convention (1903), 61

Figure 10. California Prune Production vs. Foreign Prune Imports 1890 — 1892

Increased pressure by wholesale buyers and members of the retail grocery trade forced local packers to provide a better and more uniform product and caused some local packing companies to form fruit-packing cooperatives. The first of these was formed in Saratoga in 1888, and it was followed in 1891 by the Westside Fruit Growers Association, in 1893 by the Willow Glen Fruit Union, and later by the East Side Growers Exchange and the Berryessa Fruit Growers Union. But of all the grower associations formed in the last dozen years of the nineteenth century, arguably the two most important were the Campbell Fruit Growers Union and the Fruit Exchange, each formed in 1892.⁷

Typical of the county cooperatives of the period was the Campbell Fruit Growers Union. During the mid-1890s, the Campbell district was considered the richest orchard district in Santa Clara County, with productive orchards being priced as high as \$1,000 per acre.⁸ On June 2, 1892, a number of Campbell fruit growers incorporated the Campbell Fruit Growers Union with a stock listing valued at \$100,000. This Union, like

the others of its time, allowed growers to consolidate their resources to purchase and share expensive processing facilities and equipment that most independent growers could not otherwise afford. A good example of the advantages the Campbell cooperative provided its members was detailed by Jeanette Watson:

The 1893 crop amounted to 1,074 tons of dried fruit. Much of it had to be stored in the low wooden buildings on the premises. According to President Righter, a test was made of 300 tons of prunes which showed a loss by shrinkage of ten dollars a ton. This resulted in a total loss of three thousand dollars on the 300 tons. This loss thoroughly convinced the growers that a brick warehouse was needed to protect the fruit. The following year it was constructed adjacent to the railroad tracks. Test proved that there was no loss by shrinkage, and the savings quickly paid for the building which, by the way, was still standing nearly one hundred years later.⁹

The Campbell Fruit Growers Union brought members the advantages of standardized production and marketing processes and gave a framework for growth. The early success of the Union is documented by its phenomenal growth: in its first year of operation the Union processed 194,336 pounds of dried prunes; in 1893, its production rocketed to 3,767,587 pounds.¹⁰ In that same year, the Union handled over 7,000,000 pounds of green fruit valued at \$117,873, of which more than \$98,000 (83% of sales) went back to the growers.¹¹ Despite the success the Union brought to the community of county growers, however, not all growers were happy with the arrangement.

The Union often found itself at odds with individual growers. At times, Union officials resisted pressure by growers to hold out for higher prices. During periods of instability, growers tended to turn to the Union as a safeguard. Yet, when times were better and growers felt that they could negotiate higher prices, many members refused to

deliver their fruit to the Union. The problem of member compliance persisted long after the Campbell Fruit Growers Union was consolidated into the Santa Clara County Fruit Exchange.

Under the leadership of Colonel Philo Hersey, the Exchange developed into one of the most successful grower-owned associations in the county. Hersey established common marketing methods and uniform processing standards to which all Exchange members had to conform. A primary goal was to enlist smaller cooperatives, which were mainly cooperative fruit dryers, and then to bring their processing up to the Exchange standards. To this end, between 1892 and 1899, the Exchange consolidated the West Side Fruit Growers Association, the East Side Growers Exchange, the Berryessa Fruit Growers Union, and the Campbell Fruit Growers Union.

During its first ten years of operation, the Fruit Exchange proved to be among the most effective marketing agencies in the county. In 1896, in order to handle the rapidly expanding production, the Exchange built a 60-by-150 foot brick warehouse on Sunol Street in San Jose. So rapid was the growth of the Exchange that the warehouse was enlarged twice during the first six years of operation.¹² At its peak in 1902, the Exchange listed as members 463 growers who that year shipped an estimated 14,520,000 pounds of deciduous fruit.¹³ Yet, despite its early success, the Exchange had a major structural flaw that made it, and all the local cooperatives of the time, vulnerable to the decisions of individual growers.

Even though the Fruit Exchange experienced several profitable years, its demise soon followed. A primary goal of any fruit cooperative was to create a large enough

concentration of fruit to give participating growers the leverage to negotiate more effectively with railroad, shipping, and marketing interests. To this end, cooperative officials hoped that member growers would provide their entire crops to the Exchange for processing and sale. To their disappointment, and that of many members, not all members were fully committed to the principles of the Exchange and readily sold their crops elsewhere when they were able to obtain a better price by doing so.

Another threat to the cooperative near the turn of the century was the formation of a new type of independent packing firm that bought orchard fruit directly from the grower, packed it, and marketed it. Firms like the San Francisco-based J. K. Armsby Company and the San Jose-based J. H. Flickering Company agreed to pay cash for the fruit at the moment it arrived at the packing house. For growers who found themselves in debt at the end of the harvest, the prospect of cash on delivery was extremely attractive. Yet, "growers, acting on their own behalf, were often ignorant of the prices their neighbors were receiving for fruit and thus unwittingly underbid each other."¹⁴

On paper, the increased production realized by the Santa Clara County prune growers during the final decade of the nineteenth century was impressive. In 1890, prune trees were so much in demand that local nurseries ran out of stock, and trees and seedlings had to be imported from Oregon and elsewhere at exorbitant prices.¹⁵ Estimates indicate that between 1890 and 1904, the county prune-tree count increased by approximately 3,600,000 trees. The percentage of the state's prune trees growing in Santa Clara County rose from forty percent to fifty-eight percent during this period. Reports on California prune production indicate an increase from 16,200,000 pounds in

1890 to 174,000,000 in 1900. Santa Clara County prune production rose from approximately 6,480,000 to 87,000,000 pounds in one decade, almost a fourteen-fold increase.¹⁶

The rapid increase in prune production had an adverse effect on the price local growers received for their crops after 1897. Before that year, county growers were receiving four cents per pound bulk rate (equated at 80 prunes to the pound), or eighty dollars per ton.¹⁷ State production levels doubled between 1897 and 1902, with a peak the latter year of 195,000,000 pounds. Many growers found themselves producing more but earning less as the increased production resulted in prices less than half of those realized in 1897. In 1904, the price fell to a low of 1.75 cents per pound, or twenty-five dollars per ton for fruit averaging 80 prunes to the pound.¹⁸ What made this decrease even more disturbing for local growers was the abysmal failure of California's first cured fruit association.

In reaction to the falling prune prices statewide, an increasing number of fruit-producing interests believed that if a statewide dried fruit growers' cooperative could be established and gain substantial control over at least seventy-five percent of the California prune crop, that cooperative could set and control prices to the advantage of the association members. Charles Wesley Childs, an orchardist and the assistant principal of San Jose Normal School (later San Jose State University) became the spokesperson and primary advocate for the formation of the new cooperative. After developing his proposal, which was published in numerous central and middle California newspapers, Childs called for a convention to be held in San Jose early in 1900.

More than 1,000 growers from throughout California attended the organizing convention of the California Cured Fruit Association that was held in San Jose on January 15, 1900. During the meeting Childs presented a plan to sign up seventy-five percent of the state's cured-fruit growers, with the objective of fixing and maintaining prices. Initial reactions to Childs' proposal were very encouraging.¹⁹

The Association elected Santa Clara Judge J. G. Bond its first president. Among the Association's first actions was a successful contract negotiation with sixty-five of the state's cured-fruit packers who agreed to buy only from Association members. To coordinate and protect their interests, the packers formed the California Packers Company and agreed to pool their sales and distribute earnings on a pro rata basis.²⁰

Next, the Association began enrolling deciduous fruit growers. Reports showed that 4,263 prune growers across the state were enrolled. This number represented sixty-seven percent of the state's growers, although the Association claimed a seventy-five percent enrollment, apparently from an error in the acreage count. Finally, the Association implemented uniform standards and inspection processes to ensure a predictable, high-quality product.

The demise of the California Cured Fruit Association just three years after its formation is chronicled in the reports of the Thirtieth Annual Convention of the California State Fruit-Growers held in 1904. "As to the effort to organize the prune growers," M. Theo Kearney reminded convention attendees, "you all know about that miserable failure."²¹ Kearney continued: "And yet while the prune-growers are this season making a desperate effort in a detached way to force up the price of prunes to a 3

to 3 ¼ cents basis, every man familiar with market conditions, and the absolute fruit famine this year all over the world, knows that if the growers were united in a marketing organization, they could get 4 cents easier than they are getting 2 ½ cents now.”²² Unfortunately for the fledgling Association, prune production in the Association’s first operating year was anything but a famine.

California prune production for 1900 reached an all-time high to date at 174,000,000 pounds.²³ In addition, bumper crops in France, Bosnia, and Serbia drove European prune prices so low that it was impossible to sell any California prunes in Europe that year. Even though it spent tens of thousands of dollars trying to market prunes in midwestern and eastern markets, the Association could not encourage enough prune consumption to offset the burdensome surplus.

Despite the obvious overproduction in 1900, the Association made a critical marketing error. It ignored objections from Association packers and set the price of prunes at three cents a pound. By June 5, 1901, when the Association membership met to discuss the problems of the previous season, Judge Bond’s report could hardly have been worse. Of the 124,924,102 pounds of prunes received by the Association, only 59,417,491 pounds (47.5 percent) had been sold.²⁴

Bond identified two problems related to the Association’s handling of the surplus. First, Bond asserted, the three cent price established by the Association in 1900 was too high; it should have be reduced to two and three-quarters cents. Bond then attacked the loyalty of some of the Association’s membership:

The Association had under contract this season, when all membership contracts were in, 54,472 acres of prunes. . . . This apparently gave us 87.5 percent of the State prune acreage. It is not necessary for me to accuse members of selling their prunes to outside packers. If the packers had bought all of their prunes not pledged to the Association, they could have got only 22 million pounds. In fact, they got 59 million pounds. This is sufficient answer as to where they got them.²⁵

Analyzing the failure of the Association in 1904, A. R. Sprague, a speaker at the Thirtieth Annual California State Fruit-Growers Convention, pointed out a number of serious flaws that he believed were inherent to the Association. The difficulty of securing a quorum with a membership that was so widely scattered was one major weakness. Complicating the problem was "the fact that in the various separate groups of growers there are no organic influences at work to promote harmony of feeling and of action."²⁶

Sprague also saw a fundamental problem with the Association's pricing policy. He believed the fixing of a rigid price for the entire season, regardless of market conditions, was a mistake. Sprague believed that to establish a price level predicated on the position "we will not sell except at our price" would have negative consequences. Such a position Sprague found to be "a fine bluff, which has failed more often that it has succeeded."²⁷

Some convention members expressed extreme frustration at fellow Association members. C. D. Harvey, a San Jose grower, told members: "Nine out of every 10 growers selfishly expected all others to stick by the Association, and as soon as prices began to advance, to quickly step around the corner, sell to the speculator at the slight

advance, and demoralize the market, leaving the true cooperative to hold the umbrella while he profits.”²⁸

Robert Couchman offers a simple insight that helps explain the overproduction that contributed to the failure of the California Cured Fruit Association: “Many growers had somehow come to believe that California dried prunes were essential to American consumers who would have to accept whatever volume and quality were offered them.”²⁹

At the same Convention, a San Jose grower discussed the plight of local growers during the 1904 season when “the grower not only failed to receive anything for his investment, but the returns were only sufficient to pay for the picking, drying, and delivering of his products.”³⁰ Another speaker noted that he saw in the Santa Clara Valley, “mortgaged homes, rapidly depreciating lands and discouraged and disheartened growers.”³¹

An evaluation of the relationship between Santa Clara County prune growers and the packing and marketing cooperatives during the first decade of the twentieth century suggests that the growers in the county were not a homogenous group with common goals and standard processes. Instead they were independent, self-serving businessmen, whose foremost goal in farming was accumulating personal wealth. They were willing to join cooperatives when they believed that the cooperative would benefit their personal interests, and they were just as willing to abandon such associations if they believed doing so would prove more profitable. As a result, while many growers in Santa Clara County did associate in local cooperatives after the Association’s failure, they did so

passively, with a tacit understanding that they were eventually as responsible for the sale of their fruit as for its harvesting.

From 1902 until 1917, county cooperatives formed and failed in response to the immediate issues facing farmers. These associations generally formed as a result of county growers' dissatisfaction with the pricing policies of proprietary packers. Although the Santa Clara Valley Fruit Exchange, the Campbell Farmers Union Packing Company, and the Santa Clara County Fruit Growers Associations are examples of small-scale cooperatives that experienced success after 1902, no broad cooperative effort would again occur until 1917 with the establishment of the California Prune and Apricot Union. During this period, farmers to a great extent negotiated independently with the numerous packing companies that existed in Santa Clara County until 1917.

Looking back to Stephen Gould's maxim concerning the inherent disequilibrium of complex systems, it is interesting to note that the decade beginning in 1890 proved to be the period of greatest growth for the Santa Clara County prune industry. That local growers formed cooperatives for the purpose of standardizing the processing and marketing of prunes during this period of growth supports Gould's belief that complex systems improve when the best players play by the same rules. Cooperative packaging and marketing ventures gave Santa Clara County farmers an early advantage in the prune production industry. By employing standard packaging processes, farmers in Santa Clara County were able to improve the overall quality of their product to the advantage of the grower community at large. The cooperatives gave members a significant advantage over growers who remained independent and therefore could not take advantage of the

improved processes and technologies the cooperatives afforded. That internal competition and greed would eventually provide the wedge that divided and destroyed the first industry-wide attempts to maintain prune prices is ironic considering the sizable advantage the cooperatives could have had over independent growers.

NOTES

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin* (New York: Random House Publishing Inc., 1997), 41.

² Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story; A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc., 1967), 27.

³ Jaclyn Greenberg, "Industry in the Garden: A Social History of the Canning Industry and Cannery Workers in the Santa Clara Valley, California" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1985), 35.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Stephen M. Payne, *Santa Clara County Harvest of Change* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1987), 88.

⁶ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 26.

⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jeannette Watson, *Campbell: The Orchard City* (Campbell: Campbell Museum Foundation, 1993), 116.

¹⁰ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 30.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Clyde Arbuckle, *History of San Jose* (San Jose: Smith & McKay Printing Co., 1985), 159.

¹³ Payne, *Santa Clara County Harvest of Change*, 89.

¹⁴ Greenberg, "Industry in the Garden: A Social History of the Canning Industry and Cannery Workers in the Santa Clara Valley, California," 40.

¹⁵ Ibid., 52.

NOTES Continued

¹⁶ Edward J. Wickson, *The California Fruits and How to Grow Them*, (San Francisco: Pacific Press, 1919), 453.

¹⁷ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 27.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ State Of California, *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual Convention of the California State Fruit-Growers; Cured Fruit Marketing, At Home and Abroad*. (Sacramento: State of California, 1904), 57.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wickson, *The California Fruits and How to Grow Them*, 453.

²⁴ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 32.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ State of California, *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual Convention of the California State Fruit-Growers*, 62.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 79.

²⁹ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 26.

³⁰ State of California, *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual Convention of the California State Fruit-Growers*, 245.

³¹ Ibid., 289.

CHAPTER 8

COOPERATIVE MARKETING

The development and implementation of new marketing strategies was a prime concern to Santa Clara County prune growers during the first two decades of the twentieth century. With the capability of producing tens of millions of pounds of prunes annually, county growers faced the enormous problem of effectively distributing and selling a prodigious amount of perishable fruit.¹ Complicating their challenge were the independent growers' individual contractual agreements with shippers, packers, and merchants that too often placed the growers at a financial disadvantage vis-a-vis the highly organized marketing organizations and competing foreign producers. To ameliorate these problems, farmers in Santa Clara County formed small commercial associations on an as-needed basis to address the particular challenges they faced during any given season. Eventually, competitive pressure forced growers in Santa Clara County and across California to reconsider the advantages of longer-term cooperative arrangements and to accept some limitations on their economic independence to secure greater bargaining power.

In 1904, F. W. Crandall presented a paper, *Cured Fruit Marketing, At Home and Abroad*, at the Thirtieth Annual California State Fruit-Growers Convention in which he reported that the prune crop of 1903 should have put California prune growers in a strong

economic position; instead, prices “went to pieces and heavy losses were sustained.”² “It is not my purpose to belch forth a tirade of abuse upon the handlers of our products in our own United States,” Crandall continued, “for frankly I do not think the fault lies with them so much as with our own disorganized and unbusiness-like methods. I do not know a single product that is handled in such a grossly incompetent way as are our prunes.”³ High on the list of evils that Crandall cited were contractual agreements that allowed fruit brokers on the East Coast to reject California prunes upon arrival by invoking a practice commonly referred to as the “three day privilege.”⁴

The “three day privilege” allowed New York fruit brokers to reject shipments of California prunes by diverting the box cars to “the Jersey flats . . . for the express purpose of delaying examination and acceptance pending [further developments in] market conditions.”⁵ If the market was strong, the buyers eagerly accepted the shipments, but when the market was weak, the brokers simply let the shipments wait in the freight cars until the market improved. “The grower often spoils the prospects of doing a legitimate business,” Crandall cautioned, “by consigning a number of cars to some irresponsible firm or broker, who promises great and wonderful results before these consignments are made, but who almost invariably after the goods arrive, writes a very nicely worded letter regretting, oh so much, that the market has gone to pieces and that in order to save the dear shipper large losses these goods must be sold for whatever they will bring at the time.”⁶

Another problem in the Santa Clara County prune industry at the turn of the century was the distrust and resentment felt among many growers and packers, some of

whom did indeed have a tendency to cheat one another. It was not uncommon for a grower to water-drench his prunes just before bringing them to the packing house for weigh-in or for a packer to lie about the quality or grade of a prune pack.⁷ Before the institution of industry-wide product standards, some packers combined off-grade prunes with standard grade fruit, expecting that the poorer fruit would go undetected in the bulk packs and thus bring a higher price than it would have otherwise. In frustration, the farmers often looked to the government for assistance in regulating fruit packing.

The first California fruit label law, passed on March 6, 1903, and requiring “marking on fruit boxes or packages the name of the vicinity where fruit is grown,”⁸ is an example of growers and packers looking to the state to help ensure that consumers who purchased California prunes were getting an honest pack for their money. The opponents of the law felt not that it was restrictive, but that it was inadequate. To be effective, they believed, the label should include the name of the packer and the grower as well as the location where the fruit was grown. Advocating a revision of the label law, A. N. Judd of Watsonville noted that “the purchasers, if they feel so disposed, can deal direct [*sic*] with the packer or grower. When the fruit is unloaded in Liverpool, for instance, and the buyers see that it is a particularly fine brand they will write to the packer or grower for further shipments.”⁹

In Chapter Seven, we detailed the largely self-serving and opportunistic on-again, off-again participation of California prune growers in cooperative associations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Typical of the Santa Clara County growers’ myopic reaction to seasonal fluctuations in the prune market was the few-months’ life

span of the Santa Clara Valley Fruit Growers Association in 1909. After receiving the highest prices ever for their prune harvest in 1907, local prune growers received below-average prices in 1908. When it seemed in early 1909 that growers would experience a second consecutive year of disappointing prices, a group of growers under the leadership of J. O. Hayes formed the Association. The objectives of the new organization were to correct improper methods of curing and packing dried fruit, to seek stable and uniform prices for the producer, to fix a reasonable price to be charged consumers of dried fruits in eastern markets, and to advertise Santa Clara County prunes. However, when the price for prunes rose strongly in late summer, the members lost interest in the cooperative, and the Association closed its doors in September, 1909.

Confronted with a serious outside threat to their control of market prices, the prune packers in Santa Clara County organized more quickly than the local growers did. In 1906, the principal New York handlers of dried prunes formed a new association whose members agreed to adhere to a uniform sales agreement and to make all future purchases of prune through the association. Most frustrating to the Santa Clara County packers was the New York association's continued insistence on the "three day privilege."

Partly in response to the threat of the New York fruit handlers' association and partly driven by the need to improve the overall quality of California's dried fruit, growers in Santa Clara County joined with other California growers to form the Dried Fruit Association (DFA) of California. Inspired by the Federal Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, the DFA's objectives were to establish packing standards, including fruit size

and cleanliness, and to monitor surpluses to avoid flooding the market.¹⁰ In addition, the DFA announced that it would sell only to domestic buyers who accepted the terms of the its new contract that ended the “three day privilege” by making all sales final at the time the agreement was signed — before shipment. Despite protest from the eastern interests, the DFA gave the California dried fruit industry a powerful tool for establishing standards and for marketing and distributing prunes domestically and abroad.

In the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, marketing California prunes abroad became increasingly important to the state’s economy. Figure 11 shows that only once between 1906 to 1909 did prune exports exceed forty million pounds, but for every year from 1910 through 1915 more than forty million pounds of fruit were shipped abroad — peaking at almost 120 million pounds in 1913. Because of surpluses warehoused from previous years, California prune exports actually exceeded the annual production for 1910 and 1913. This increased importance of foreign markets created additional problems for state and local prune interests.

Source: Prepared by Bill Bauerle using data from: *The California State Board Of Agriculture For the Year 1915*, 157.

Figure 11. California Dried Prune Production and Exports 1906 — 1915

In 1910, California packing houses faced a marketing issue that centered on the sale of 100-pound bags of prunes to German fruit brokers. Complaints from California packers suggest that once the bags of prunes arrived at packing houses in Hamburg, the fruit was combined with prunes coming from Yugoslavia and France and then offered as California or Santa Clara County prunes. To maintain the reputation of California fruit, the DFA established an independent inspection to certify the condition of dried fruit on the dock before shipment to Europe. This practice was initially unpopular with foreign exporters, but it was finally adopted to the delight of California growers.¹¹

In 1915, a serious pricing issue again increased the tension between Santa Clara County packers and growers. Invoking the fear of war in Europe, speculators tried to convince local growers that the loss of German markets would drastically lower the price of prunes at harvest and tried to pressure growers into selling their prunes for less than three cents a pound before the trees blossomed. By chance, a group of Cupertino growers learned that the speculators had already sold the upcoming prune crop short at three and a half cents a pound. Aware that if they chose to hold out for a higher price the packers would be forced to take substantial losses, the growers decided to bring the issue before the Cupertino Improvement Club.¹² Approximately 1,200 frustrated growers crowded into the San Jose Chamber of Commerce assembly hall on May 15, 1915. As the meeting progressed, the growers agreed that the greatest obstacle to a successful marketing strategy was their lack of accurate, dependable information concerning crop and market

conditions. Again taking a leadership position, J. O. Hayes proposed that each district select a representative to serve on a bureau of information that would develop semi-monthly crop and market reports for growers.¹³

Funded by the participating growers, the new Growers Information Bureau helped Santa Clara County prune growers see their common interests. The semi-monthly reports provided growers with a common understanding of their markets. Armed with new information, participating growers were better able to assess their potential for success. By the time the 1915 harvest had been picked and was being processed, members were urging that the scope of the Bureau's responsibilities be increased.

At a meeting of the Bureau held on January 19, 1916, Colonel Harris Weinstock, newly appointed market director, advocated the formation of a statewide marketing cooperative. His plan called for replacing all the dried fruit packing houses throughout California with grower-sponsored marketing centers to which growers could bring dried fruit for grading, packaging, and distribution. Weinstock also suggested developing a nationwide advertising campaign for California prunes.¹⁴

The growers' initial enthusiasm for Weinstock's cooperative marketing plan quickly waned when they began to understand the new costs and responsibilities they would incur. Under Weinstock's proposal, the growers would be responsible for packing their own fruit, would have to pay cash for transportation costs, and would have to forego the up-front cash payment they customarily received from the packers who bought their fruit. To many growers, a statewide cured fruit cooperative, modeled after the California

Raisin Association that offered both packing and marketing services, seemed like a more attractive alternative.¹⁵

A growers' committee was formed in 1916 to consider establishing a new, statewide prune and apricot dried fruit cooperative. When the committee presented the idea to Weinstock, he received this new plan enthusiastically. On April 14, 1916, the committee shared the plan with members of the Growers Information Bureau and recommended the creation of a voting trust and stock subscription of \$2,500,000, with the first \$750,000 to be subscribed by March 1, 1917. The new corporate stock could be purchased for fifty percent cash and a note for the balance. The cooperative's operating expenses would be funded by a one-quarter of a cent charge per pound of handled fruit. The first contract with growers would cover the prune harvests of 1917 and 1918 and would guarantee a minimum price of four cents per pound.¹⁶ With the approval of the board of trustees of the Growers Information Bureau, the new Prune and Apricot Growers, Inc. cooperative opened for business in March, 1917. "Without a single dissenting vote," the *San Jose Mercury Herald* reported, "H. G. Coykendall was nominated general manager and will immediately formulate his plans for carrying on the selling agency in the most efficient manner backed by — to use his own words — the finest and strongest body of directors that could possibly have been chosen in the state, a sufficient guarantee that the enterprise will be a unqualified success."¹⁷ In addition, J. O. Hayes and Frank Brush were appointed members of the board of directors of the fledgling association.¹⁸

Initially, the growers were encouraged by Coykendall's selection because of his success as general manager of the former Cured Fruit Association and his perceived influence with eastern prune merchants. During the previous season, Coykendall had handled approximately one-fourth of the Santa Clara Valley prune crop and one-eighth of the state's crop, "something between 16,000,000 and 20,000,000 pounds of fruit," according to the *Mercury Herald*. The paper noted that "the secret of much of Coykendall's success in the markets is his intimate acquaintance with all the New York buyers and large wholesalers, and his knowledge of all the eastern trade. In the early stages of business he habitually spent from two to four months of the year in New York, understanding the selling end of the company's business."¹⁹

Coykendall's first challenge was to canvass the state, explain the new association to growers, and solicit their membership.²⁰ J. O. Hayes was a member of the executive team that ventured out to spread the word and sign up new growers. On April 30, 1917, the cooperative announced that it had successfully enrolled growers representing seventy-five percent of the state's prune and apricot acreage. One day later the cooperative announced that it had already sold 85,000,000 pounds of the 1917 prune crop. At the start of June, the cooperative, which had no packing houses of its own, reported that it had arranged contracts with forty-five affiliated packers to receive and pack the 1917 crop.²¹

With establishment of the cooperative, the prune growers had effectively consolidated the capital necessary to fund more sophisticated production and marketing processes. Having set uniform packing standards, the cooperative chose Sunsweet as its

brand name and in August 1917 engaged the Honig-Cooper Advertising Company to prepare a national advertising campaign.²² By the 1918 season the cooperative had purchased sixteen packing plants in Santa Clara County and across the state.²³

Even before the national advertising campaign was underway, signs of coming turmoil surfaced in the cooperative. In June 1917 independent packers were offering growers seven cents a pound for fresh picked prunes, and there was a widespread opinion among growers that the "field market" might level off at seven and one-half cents.²⁴ The affiliated growers were disappointed when, on July 3, the cooperative announced its opening price at "6 cents basis, with a 1-cent premium on 30's, ½-cent premium on 40's, and ¼-cent premium for shipment in September, prices guaranteed to January 1, 1918."²⁵

During its first full season of operation, the cooperative had paid the growers a higher average price for prunes than had ever been paid before. The cooperative's total sales for all dried fruit were \$15,000,000.²⁶ However, when the cooperative tallied its end-of-year production it found some members following old, familiar habits. Although the cooperative had contracts for seventy-five percent of the State's prune acreage, it had in fact handled only 105,000,000 of the 224,000,000 pounds of the prunes picked, forty-seven percent of the year's harvest. As the cooperative would soon learn, disloyal growers were only one of many problems it would encounter in the coming years.

NOTES

¹ Legislature of the State of California, *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Twenty-Ninth Session*, vol 6 (Sacramento: State of California, 1904), 74. In 1904, Santa Clara County grew 3,920,140 of California's 6,736,935 bearing prune trees, equaling fifty-eight percent of the state's total. In the same year, the state produced 135,000,000 pounds of prunes. "The Statistical Report of the California State Board of Agriculture", 1915, gives the total 1904 California dried prune production data. Although the state records for 1904 do not give prune production figures by county, it can be assumed that the production in Santa Clara County was approximately fifty-eight percent of the total production, or around 78,000,000 pounds of prunes.

² State of California, *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Annual Convention of the California State Fruit-Growers; Cured Fruit Marketing, At Home and Abroad*. (Sacramento: State of California, 1904), 245.

³ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴ Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story: A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc. 1967), 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Legislature of the State of California, *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Thirtieth Session*, vol. 6 (Sacramento: State of California, 1904), 246.

⁷ Legislature of the State of California, *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Twenty-Ninth Session*, vol. 6 (Sacramento: State of California, 1904), 61. A. R. Sprague, a Sacramento farmer, believed the strong prejudice against cooperatives at the turn of the century was caused by the failure of the California Cured Fruit Association.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Yvonne Jacobson, *Passing Farms, Enduring Values; California's Santa Clara Valley* (Los Altos: William Kaufman, Inc., 1963), 186.

NOTES Continued

¹¹ California Prune Board, "Black Nuggets of California," Pleasanton: California Prune Board, 1998), 2.

¹² Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 48.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 49.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ The *San Jose Mercury Herald*, March 17, 1917, 1.

¹⁸ Ibid. The new executive officers reported in the *Mercury Herald* included T. S. Montgomery, president; W. A. Yerxa, vice president; H. G. Coykendall, general manager; and Joseph H. Bone, secretary.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 53.

²² Legislature of the State of California, *Appendix To The Journals Of The Forty-Second Session, of the Legislature of the State of California*, vol. 6 (Sacramento: State of California, 1917). 81. A survey of New York retail markets in December 1915 had identified seven marketing levels for prunes: Class A, "high-class grocers"; B, department stores; C, the city-owned Washington Markets; D, cheap grocers in tenement districts; E, specialty fruit stores; F, pushcarts, East Side and Harlem; and G, open-air municipal markets.

²³ Timothy J. Lukes, "Progressivism Off-Broadway: Reform Politics In San Jose, California, 1880-1920," *Southern California Quarterly*, 74 (Spring 1994): 377.

²⁴ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 54.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ State of California Commission on Horticulture, *Report for 1915-1916* (Sacramento: State of California, 1916), 82. Standard practice was to give higher prices

NOTES Continued

for larger fruit. Prunes graded as 30s (30 prunes per pound) were larger than those graded as 40s (40 prunes per pound) and thus were more expensive. After they were graded by size, prunes were classed by quality for wholesale. The report tabulated wholesale prices based on class: Class A received an average price of eighteen cents per pound; Class B, fourteen cents; Class C, thirteen cents; Class D, eleven cents; and Class E, eight cents per pound.

CHAPTER 9

STORMY WEATHER

The growth of the California Prune and Apricot Association was turbulent at best. Beleaguered by natural disaster, grower dissatisfaction, political infighting, and national economic downturns, the Association limped through the 1920s and 1930s with the constant threat that every harvest could be its last. Despite the difficulties many growers felt when dealing with the Association, the organization proved to be the most successful marketing agent for Santa Clara County and California prunes throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. It was a success that few growers appreciated during these years.

In 1918 the prune market looked strong. As a result of World War I, imported prunes had been virtually removed from the market, the offering price was up, and the increased demand all but guaranteed a total sale of Santa Clara County's upcoming crop.¹ Then natural disaster struck with an unseasonable storm that began on September 12, 1918, as thousands of full prune trays were spread across the valley in preparation for drying. Charlie Forges, a local grower, recorded rainfall of 3.5 inches during the first 24 hours of the storm.² At its worst, the storm poured seven inches of rain during a forty-eight hour period.³ By September 17 many growers had given up trying to save any of their fruit.⁴ Others were working with a group of academic and government experts to try to salvage whatever was possible. Instructions for salvaging prunes were printed in the

San Jose Mercury Herald, but apparently to little avail. By September 19 losses of fifty percent of the crop were projected in some parts of the county.⁵ The final tabulations estimated that two-thirds of the California prune crop had been lost.⁶

When the rains finally cleared on September 24, growers were asked to consider the war effort before disposing of rotting fruit. Dr. W. V. Cruess, assistant professor of zymology (the science of fermentation) at the University of California, Berkeley suggested that denatured alcohol could be distilled from the prunes and used to manufacture explosives for the war effort. The Red Cross implored local growers to save the pits: "The shells and pits are badly needed for the manufacture of the carbon used in gas masks, and hundreds of additional tons would be available if conserved in the homes, restaurants, and by those in the fruit industry."⁷

In response to the 1918 disaster, Professor A. W. Christie of the University of California, Davis worked with Romolo L. Puccinelli, an inventor from Los Gatos, to develop a mechanical dehydrator. While smaller dehydrators had been used before 1918, large-scale dehydration would not be widely used for another decade, when technological improvements ensured packers that dehydrated fruit was as flavorful and as physically appealing as sun-dried fruit.⁸

In the aftermath of the storm, the Prune and Apricot Association refused to market any prunes of questionable quality lest the introduction of inferior prunes damage future markets. For farmers who had struggled to produce a crop and then to salvage even a fraction of it, the Association's decision came as a blow.

Dissatisfied with the Association's management team, a group of Santa Clara growers lodged a protest with the Association in 1919. The growers accused management of being ineffective and neglectful of their interests. Upon completing a formal investigation of the matter, J. J. McDonald, a Milpitas farmer who led the investigation, commended the Association's management team for "their faithful and efficient conduct of the Association's business."⁹

In the spring of 1919 independent packers offered growers between 8.5 cents and 12 cents a pound for their prunes. Orchard sales exploded, fueled by local newspaper advertisements reading, "Prunes At 9 Cents Means Orchards Are Going Up."¹⁰ Orchards in Santa Clara County were selling for as much as \$3,000 an acre in 1919. In that year more than 30,000 acres of land changed hands, of which 15,000 acres were priced between \$2,000 and \$3,000. When the season's prune production was tallied the 1919 prune crop was found to have reached an astounding 290,000,000 pounds.¹¹

Anticipating one of the largest fruit crops ever and still suffering from the shock of the 1918 disaster, the Association initiated its first nationwide advertising campaign in the fall of 1919.¹² The five-month newspaper and magazine campaign cost nearly \$250,000 and continued into the spring of 1920. The Association successfully sold the entire 1920 crop. Total sales for the year reached \$24,000,000, and the return to growers 13.56 cents a pound.¹³

It appears that few growers gave the Association much credit for the successes of 1919. As had happened with earlier local cooperatives, during years when the market was strong the growers preferred to deal individually with the packer rather than being

restricted by a contract with the Association. Frustrated by their inability to gain control of a larger share of the national apricot and prune markets, the Association's executive team made a bold move at the end of the first three-year contract period. On December 10, 1919, the board of directors passed a resolution that the Association would not continue unless new contracts could be obtained that increased the acreage under the Association's control by an additional 20,000 acres.¹⁴

To reach that goal, the executive committee initiated another statewide campaign to enroll growers. As before, the Association sent representatives out to promote the organization. By January 20, 1920, the Association had gained control of an additional 29,661 acres, of which 11,113 were prune orchards. The result extended the Association's life an additional two years.¹⁵

With the same enthusiasm they had shown at the beginning of the 1918 growing season, the Association faced 1920 with naïve optimism. Relishing the good fortune of the 1919 fruit sales, the Association announced an opening price for its bulk-basis prune purchases at 12.56 cents a pounds and quickly sold 97,000,000 pounds. Then, in late September 1920, the commodity prices in the United States for sugar, flour, and coffee collapsed, initiating a domino effect upon all other foodstuff commodity prices.

Bankruptcy forced many foodstuffs wholesalers out of business, and the Association had to absorb \$1,500,000 in lost revenues for prunes that the Association had sold on credit. To pay its own creditors, Association was forced to borrow \$4,500,000 from commercial banks.¹⁶

This failure of the foodstuffs market had a major effect on the Association's marketing practices. No longer did the Association feel secure in selling prunes in bulk shipments based on estimates of future prices. Rather, in 1921 the Association began to sell dried fruit in small lots at the current market price.¹⁷ Similar problems faced the packers and the growers. The packers, who before the collapse of the foodstuffs market could sell most of their anticipated supplies before the packing season had begun, were now reluctant to ship before receiving payment.¹⁸ And the growers, who previously had received payment when they delivered prunes to the Association, now had to wait until the Association had received its payment from the wholesaler. To make matters worse, in the spring of 1920 the Association had advanced payment at eight cents a pound to half its growers. After the failure of the foodstuffs market, the wholesale price of prunes supported only a four cent payment to growers, and the Association was forced to ask the growers to return half of their advance payment.¹⁹

Despite these problems, the Association was able, through an aggressive enrollment campaign, to enlist enough growers to establish a new seven-year contract in 1921. At this time, the Association reorganized and changed its name from the California Prune and Apricot, Inc., to the California Prune and Apricot Association. During the reorganization a serious conflict between James R. Welch, a Saratoga grower, and H. G. Coykendall, the Association general manager jeopardized the very existence of the Association.²⁰

During one of the reorganization meetings in 1921, Welch presented a proposal, "Propositions and Principles as Guides in Reorganizing the Association,"²¹ to give

growers a greater voice in the Association and a better understanding of its internal operations. The proposal encouraged dialogue between the Association's executive management and the growers and suggested limits on the amount of money the Association could borrow. Perhaps of greatest concern to Coykendall and the executive managers was a provision calling for the organization of a new Association formed by the growers themselves, in which voting board members would be elected for two-year terms rather than the seven-year terms then in progress.²²

After assembling a list of candidates for the voting board, Welch canvassed groups of growers to promote his ideas and candidates. In May 1922, Coykendall countered Welch's actions by accusing him of trying to force the Association to employ him. Welch denied the allegation and increased his attacks against the Association management.²³

In an attempt to recover from the increasingly unfavorable publicity, the voting board appointed Warren E. Hyde to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the Association's business dealings. Warren's Efficiency Committee was to evaluate the competence of the existing management board. Warren employed the Leffingwell-Ream organization, based in New York and Chicago, to perform an efficiency study of the Association's operations. Several months later Leffingwell-Ream presented Hyde with a report that the voting board decided to withhold from the Association's general membership. Some of Welch's supporters, who had obtained the report, provided him a copy.²⁴

Determined to expose the operational shortcomings of the Association, Welch extracted portions of the report and published them in a 90-page pamphlet under his own name. The report created an instant schism within the Association. Siding with Welch were members of the Association who advocated complete and open disclosure of all issues and concerns related to the Association's operations. This group was eager to take drastic corrective action to resolve any efficiency problems the Association might have.²⁵

A second, opposing group, consisting largely of Coykendall's adherents, believed that the problems identified by the Efficiency Committee needed to be handled systematically and carefully, one problem at a time. They feared that the confrontational approach proposed by Welch and his supporters would weaken the Association to the point of destruction. In an attempt to restore order to the Association, the voting board used a petition signed by 1,200 members to expel Welch and his followers from the Association.²⁶

Anticipating embarrassing allegations from Welch, the Association barred the public and the press from its annual meeting in May 1923. As expected, Welch confronted the voting board and board of directors with the accusation that Coykendall and Ruth G. Wallace, the Association's sales manager, were guilty of graft and bribery. Wallace admitted that she had received \$5,000 from A. H. and G. O. Sainbury in return for Associate brokerage rights in Toronto, Canada, and that Coykendall had known of the bribe.²⁷

As a result of the accusation Wallace resigned, but Coykendall held his ground. To shore up the general manager's position and enable him to maintain his effectiveness,

the voting board and board of directors voted forty-four to one to exonerate him of any wrongdoing. The voting board then met on May 12, 1923, to elect the new Association directors. J. O. Hayes, W. G. Alexander, and Alexander Kammerer were the only incumbents not reelected. Two days later, the new directors met and re-elected Coykendall general manager.²⁸

Problems escalated for Coykendall when an editorial appeared in the *San Jose Mercury Herald*. On May 15, 1923, the publisher J. O. Hayes called for the resignation of Coykendall and the replacement of the existing Association management structure. Later that afternoon, worn by months of intense scrutiny and pointed attacks on his character and professional dealings, Coykendall resigned. In his prepared address to the board of directors, Coykendall explained:

Last week when the voting board elected me a member of the board of directors and immediately afterwards when the board of directors elected me as vice president and general manager, I was convinced that they expressed the wishes of the grower members. . . . I returned to my desk this morning with a feeling of added responsibility, but with the belief that the hatchet had been buried and that real work could again be accomplished; that the organization could resume the sole work for which it was created — the business of handling and marketing the prunes and apricots produced by our members. In the very face of this new determination came in this morning's *Mercury Herald* an editorial, which on the one hand suggested to growers, who might have not considered the matter before hand, that they sell their crops outside the Association; an editorial which on the other hand suggests to the trade that if their confidence in the Association has not yet been shaken, it is high time they consider losing such confidence as they now have and further suggesting that the market has already been affected by my connection with the Association. The latter suggestion has already been interpreted by the trade as an inside tip to refrain from buying now; to wait for lower prices. . . . I feel that these united attempts fostered by selfish politicians whose sole purpose is the fostering of their own commercial interests or the wrecking of the institution if they fail to control it; that with this

propaganda to start the landslide of non-deliveries of members and at the same time tip off the trade not to buy now, but wait awhile, the sole purpose for which I and my entire organization are laboring is rendered hopeless. I therefore feel that it is time for me to step aside, that new and outside neutral interests may take over the Association and perhaps help to stem the tide of propaganda which otherwise will quickly wreck the entire institution. This Association is today in a financial condition second to no other Association in this state. Its standing with the trade is a source of greater pride and gratification to me. The only regret that I have in leaving this Association is that I am doing so in opposition to the wishes of thousands of loyal friends, but I believe that in the long run I will best be serving them by tendering my resignation at this time.²⁹

On its front page, directly below Coykendall's statement, the *Mercury Herald* offered its rebuttal:

The *Mercury Herald* carefully guarded against the use of words at all calculated to wound the personal feelings of Mr. Coykendall or anyone else. Nor was there by any reasonable interpretation of the article objected to, a suggestion that was likely to shake the confidence of members in their Association, much less to 'tip off' the Eastern trade in a way to affect the markets. On the contrary, it was the almost certain knowledge that unless Mr. Coykendall resigned, deliveries would be seriously jeopardized that constrained the *Mercury Herald* to appeal to him to do the one thing necessary to clear the atmosphere and make way for a better feeling both at home and abroad. Now that he has placed his resignation in the hands of the Board of Directors, the *Mercury Herald* has no hesitation in saying that he has removed one of the chief obstacles in the way of rehabilitation.³⁰

In response to Coykendall's resignation, changes occurred quickly in the Association's executive management. On June 6, thirteen members of the voting board resigned, including the representative of Santa Clara County. One week later, T. S. Montgomery, the Association president, also resigned, leaving two vacancies in the board of directors — his and Coykendall's — which were filled by J. O. Hayes and Hugh

Hersman of Gilroy. On July 11, 1923, I. O. Rhoades was elected as the Association's new president and Andrew Mortensen as the new general manager.³¹

Source: Created by Bill Bauerle from data in *California Crop and Livestock Reporting Service Special Publication 257, "Acreage Estimates of California Fruit and Nut Crops, 1919-1953"*

Figure 12. California and Santa Clara County Bearing and Non-Bearing Acreage 1919 — 1932

This prolonged and very public display of dirty linen, as well as the disrupted foodstuffs market, did affect the growers' confidence, as evidenced by the decline in the number of prune-bearing acres. Figure 12 shows the total bearing and non-bearing acres of California prune orchards in Santa Clara County and in the rest of the state. Non-bearing acres are acres recently planted in trees that have not yet started to bear fruit. Before 1923 farmers, encouraged by market conditions, planted more and more new

prune trees annually in expectation of greater returns on investment. The decrease in total non-bearing acres beginning in 1923 and continuing through 1931 shows a lack of grower confidence after 1923 as to the future profitability of prune production. Figure 12 does show a gradual, but steady increase in the aggregate state and county prune acreage through 1930, with California reaching an all-time high of 191,406 acres (299 square miles) in 1929, and Santa Clara County reaching its all-time high one year later with 68,760 acres (107 square miles) of prune orchards in 1930.³²

The vicious contest for control of the Association may have initially overshadowed a marketing problem that quickly eroded the growers' confidence in the value of their produce. In 1922 cheap imports from a massive Yugoslavian prune crop — more than 180,000,000 pounds — seriously reduced the Association's sales in the domestic as well as in foreign markets. In addition, increased prune production from Oregon made inroads on the Association's sales.³³ The combined prune crops for California and Oregon soared to 335,000,000 pounds in 1923. The Association, which had set the wholesale price at 10.5 cents a pound, was shaken when Oregon packers starting selling their fruit at 5 cents a pound.³⁴ In response, the Association undertook a vigorous advertising campaign with consumer-oriented advertisements in national magazines and in newspapers in selected markets, direct mailings to retailers, and the employment of "specialty men" who called on grocers in the markets where the newspaper advertisements appeared.³⁵ Despite its efforts, the Associate carried a 40,000,000 pound surplus into 1924.³⁶

Source: Created by Bill Bauerle from data in Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story: A History of the Establishment the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.*, 1967) 67.

Figure 13. Average Price Received by Santa Clara County Prune Growers 1924 — 1927

To the good fortune of the Association and of Santa Clara County growers as a whole, foreign markets absorbed a significant percentage of the state's prune production in most years of the 1920s. Between 1921 and 1930, fifty-four percent of the total United State prune production was exported.³⁷ However, even with a healthy export trade, the saturation of the domestic markets resulted in a steady decline of prune prices between 1923 and 1927. It is easy to be impressed by the extraordinarily increased production by Santa Clara County prune growers who during the 1920s grew one-third of all prunes produced worldwide.³⁸ But as Lee Lester, the last commercial prune grower in San Jose, remarked during a 1998 interview, "no farmer ever got rich selling

prunes.”³⁹ Figure 13 shows the steady decline in the prices paid to county growers between 1924 and 1927 as the result of foreign and national competition that glutted the market for prunes. With the onslaught of the depression, the prune growers’ problems only worsened.

By 1931 the California Prune and Apricot Growers’ Association’s share of California prune production had been reduced to thirty percent.⁴⁰ H. C. Dunlap, an Association executive, explained during a public federal hearing on marketing policy that some old-crop prunes had been sold late in the 1931 season for as little as three-eighths of a cent per pound.⁴¹ Worried growers engaged in price competition that further reduced the market price. Early in the 1930s, voluntary organizations such as the California Prune Institute and the Growers League were formed to try to promote prunes and to ensure farmers a fair price. They failed quickly.

Desperate to reestablish the prune market, a committee working with the A. P. Giannini Foundation for Agricultural Research developed an industry-wide United Pooling Plan for the growers. With some reluctance, the California Prune and Apricot Growers’ Association accepted the conditions of the new price-stabilization pool. Initially, Association members found some advantages in the plan.

In the past, the Association had borne the entire cost of advertising and had been penalized by the need to maintain price floors during weak markets. With the new United Pool, these burdens were shared, because the pool’s contract with packers required the packers to deal with out-of-pool growers on the same terms as those in the pool. In

addition, the pool was able to obtain a \$2,000,000 government loan for pool management and for advertising.

With the pool in control, the price of prunes fell to an all-time low of one cent per pound in 1933. Like the other cooperatives before it, the United Pool could not keep growers from flooding the market with off-grade fruit. Compounding the problem were major losses in foreign markets brought on by Adolph Hitler's restrictions on imports as part of his efforts to make Germany economically self-sufficient. Hitler's action destroyed Santa Clara County's largest foreign market overnight.⁴²

The United Pool continued operations until 1934, when local prune growers turned to New Deal programs for assistance. In January 1934 growers met in San Jose to determine how they could benefit from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (A.A.A.) marketing order program. Their primary goal was to gain better control of the sale of off-grade fruit. The new A.A.A. Control Program, they learned, pooled all standard-grade fruit and placed controls on off-grade prunes. To participate in the new Control Program, California growers had to commit eighty percent of their 1934 crop, which they agreed to do in August. From the start, growers were generally displeased with the new program. Their greatest concern was the absence of an industry-wide packing program. Also, despite local growers' insistence that an advertising program was essential for successful prune marketing, Secretary of State Henry A. Wallace rejected any attempts at promotion, arguing that advertising merely encouraged the consumption of one commodity over another.⁴³

Perhaps the most telling statistic showing the Santa Clara County growers' loss of crop and land during the Depression is the increase in farm mortgages. In 1931, fifty-two percent of Santa Clara County farms were mortgaged; a decade later, mortgaged farms leaped to ninety-two percent. During the same period, the value of farm land dropped by forty-nine percent. By 1941, records from the Federal Land Bank indicate that seventy-two percent of all northern California bankruptcy cases under the Frazier-Lemke law were declared in Santa Clara County.⁴⁴

During the decades of the 1920s and 1930s the accomplishments of the Santa Clara prune growers were significant, but their struggles were titanic. Even though they were faced with natural and economic disaster, organizational disarray, and constant pressure from out-of-state competition, the prune growers of Santa Clara County consistently led the world in prune production. The ability to maintain cooperative agreements throughout the two decades indicates that the majority of growers respected the concept, if not always the practice, of cooperative marketing. Yet full credit for the extraordinary production of the local prune industry should not be awarded without considering the labor force that carried the Santa Clara County prune industry to its peak.

NOTES

¹ Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story: A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc. 1967), 55.

² Yvonne Jacobson, *Passing Farms, Enduring Values; California's Santa Clara Valley* (Los Altos: William Kaufman, Inc., 1963), 207.

³ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 56.

⁴ *San Jose Mercury Herald*, September, 19, 1918, 1.

⁵ *San Jose Mercury Herald*, September 20, 1918, 3.

⁶ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 55.

⁷ *San Jose Mercury Herald*, September 21, 1918, 4.

⁸ Jacobson, *Passing Farms, Enduring Values*, 207. In 1933 Sunsweet marketed "Tenderized" prunes, produced by boiling or steaming the prunes after the dehydration process to regain the fruits' tenderness.

⁹ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 56.

¹⁰ *San Jose Mercury Herald*, September 21, 1918, 4.

¹¹ Couchman, *5 The Sunsweet Story*, 6.

¹² *A Fortune in Two Trunks* (San Jose, CA: California Prune and Apricot Growers Association, 1958), 7.

¹³ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

NOTES Continued

¹⁹ Ibid., 58.

²⁰ Ibid., 60.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *San Jose Mercury Herald*, May 17, 1923, 1.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 63.

³² *California Crop and Livestock Reporting Service Special Publication 257*, "Acreage Estimates of California Fruit and Nut Crops 1919-1953" (Sacramento: State of California, 1954), 208-209

³³ *Fifteenth Census Of the United States, Agriculture* vol. 4, Table 16 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1930), 85. In 1920, Oregon reported 2,999,480 plum and prune trees. During the 1920s Oregon's prune and plum acreage would jump by seventy-five percent to 5,292,900 acres.

³⁴ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 67.

³⁵ *A Fortune in Two Trunks*, 7.

³⁶ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 58.

³⁷ Ibid., 122.

NOTES Continued

³⁸ Glenna Matthews, "The Fruit Workers of the Santa Clara Valley: Alternative Paths to Union Organization During the 1930s," *Pacific Historical Review*, 54 (February 1985): 52.

³⁹ Lee Lester, Interview with William Bauerle, June 6, 1998.

⁴⁰ Glenna Matthews, "A California Middletown: The Social History Of San Jose in the Great Depression" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford, 1976), 199.

⁴¹ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 86.

⁴² Matthews, "The Fruit Workers of the Santa Clara Valley," 56.

⁴³ Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 85.

⁴⁴ Matthews, "The Fruit Workers of the Santa Clara Valley," 68.

CHAPTER 10

BITTER FRUIT: LABOR CAMPS AND MIGRANT CHILDREN

"Fella come through an' he says they's gonna be work up north."

"Up north?"

"Yeah — place called the Santa Clara Valley ... Prune pickin',
an' pears an' cannery work. Says it's pretty near ready."

— John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*¹

War in Europe and domestic economic fluctuations effectively changed the demographics of Santa Clara County's itinerant labor pool. Consistently high levels of fruit production throughout the 1920s and 1930s placed many county farmers in an annual state of anxiety concerning potential labor shortages. After 1923 the employment of greater numbers of Mexican migrant workers and later of displaced white laborers from the dust-bowl states, required greater social services from growers and from county and state agencies. In contrast to the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino laborers who generally came without family, Mexican and white migrant workers brought increasing numbers of dependent children into a county where the social services and educational systems were not prepared to handle either their numbers or their special needs. After 1930 the increased need for social services by migrant workers and by the Depression-stricken farmers themselves resulted in conflict among farmers and local and state agencies on how best to use federal relief dollars.

The Santa Clara County prune growers did not have a dedicated labor force that returned intact annually to harvest their crop. Instead, Carey McWilliams explains, agricultural employers across California “sought to maintain a pool or reserve of unemployed labor to meet the seasonal or peak demands for labor.”² McWilliams believes the grower wanted to “tap his pool as one would turn water on or off at a faucet.”³ In 1938, the United States Department of Labor wrote in its *Monthly Labor Review*: “The fruit, vegetable, and cotton crops of California depend upon migratory labor . . . a highly mobile labor class which shifts from one part of the state to another, following the crops.”⁴

In the years just before World War I, Frederick C. Mills, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, was hired by the United States Immigration Commission to disguise himself as a migrant worker to gain a better understanding of the transient population. He integrated his own findings with other Immigration Commission migrant labor surveys to develop five reports.⁵

In his most important report, Mills summarized the characteristics of 222 itinerant California laborers. All were men whose ages generally fell between twenty and forty, although the youngest was sixteen and the oldest sixty-two. Seventy-six percent of them were unmarried. Sixty-one percent of them were United States citizens. They came from twenty-four different countries. The majority of foreign-born workers came from northern Europe — fifteen percent were Irish, fourteen percent were Swedish, and twelve percent were German. Italy provided the only significant population from southern or eastern Europe.⁶

Mills' report is important because it provides historians some understanding of the lives of these people. He attributed their predicament to the "wipe of economic necessity," and added that, "the constitution of California industry demands an immense reserve labor force of migratory, seasonal workers."⁷ Referring to them as a "necessary army," Mills noted:

As to the number on the road constantly, throughout the State, or the number who resort to this migratory life between periods of work, it is impossible to reach an approximation. Only can it be said that there is a great shifting army of them, tramping, riding, back and forth, over the State. Several times I have counted from 40 to 60 on a single freight train; often as many as 20 will be stowed away on a fast passenger train. Every train bears them; every road sees the weary blanket stiff; every railroad town has its 'jungles,' frequented by an ever-flowing stream of itinerants.⁸

World War I all but dried up the superabundance of agricultural labor that Mills described. By 1917 farm operators throughout the state were yet again complaining of labor shortages so severe that some growers were losing crops. In response, the United States Department of Labor suspended the head tax, literacy test, and the provisions against contract labor for Mexicans. Farmers were encouraged to bring Mexicans into California, "where they were to engage exclusively in agricultural labor or be arrested and deported."⁹ At first, fearing the antagonism of organized labor, however, growers in Santa Clara County were not enthusiastic about using Mexican labor despite the increasing shortages.

On March 3, 1919, Santa Clara County agricultural interests predicted labor shortages for county farmers. Citing immigration declines, war casualties, and the deadly influenza epidemic of the previous year as reasons for the shortages, local growers feared

that these conditions would continue for years to come. Expecting tremendous opposition from organized labor, local growers quickly dismissed any thought of encouraging Chinese, Japanese, or Mexican labor.¹⁰ In a column written for the *San Jose Mercury Herald*, Louis L. Huillier of Santa Clara took a progressive stance and suggested that the solutions to the impending labor shortage were “up-to-date machinery, education and cooperation between employers and help, and good wages.”¹¹

Evidence indicates that there were no serious labor shortages in the first several years immediately following World War I. The *Pacific Rural Press* reported that farm wage increases for the 1919 and 1920 seasons were not the result of a labor shortage, because there was a sufficient number of workers to harvest the crops those years.¹² However, that situation changed rapidly and drastically. By 1921, records from the California Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated a thirty-two percent shortage of prune pickers in San Jose.¹³ At the same time, California’s Mexican labor supply began to grow.

Beginning in 1923, immigration to California by Mexican laborers rose rapidly. The three-year period from 1923 through 1925 witnessed an eighty-four percent increase in Mexican immigrants during the years 1920 through 1922, from 98,891 to 182,735. Attempts in 1926 to impose a new quota that would reduce the annual number of Mexican immigrants into California to a relative trickle of two thousand persons annually was strongly opposed by farmers who had become more dependent upon this labor supply with each passing year.¹⁴ By 1930, the Mexican population in California had grown to 368,013, an increase of more than three hundred percent since 1920.¹⁵

In tandem with the increased Mexican population in California, although fewer in overall numbers, was an increase in the state's Filipino population. Only 2,674 Filipinos resided in California in 1920; the number emigrating to California jumped from 469 in 1922 to 2,122 in 1923. Influenced by reports from relatives who had come before them and by steamship lines that painted glowing pictures of California's economic potential, the Filipino population of California had grown to 30,470 by 1930.¹⁶

	Mexican	Japanese	Filipino	Hindu	Chinese	Others
Imperial Coachella Valleys	75	7	7	0	0	11
Southern California	84	5	6	2	2	1
* Central Coast	47	21	18	1	6	6
Northern Coast	36	28	15	2	14	5
Sacramento Valley	32	29	18	12	6	2
San Joaquine Valley	56	17	17	2	3	4
Mountain & Deserts	21	29	15	32	3	0

*** Central Coast Counties:**

Alameda, Contra Costa, Monterey, Napa, San Bernito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Sonoma

Source: Varden Fuller, "The Supply of Agriculture Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, Pursuant to Senate Resolution 266, A Resolution to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with the Rights of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively*, Seventy-Sixth Congress, Third Session (Washington D.C.: United States Bureau Of Agricultural Economics, January 13, 1940), 19872.

Figure 14. Percentage of Non-White Farm Labor by California Agricultural District
1928 — 1930

Figure 14 shows the reliance farmers placed on non-white agricultural workers throughout California's seven agricultural districts.¹⁷ For the Central Coast District, which includes Santa Clara County farmers overwhelmingly used Mexican labor as the primary source of non-white labor. Faced with the necessity of harvesting their crop, the prune growers in Santa Clara County disregarded their earlier fears of resistance from organized labor and hired whatever labor was available.

Source: Prepared by William Bauerle after information from *Years 1910-1932: United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Immigration, Annual Reports of the Commissioner-General of Immigration*, and *Years 1933-1936: United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Statistical Abstract of the United States* (1936), 101.. (1937), 11.

Figure 15. California Farm Wages Per Day 1909 — 1935

Figure 15 shows the daily wage paid to California farm labor from 1909 to 1935. The daily California farm wage peaked at \$3.50 in 1920 and then dropped by \$1.05 from 1920 to 1921 as the labor pools in the state began to replenish themselves. With the exception of a twenty-seven cent increase in 1923, daily wages averaged \$2.57 through 1930, then fell forty-six percent to \$1.38 in 1932, the lowest amount recorded during these twenty-seven years. For itinerant laborers, and especially for Mexican workers, the low wage created terrible hardship.¹⁸

Most Mexican migrant workers displayed one characteristic that set them apart from all other migrant labor groups prior to the Great Depression. Unlike the Chinese, Japanese, and white migrant laborers before them, who generally were single men traveling alone, a substantial number of Mexican workers brought their families to the United States. These families, along with the increasing number of out-of-state white families — “Okies” — who came to California near the end of the 1920s, imposed severe demands on the municipalities that accepted them. With the deepening Depression and the economic strain it placed on local government resources, migrant housing and education became serious matters of contention between state government officials and county farmers.

Beginning in December 1934 the National Association of Housing sponsored four *Conferences On Housing Of Migratory Agricultural Laborers*. Attended by state and local officials and by state farmers, the primary objective of the conferences was to consider how “subsistence homesteads” or “camps for migrant laborers either on the farms of growers or on publicly owned property” might be used to relieve some of the housing problems facing migrant workers.¹⁹

H. E. Drobish, Director of Resettlement for Agricultural Labor in California, focused the discussion by reference to the 1930 census: “Those figures show that of those listed as gainfully employed in agriculture, 56.8 percent are classed as agricultural laborers. In other words, in California, over half of the people who are classed as agricultural are laborers and not land owners or even tenants.”²⁰ Drobish noted that

information gathered by his organization showed that approximately 80,000 agricultural workers in California were on relief.²¹

Mr. Carleton, a state official, indicated that the state was providing assistance to 35,000 transients, and that in one month alone 65,000 transients were “handled.” Within this group, Carleton mentioned that the state was providing for 5,000 migrant families.²² At the end of 1934, California operated sixty-seven camps that supported nearly 15,000 people. Drobish replied:

We believe that where there are several crops coming on in different times requiring outside labor, in such an area might be located a colony of laborers’ homes where these little homes could be rented to these laborers on some sort of basis where they would have a clean, decent place to live under proper supervision. In connection with that, I am visualizing this as a colony of laborers with families, but along with that, we must consider the homeless men, the single men who are laborers, and perhaps an army barrack type of a place with an eating house in connection with it should be established for those men.²³

Mr. Merritt, a farmer from the Tagus Ranch in Tulare County, agreed that these labor colonies were needed, and he had some strong feelings regarding their placement. “I would hate,” he injected, “to see such a colony around a ranch which I was operating myself.” Rather, Merritt felt that the camps should be located near smaller towns and not in purely agricultural districts.²⁴

W. W. Curtner, a large-scale prune grower from northern Santa Clara County, spoke from experience: “Now in housing, our place was for a while, when we first started using migratory labor, a head quarters for it and it got to be that they would become nesters.”²⁵ Curtner indicated that his farm was “more or less” dependent on Mexican labor and he categorized labor on his ranch into two groups — one that returned

annually and caused few problems, and the other that was quite destructive. "When they are ready to leave, for the last few days that they are on the place, if you don't watch them, your camps and locations are practically wrecked. If they are short on fuel and you are not watching them — they will use boards or materials where they can get it."²⁶ Such problems caused Curtner eventually to evict all the migrants from his land.

Mulling over his bad experiences with migrant housing, Curtner offered some solutions. Believing that much of his problem was directly tied to the large size of his informal camp, Curtner suggested that smaller camps be maintained on the growers' ranches: "By having them on the ranch, you are in closer contact with them, you are able to handle the labor unrest better, and we find that the smaller the camp, the better."²⁷ Curtner believed the best approach was to limit each camp to three or four families, "for if they are related, it is better."²⁸ Furthermore, Curtner felt, outbreaks of disease such as smallpox could be more effectively quarantined in small camps and as a result would be less likely to erode his labor force.²⁹

Responding to Curtner's comments about the destruction of property, Dr. Stone, Health Officer of Madera, took the opportunity to comment on one unjust generalization while making another:

I hear Mexicans criticized a great deal; criticized by individuals who know nothing about them. It has been my observation that of two types of transient labor, the Mexican is infinitely better than the poor White. The poor White comes from the Southern States and is an individual who has a preconceived idea that the county owes him a living. He comes in after he is through with his picking, his wife has gone out to get a permanent wave, his children have a new automobile and at the end of the season he is broke. He goes in and demands welfare. He demands support.³⁰

Then, returning to the topic of where to establish the camps, Stone criticized Merritt's "facetious" suggestion that camps be located near small towns. "I would like to see them put away from small towns because in the small town labor is a problem. There are too many people in those small towns who are dependent on help and if there is competition, you don't want to inflict upon the small town any further competition."³¹ Nor did Stone like the idea of labor colonies, which he felt would be a source of conflict and jealousy among large and small farmers who would be drawing labor from the same camp. For example, Stone suggested, "Tom over here has a big place and wants the best labor. Bill has not got so much, and wants the best labor too, but he doesn't always get it."³²

Stone believed that the farmers' dependence on itinerant labor could be eliminated if farmers paid agricultural workers a living wage. If farmers paid agricultural workers the same wage that industrial city workers typically received, then farm workers could live in the cities where they could become meaningful contributors to the city's economy. Instead, Stone argued, "We have got great numbers of State homeless in practically every section in California. What to do with them none of us seem to know, and it seems to me that sooner or later, that matter is going to be put up squarely to the State, because the individual counties cannot carry on as they are at the present moment, without going absolutely bankrupt."³³ Moving the argument in a different direction, Mr. Palomares from the San Joaquin Valley discussed the farmers' plight and the statewide competition for labor: "I venture to say that our pickers, our itinerant workers, have made more money than farmers. . . . Our farmers in the last three years have had an awful struggle.

Sometimes the itinerant has a better house than the farmer. The day of the hut is getting to be a thing of the past. They are building permanent housing. That is the way to hold labor.”³⁴

Palormares reminded the audience that the counties with the best housing would attract the best labor, and he reminded his listeners that “in the Santa Clara Valley they have seasonal work. Remember this, that the same crops mature at the same time throughout the state with the exception of the Imperial Valley. When the labor demands are made from the San Joaquin Valley, they are also made from the Santa Clara Valley. First peas, beets, fruit thinning, fruit picking and cotton.”³⁵

During the second conference, held in Sacramento on January 18, 1935, Mr. Weston, a member of the Santa Clara County Planning Commission and a large-scale orchardist, suggested a system of labor certification. “I feel that people are willing to pay for competent help,” Weston announced. “I think certification should be on the basis of experience. They carry a card and are identified by a card and some neutral authority should make a memoranda [sic] on that card showing where, when and how long they have worked.”³⁶ In addition, Weston believed housing for the certified labor should be planned by district, “probably by county,” and should provide “an almost minimum of features of shelter, sanitation, water and electric light.” Weston indicated that the families assigned to the group should have a “certain amount of privacy” and that admissions into a camp would be segregated by “congenial grouping”; in other words, Weston did

not think it was a wise to have Filipinos mixing with Mexicans, or families grouped with “single men and drifters.”³⁷

When Weston was asked his opinion of the extension of privately funded “auto camps,” his answer was direct. “I think they are pathetic. I can’t think they render the service they collect for. I think the service is over paid for. They are shoved on the ranch. . . . I think we are tender of a little human interest in the form of auto camps.”³⁸ Stone was quick to rebut:

I have only this to say as far as Mr. Weston’s remarks insofar as auto camps are concerned: The suggestion was that there had been a great many laborers who had come into auto camps to make their temporary homes rather than to build tents by the larger property owners or by smaller camps and that they had gone into these camps because they possess the money to pay the rent that was charged them. It has been my observation of the auto camps over the entire State of California that there is no better or finer organization or more progressive organization in the State. These auto camps, while it is true there are some not as good as others — your auto camp is nothing more or less than an automobile hotel and in my opinion, having watched the very effective work done by the Division of Immigration and Housing in their careful inspection of these camps, that there are more good ones than there are bad ones and whenever a bad one is found, the Division of Immigration and Housing rights their conditions.³⁹

Continuing his argument, Stone looked back to a time when farm labor traveled from one farm to another making, he claimed, “a party of it.” Since then, he argued, the Chambers of Commerce all over California had actively promoted their specific regions as being “Utopias.” Stone called this boosterism false advertising that disillusioned the laborers: “When they find that they can’t pick bread off the trees and meat out of the ground, then they become more or less disgruntled.” The consequence, Stone suggested, was that “some of the false advertising plus the machine age has brought into California

much undesirable labor and much which is causing us trouble today and I don't know that we should absolutely blame the machine for it, but we should blame bad propaganda for a large part of it." Stone then suggested that labor camps sponsored by the federal government would benefit the farmer who could "know something about the laborer when he arrives on your property to pick your crop."⁴⁰

"How are you going to keep these camps for migratory labor?" Curtner asked. "How can you define migratory labor? How are you going to keep them from going places where they will squat? Is there any way to prevent a group from coming in and camping and remaining permanently, and how are we going to keep out the individual [i.e., the labor organizer] that raises false hopes among them, collecting fees from them, and creating disturbances among them and the employers?"⁴¹ Curtner's questions went unanswered. During the remainder of the second conference, the participants discussed the need to complete a survey, authorized during the first conference but not yet undertaken, that would provide conference attendees with a comprehensive understanding of California's migrant labor problem. Professor Paul Taylor of the University of California, Berkeley, acting as the state's Regional Labor Relations Advisor, was asked to head the statewide survey. After eight months spent collecting and analyzing the data, Taylor presented the preliminary findings at the third conference, held in Marysville on October 12, 1935.⁴²

The fourth conference, held on November 18, 1935, was perhaps the most revealing of the feelings and struggles of Santa Clara County farmers concerning itinerant

labor and the housing problem. The economic advantage of large farmers over small farmers in providing affordable housing for labor was at the center of the discussion. Mr. D. D. Watson, a large-scale fruit grower from Brentwood opened the discourse:

I have been farming the Brentwood district for some 15 years and operate some 8000 acres of orchards and employ 400 to 800 people. . . . I believe it is the duty of every employer to see that those people working for him are properly housed, at least meeting the major requirement of the State Housing Act. It is true that some large corporations have been able to put in fine camps. Not all growers find themselves in this fortunate position, and I believe the ways and means have been provided so these growers can provide the same facilities as is being provided for these laborers by the large operators. The large operators are doing this because they will be able to demand and attract the very cream of labor.⁴³

Curtner later responded that although he was not a small grower, he was in constant contact with the small growers of Santa Clara County. Referring to a group of Portuguese growers in eastern Santa Clara County, Curtner explained that they were a difficult group to deal with. "They came up through the hard knocks themselves and they can't understand why they should have to fix up better conditions than they were used to. It is almost impossible to get that over to them, and yet those small growers with 10, 15, and 20 acres of their own land are coming to the point where they are saying 'we had better put up toilets, floors, garden space for our help.'"⁴⁴

Watson replied that there were a lot of farmers who were "right up against it," and that small farmers who would have liked to provide adequate housing, but they could not afford to. With tighter restrictions being placed on farmers by the Federal Land Bank, the future was looking worse. "It seems to me," Watson added, "with this set up through the

Resettlement Administration that if the small farmer who wants to provide housing can't raise the money to do it, the ways and means should be provided."⁴⁵

Speaking up, Mr. Leonard, secretary of the Santa Clara County Farm Bureau, discussed how the lending policies of the Federal Land Bank adversely affected Santa Clara County farmers. Leonard started by explaining that, as of 1930, the county had more than 6,000 farms. Having consulted with "one of the most prominent and solid bankers in San Jose," Leonard determined that during the five years leading up to 1934, Santa Clara County farm debt equaled \$26,000,000, and that the Federal Land Bank took in \$4,000,000 in 1933 and an estimated \$1,830,000 in 1934. Analyzing the agricultural financing in the county, Leonard stated, "The Federal Land Bank in its loaning policy has helped the man who did not need it. There must be close to 2,000 farmers in Santa Clara County, one of the most famous valleys on the face of the earth, that are in financial difficulties, and they can't get a dime to help from any government agency."⁴⁶

Later, Leonard urged the government to take action to resolve the Santa Clara County farm debt. "If you give these men enough money to refinance themselves on three, four, and five percent, they will come clean and you won't lose a dime."⁴⁷ With his next breath, Leonard criticized government aid to labor:

Frankly, I think you had better go back to old-fashioned and first principles and let everybody pay his own bills. [Leonard saw no contradiction between having just suggested that the government bail farmers out of their current dilemma and then suggesting that everyone should pay his own way.] I am trying to provide for my men. If you come on my place you will find modern toilets. I don't need the government telling me that. Frankly, I think a lot of this may be a waste of money. . . . I tell you that we are babying a lot of our laborers. I had the experience of going into San Jose and if I asked one man, I asked 40 to come out to work

for 30 cents an hour and [I] can't get one. I found five sitting in the back of an athletic club and not one of them would work.⁴⁸

Toward the end of the last day of the conference, Stone asked the chairman to present the body with a resolution that could be considered for approval. J. B. Nathan, acting secretary of the organizational committee of the Federation of Agricultural, Packing and Cannery Workers, replied, "This is not a representative group. Labor is not represented. The workers are not represented here. And the small farmers' groups are not represented here."⁴⁹ Several speakers concurred with Nathan, including Taylor who added, "I was informed that there would be no resolution adopted; that it was a gathering to discuss matters rather than pass resolutions. With all due regard to my friend Dr. Stone, I am sorry to say I have no power to vote in any representative capacity and that any vote that I might make would be construed as a representative vote."⁵⁰

In his closing remarks to the committee, Drobish criticized the callousness of some of the conference attendees:

Some said that perhaps the relief question is all wrong. We may have been making a mistake by feeding these people. They ought to take care of themselves. . . . We have advanced millions to industrial groups, to banking groups, to railroads, and on down the line. The situation in Santa Clara County is not typical in the State in another matter. The facts are that millions of farmers are on land that wouldn't be otherwise. We are here not representing the individuals but are trying to think this thing through from the point of view of the State. . . . We have to recognize this fact that of our agricultural people, over half of them are laborers. The only thing we have done for that group of agricultural labor — one is relief and the other is work relief. But the rest of us have gotten some way or other loans or grants to carry us on. Here is a group of half of your population they haven't done anything for.⁵¹

The series of conferences, while extremely informative, ended without passing any resolution. However, in the third conference, during his presentation of the statewide survey on the problem of migratory agricultural labor, Dr. Taylor did expose a serious social condition that later came under state scrutiny in Santa Clara County.

On the list of tragedies highlighted by the Great Depression, perhaps none was more disturbing than the educational plight of the migrant child. Taylor quoted a fruit picker, "My children ain't raised decent like I was raised by my father."⁵² Another "fruit tramp" reached in his pocket, pulled out a letter from his son, and handing it to Taylor said, "Look, my son can't spell as he ought to." Emphasizing his point, Taylor told the conference, "In other words, although we have long cherished the ideal, and it has been a fact, that children should be better educated than the parents, we face that sad fact among the agricultural laborers of many of them retrogressing in education and living conditions."⁵³

To help inform the public, on August 15, 1938, Edward J. Rowell published an article in *California Children*, titled, "The Child in the Migratory Camp — Education." Rowell reported that in 1935 the total number of out-of-state migrants seeking manual work in California was 250,000.⁵⁴ In that year, a conservative estimate placed the number of school-aged migrant children at 100,000. Using data collected by the Farm Security Administration, Rowell examined the educational issues confronting the children of migratory families. He used student records from Santa Clara County for his analysis.

According to Rowell, most counties with significant numbers of agricultural laborers set aside "special facilities" such as the school auditorium, extra classrooms,

tents and other available facilities, for the schooling of migrant children. Irregular attendance was one justification given for segregating migrant children from the general school population. Average daily attendance records and total enrollment records taken from eleven Santa Clara County schools during the 1934-1935 season show a consistent attendance pattern associated with harvest time.⁵⁵ Alviso School records indicate a significant drop in attendance during the fruit harvest. Daily school attendance fell from an average of 95.4 percent for the school months other than September and October to 91.8 percent in September and to 86.1 percent in October. Similar patterns appeared in other county schools including San Jose, Sunnyvale, Mountain View, and Jackson.⁵⁶

Source: Drawn by William Bauerle after information from "California Agricultural Background: The Structure of The Agricultural Economy," *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, Pursuant to Senate Resolution 266, Part 62, A Resolution to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with the Rights of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively*, Seventy-Sixth Congress, Third Session (Washington, D.C.: United States Bureau Of Agricultural Economics, January 13, 1940), 22745.

Figure 16. Santa Clara County Schools Eight-Month Average Daily Attendance
1934 — 1935

Figure 16 shows the total average daily attendance for eight Santa Clara County schools from September 1934 through April 1935. County school records indicate that average daily attendance declined by 193 students from September to April. Although the small sample population and the single-year data prevent definitive analysis, the decline in attendance from September through April does fit state migratory patterns and suggests that additional children were enrolled in county schools during harvest season. The gradual decline from November to March suggests that some migrant families may have remained in the county throughout the winter months and then moved on to other agricultural work.

Rowell asserts that the “expected result from interrupted education and irregular attendance is retardation.”⁵⁷ He reasoned that a child should normally advance one grade each year; assuming entrance to grade school at age six, a child under normal conditions would complete the first grade at age seven, the second grade at age eight, the third grade at age nine, and so forth. Using data taken from an educational survey of 250 white migratory labor families and 157 Mexican migratory labor families, Rowell noted the following educational patterns:

Thirteen, or 4 percent, of children of white migrant families were retarded one grade at age eleven. The modal tendency was for this one year retardation to continue through the eighth grade. However, from age nine on, an increasing number failed to keep pace with the normal advancement. Thus 27.2 percent were retarded one grade at age nine; 40.9 percent, one more grade at age ten; 66 percent, one more grade at age eleven; 69.2 percent at age 12; 63.1 percent at age 13; and 84 percent at age 14. In the case of Mexican children included in the survey, the retardation was even greater. The modal group shifted from normal advancement to one year retardation at age ten and continued one year behind through age 14. Retardation started as early as the second grade in

contrast to the whites, who showed no signs of this until the third grade. The proportionate number of Mexican children back one or more grades in schooling at ages from eight to fourteen were as follows: age 8, 36 percent; age 9, 50 percent; age 10, 70.8 percent; age 11, 72.75 percent; age 13, 77.2 percent; and age 14, 88.4 percent.⁵⁸

A number of factors contributed to the greater number of Mexican children experiencing educational problems. Cultural adjustments, language barriers, lack of family support of education, and racial discrimination were additional obstacles Mexican children faced as they struggled through the California educational system. Social rejection was perhaps the hardest and most pronounced obstacle that both Mexican and poor white children faced as they moved in and out of California school districts.

School officials' segregation of the children of migratory laborers from the general school population was obviously supported by the majority of families in the county whose children attended public schools. Migrant families usually could not afford the amenities — clothes, bathing facilities, nutritional foods, bedding — taken for granted by most local children. Reports suggest that migrant children were often less clean, less healthy, and less readily accepted as students. As one migrant parent lamented, "They said of my child on the school ground, 'he's from the county camp.' Don't you see how it hurts? Makes it hard. Pretty soon the children begin to think they're not equal. That's a drawback to this education."⁵⁹

The housing and child labor conferences provided important clues regarding Santa Clara County's use and treatment of migrant workers during the 1930s. Local farmers appear to have resented a government program that required them to provide improved accommodations over and above those they believed were necessary. The annual

migration of thousands of new dependents taxed ill-prepared school, health, and other social services, and had potential long-term adverse effects on the migrant children exposed to them.

To the Chamber of Commerce boosters in the 1920s and through the 1930s, the prune orchards made Santa Clara Valley the “Valley of the Heart’s Delight.” However, throughout these decades, the blessings of fertile soil, gentle climate, and agricultural abundance were blemished by the continued exploitation of an underclass of itinerant laborers who produced but did not partake of the bounty. This population was an essential element in the Santa Clara Valley; its color had changed, but its circumstances had not. The prunes had to be picked.

NOTES

¹ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 354 (page reference is to reprint edition).

² Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares The Land: Migrant and Migratory Labor in the United States* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 1967), 37.

³ Ibid.

⁴ United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Review*, 47, no. 5 (November 1938), 980.

⁵ Gregory R. Woirol, "Men On The Road: Early Twentieth-Century Surveys Of Itinerant Labor in California," *California History* (Summer 1991): 193.

⁶ Ibid., 200.

⁷ Ibid., 198.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Varden Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, Pursuant to Senate Resolution 266, A Resolution to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with the Rights of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively*, Seventy-Sixth Congress, Third Session (Washington D.C.: United States Bureau Of Agricultural Economics, January 13, 1940), 19849.

¹⁰ *San Jose Mercury Herald*, March 3, 1919, 6. In addition, the growers indicated that "the present scale of orchard wages would remain in force [at] 25 cents to 40 cents an hour without room and board."

¹¹ Yvonne Jacobson, *Passing Farms, Enduring Values; California's Santa Clara Valley* (Los Altos: William Kaufman, Inc., 1963), 204 — 205. Tractors capable of meeting the unique requirements of orchard cultivation first appeared in the Santa Clara County around 1907 when Alf Johnson and his brother opened the Johnson Tractor Company. Until then, the only labor-saving devices commonly employed in the county were the Bean power sprayers and the stationary water-pump engines used for orchard irrigation. By 1922, the Hendy Iron Works Company had purchased Johnson's tractor design and was asserting that "it replaces horses for every [aspect of] farm work." The

NOTES Continued

United States agricultural census of 1910 makes no mention of tractors on Santa Clara County farms. By 1939 state records reported 3,020 tractors operating on 5,608 county farms. During the period 1910 to 1930, the average number of horses and mules per farm in Santa Clara County dropped from four horses and mules per farm to fewer than one per farm. Despite reductions in animal power and the efficiencies the tractor brought to local farmers, it did little or nothing to reduce the human labor required at harvest time. *Year 1910: United States Thirteenth Agricultural Census 1909 and 1910*, Table 1, 152. *Year 1930: United States Fifteenth Agricultural Census 1930*, Table 4, 408.

¹² Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," *Hearings Before a Subcommittee*, 19849.

¹³ California Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Twentieth Biennial Report, 1921-1922*, Table No.33 (Sacramento: State of California, 1923), 385.

¹⁴ Fuller, "The Supply of Agricultural Labor as a Factor in the Evolution of Farm Organization in California," *Hearings Before a Subcommittee*, 19853. Before 1917 immigration laws placed general restrictions and were used to limit Mexican labor. In 1917 the Secretary of Labor lifted some restrictions against Mexicans in response to a statewide labor emergency. By 1920, a committee appointed to investigate Mexican admissions under the emergency exemption estimated that 50,800 Mexicans had entered the United States under the exemption. Eighty percent of those who entered were categorized as agricultural labor.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19852.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19857.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19871. The table was prepared by the United States College of Agricultural and reflects data from surveys of more than 1,287 California farmers located throughout the state. The questionnaires asked farmers to identify the number they employed in the different groups during the three-year period 1928 — 1930.

¹⁸ Varden Fuller, "California Agricultural Background: The Structure of the Agricultural Economy," *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee of the Committee on Education and Labor, Pursuant to Senate Resolution 266, A Resolution to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with the Rights of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively*, Seventy-Sixth Congress, Third Session (Washington D.C.: United States Bureau Of Agricultural Economics, January 13, 1940), 22524.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22541.

NOTES Continued

²⁰ Ibid., 22543.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. Notes from the four conferences do not include the full names of all the participants. There are numerous examples throughout the conference reports where speakers were only addressed by their last names.

²³ Ibid., 22544.

²⁴ Ibid., 22546.

²⁵ Ibid., 22547.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 22546.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 22548.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 22553.

³⁵ Ibid., 22570.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 22553.

³⁸ Ibid., 22570.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22572.

NOTES Continued

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 22609. The majority of the third conference was dedicated to the review of Taylor's report and of a presentation provided by Drobish on the Rural Rehabilitation Division of the Settlement Administration titled, "What Has Been Accomplished and What is Proposed by The Resettlement Administration for Agricultural Labor In California."

⁴³ Ibid., 22629.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 22631.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 22632.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22633.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 22635.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 22634.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 22635.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 22598.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 22741.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 22745.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 22743.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSIONS: WITHERING BLOSSOMS

After 1930, Santa Clara County prune acreage steadily decreased. In the course of five decades the agricultural economy of Santa Clara County was replaced by an industry based on high technology that promised new investors the moon and the stars and then delivered. Escalating land values brought on by a rapidly expanding industrial economy, resulted in gargantuan changes in the county's landscape that included the destruction of millions of prune trees and the paving over of hundreds of square miles of orchards. Despite minor resistance from some county citizens who hoped for a resurgence in the county's agricultural economy, by the 1990s the county's prune production dwindled to something just short of memories.

The depression years of the 1930s radically changed the economic balance across America and in Santa Clara County. During this time the cost of farming became more burdensome. Between 1929 and 1934, nearly two million American farmers left their farms in search of work.¹ Rising labor costs, fuel, water, fertilizer, sprays, equipment, and taxes all played into the farmers' decisions to leave the land. In some cases land had been subdivided when it was passed down from one generation to the next, yielding parcels too small to earn a living.² As the Depression worsened, many local farmers looked for alternative work to help pay their bills.

The decision by the United States Navy in 1931 to build a West Coast base to house blimps in Sunnyvale was the seed of a military presence that would drastically shift employment from an agricultural to a military and industrial basis. One historian estimates that between 1943 and 1947 approximately seventy new industrial plants were built to support military projects. During the 1940s the federal government spent more than \$8,000,000 to construct plants to produce magnesium, ferro-silicon and plastics in San Jose. It is estimated that between 1941 and 1945 the United States government spent more than \$32,000,000 in defense money in Santa Clara County.³

	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Trade	Service	Government	Total
1949	16.4	20.9	16.5	11.5	11.8	77.1
1960	11.2	69	34.5	30.5	26.8	172
1965	8.4	88.2	49.4	53.9	43.4	243.3
1970	6.7	123.5	71	75.5	60	336.7
1975	7.7	153.8	91.3	97.3	72.5	422.6
1980	6.4	242.6	135.1	155.8	83.9	623.8
1987	4.7	262.1	162	193.1	87.6	709.5

Source: RoseAnne Dominguez *The Decline Of Santa Clara County's Fruit And Vegetable Canning Industry 1967-1987*. (Masters Thesis, San Jose State University, 1992), 37.

Figure 17. Average Annual Employment by Industry (1000's of people)

Figure 17 shows the rapid growth of the manufacturing labor force in Santa Clara County and the gradual decline of its agricultural labor base from 1949 through 1987. The rise in manufacturing jobs was largely made possible by county leadership that saw the defense and high technology industries as the way to future prosperity. In 1944, one hundred of San Jose's most prominent men joined together to form the Progressive Committee to plan Santa Clara County's post-war industrial growth.⁴ Local historian

Stephen M. Payne suggests that: "Much of the development of the county can be attributed to pro-growth spirit of the Industrial Committee . . . and the choice of Anthony P. 'Dutch' Hamann as San Jose City Manager in 1950."⁵

From the late 1940s through the 1950s, farm acreage in California increased by five percent; at the same time, farm acreage in Santa Clara County decreased by twenty-seven percent.⁶ This rapid conversion of orchard land to industrial use was not easily accepted by some growers. Yvonne Jacobson recalls that her father, a county grower, developed ulcers as he fought alongside other farmers, devising "schemes to counterattack the cities' drive to annex" their land.⁷ Jacobson described the turbulent years of the 1950s when:

In an effort to increase its tax base, San Jose began to annex farm lands, creating a patchwork of boundary lines and isolated islands of development that were expensive and impractical to service. But each city practiced the same method of grabbing land. This patchwork development, or 'leapfrogging' was to have the worst effect on agricultural lands by creating pressure on all sides for the few remaining farmers to sell out to development, even if they didn't want to. By 1955 nearly 30,000 acres of prime farmland had been lost, by 1965 there were 52,000 acres left in fruit, nuts and berries; a decade later the number was down to 23,000. Seventy-seven thousand acres were urbanized within thirty years.⁸

Source: Santa Clara County Crop Reports 1940, 1949, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1980

Figure 18. Decline of Santa Clara County Prune Acreage From 1940 Through 1990.

Figure 18 reflects the rapid urbanization that squeezed prune acreage out of Santa Clara County. Lee Lester recalled that “in the ‘50s and early ‘60s, a lot of farmers said, ‘Heck, I’m not going to farm here anymore,’ and sold their property for just way too cheap, \$1,000 or \$1,100 an acre. It went up to \$2,000 and that looked pretty good — more than most farmers had ever dreamed of.”⁹ In 1960 Sacramento County produced 55,547 tons of prunes, the first time in nine decades that it had out-produced Santa Clara County (51,700 tons).¹⁰ By 1970 the county’s prune acreage had dropped to only 18,900 acres; twenty years later it had fallen to less than 900 acres. In 1998 there are fewer than 500 acres of prunes growing in Santa Clara County.¹¹

For approximately ninety years, Santa Clara County led the world in the production and marketing of prunes. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth-

century, the production of prunes in Santa Clara County provided a novel dietary delight to Californians whose previous enjoyment of fruit had been limited by the short life of perishable fresh fruit, and whose typical monotonous diet consisted largely of beef, bread, beans, potatoes, and cereal.¹² Encouraged by improvements in transportation, farm machinery, and agricultural knowledge, local growers reached East Coast and international markets.

The phenomenal success of the Santa Clara County prune industry resulted from a number of natural, social and economic factors. Blessed with rich soil, abundant water, and a valley where the sun, wind, and rain mixed in measures ideal for the growing of fruit, Santa Clara County was a virtual mecca for prune production. The valley drew the energy and ambition of thousands of enterprising pioneers in search of a new life and excited by the fertile soil, clean abundant water, and mild weather.

The early pioneers who came to the county in the 1850s and 1860s helped develop the fruit production and marketing infrastructure. An early system of communication that included newspapers, the California Agricultural Society, telegraph, and local horticulturist groups helped pool knowledge and distribute information on marketing and production strategies. Early fruit producers established nurseries, designed orchard layouts, built packing houses, networked with financial and marketing concerns, and in so doing established the business infrastructure that supported the prune industry.

With time local growers learned hard lessons relative to free enterprise. Increased production and cost concerns in the 1870s caused growers to separate prune production from the packing, and by doing so to employ women at lower wages than white men.

Also, the saturation of local markets forced growers to seek new national and eventually foreign markets. Their efforts were enhanced by the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. As markets expanded and production levels increased even higher, growers faced what was noticeably one of their largest and most persistent problems, providing affordable harvest labor.

Labor to harvest the orchard crops was perhaps the greatest difficulty county farmers faced during the years of highest production, 1890 through 1940. By 1890 Santa Clara County growers had expanded to national and global markets. At the same time, they were critically dependent on the agencies that produced and marketed their product. Besides the hired labor they needed to help maintain the orchards during the non harvest season, farmers depended heavily on others to pick, pack, ship, and market their fruit. In addition as production grew so did their increased need for and costs of; water, fertilizer, pesticides, and farm implements.

With perhaps the one exception of labor, the farmers had very little control over their production and marketing costs. Compounding their problems, when times were hard, farmers had to mortgage their property to pay the bills. In a very real sense the farmer was only one step above his workers on the agricultural economic hierarchy. In the early 1870s farmers, dependent on affordable labor, began employing any non-white male harvest labor that was available to achieve their earning goals. Non-white male laborers were hired on an as-needed basis for wages drastically lower than what white laborers earned for similar work. In most cases non-white laborers were not expected to cover their own room and board.

Aided by a society steeped in bigotry and racial prejudice, and driven by profit, innovation, and self-reliance, the county growers consistently employed un-empowered and tractable laborers who were often as objectionable to the majority of the local community as was the work they performed. The Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans were successive pools of workers who could not vote and who often suffered social ostracism, and at times physical and property abuse. In addition, white men who chose, during times of hardship, to join the ranks of the migrant workers marching from field to field in search of work, were often labeled “tramps.”

While at times, local farmers did experience public criticism and, on rare occasions, property damage because of their employment of non-white labor, in most cases it was the migrant worker who received the brunt of abuse. Often during times of economic down turn, local residents concerned with the employment of non-American citizens attacked the laborer rather than the farmer who employed them. The most effective way society found to deal with the unwanted migrant labor force was through the legal system.

The Chinese Exclusionary Act (1882), the Geary Act (1893), the Alien Land Act (1913), and a host of immigration laws helped control and limit the rights of the unwanted immigrant populations. At the same time they gave society an option for addressing the problem without having to deal directly with the economic issues that Santa Clara County farmers faced annually. That local growers were able to produce and market millions of pounds of fruit annually under such stress, is a testament to their fortitude and commitment to their industry.

Eventually, a common desire among most county growers to gain greater control over national and global prune production led to the establishment of a successful cooperative venture. Bit by bit, and constantly tugged between immediate self-interest and the longer-range benefits of cooperative marketing, the small-scale prune growers eventually managed to establish a viable industry organization with a trademark — Sunsweet — that became synonymous with its product. For almost one hundred years, the prune growers withstood natural and national economic disasters.

Ironically, it was prosperity that ultimately devastated the orchards: farmers battered by the Depression were unable to withstand the land-devouring demands of the military and defense-related industries that arrived during World War II or the even more land-hungry electronics industry they spawned. Starting in the 1940s and accelerating through the next five decades, industrial parks and parking lots supplanted the prune orchards in Santa Clara County

In the final analysis, it was the people, the farmers, packers, merchants, bankers, shippers, government officials and laborers who made the Santa Clara County prune industry a recognized leader for nearly a century. The ability of each component in the industry to leverage one another and to make their specific contributions to the overall goal more efficiently than their competitors allowed the Santa Clara County prune industry to succeed. In the end, the county's prune industry was displaced by a progressive movement that valued high technology over fruit production and over orchard land, just as prune orchards had previously replaced waves of golden grain.

NOTES

¹ Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares The Land: Migrant and Migratory Labor in the United States* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 1967), 5.

² Yvonne Jacobson, *Passing Farms, Enduring Values* (Los Altos: William Kaufmann, Inc., 1963), 231.

³ Stephen M. Payne, *Santa Clara County Harvest of Change* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1987), 168.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷ Yvonne Jacobson, *Passing Farms, Enduring Values*, 231.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁹ *San Jose Mercury News*, April 5, 1998, 3G.

¹⁰ Robert Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story: A History of the Establishment of the Dried Fruit Industry in California and of the Fifty Years of Services of Sunsweet Growers Inc.* (San Jose: Sunsweet Growers Inc. 1967), 26.

¹¹ *San Jose Mercury News*, April 5, 1998, 3G.

¹² Couchman, *The Sunsweet Story*, 9.

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