



The pictures on this page, provided to us by courtesy of Tom Thwaits of King City, give a glimpse of Salinas Valley agri-

culture in the early part of the century. Above: a load of sugarbeets, taken near Soledad. The date is unknown.

From Cattle to Beans, the Salinas Valley's Seen It All

BY MIKE HENRY

NOT MUCH THOUGHT WAS given to the future of agriculture in the Salinas Valley during the early 1800s. About the most excited anyone ever got was wondering whether there would be enough food produced on mission lands to feed the missionaries and their converts.

The Spanish missions up and down the Salinas Valley received large tracts of land from Spain. Later, when Mexico cut its bonds to the mother country, the newly formed Mexican government rewarded its loyal soldiers with land in California. Many of those soldiers had battled in California during the early years of the 19th century, and they stayed on after independence from Spain was won.

Hide and Tallow

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land grants. But even that recognition did not spell success for some farmers and ranchers.

Drought Foreclosures

During the 1860s, a severe drought got a life-threatening grip on the Salinas Valley. Many stock animals succumbed both to the drying heat and to the lack of water. Some farmers and ranchers simply ran out of money to continue their operations and were forced to sell their lands or abandon them to foreclosures.

It was during this period that shrewd businessmen recognized the valley's potential and quickly moved to gain a foothold there. They would offer farmers 50 cents on the dollar for their land, and many farmers had to settle for the painfully low price.

As Mother Nature released her grip on the valley, more and more settlers moved in. One of the early white settlers in the valley was M.V. Jack. Much of his land was acquired

place in local agriculture.

The first dairy cow brought into the valley is reported to have come from the Sonoma district. Valley milk and dairy products did very well in the nearby San Francisco market, where dairymen received top price for their product. It was this period that saw the booming popularity of Monterey Jack cheese, named after the man who had established himself in the valley only a few years before.

Enter the Railroad

Before 1890, farmers south of Soledad were forced to bring their farm products to the nearest community where there was a railroad. The McIntosh brothers operated a profitable stage line in the 1880s, but their business gradually dropped off as the railroad tracks crept southward. In the 1890s the valuable tracks that connected the farmers to far-off markets finally reached King City. This accomplishment was a major factor in

for their beets, turned to potatoes. But potatoes became a short-lived crop in Salinas when a potato blight devastated the area, forcing many of the farmers to return to sugarbeets and to Spreckels.

Small Beans Make It Big

During World War I, small white beans were introduced into the valley. The expansion of crops at this time was due largely to irrigation systems that were springing up throughout the valley. Spreckels dammed the Salinas River and San Lorenzo Creek to provide water to its own growers.

In 1917, the Salinas Land Company was formed by A.L. Hobson, John Lagomarsino, and Charles Teague, and purchased 8000 acres of land north of the Salinas River near King City. One of their first efforts was the drilling of wells. With the assurance of plentiful water, lima beans became a major crop, and more acreage went under pinks and small white beans. The land soon became known as the

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Fences were unheard of in those days, and the ranchers would turn their animals loose on the open range after marking them for identification. Cattle from different ranches were allowed to roam freely together until they had to be rounded up. Then the whips would crack and the lassos twirl as the cattlemen worked to separate their animals. Some would be shipped for slaughter while others would be slaughtered on the site. Hides and tallow works were a very major part of the early cattle industry in the Salinas Valley.

While the cattle roamed the open lands of the valley floor and the nearby mountains, their owners chose the protective canyons for their homesites, away from the wind that would come roaring along the valley floor much as it does today. Eventually, small groups of homes began springing up on the valley floor as agriculture crept southward from Salinas.

The same land grants that had provided the foundation for the valley's agriculture were placed in limbo immediately after California broke away from Mexico and gained statehood. Eight years went by before a break in the negotiations prompted the U.S. government to recognize the

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A scene from the late '20s: Will Bracher of Santa Clara hauls celery to market.

through loans to ranchers on the verge of default to their creditors. The influence Jack had on the valley can be seen even today in homes and farm buildings featuring a distinctive red color that is a long-time trademark of the Jack enterprise.

Dairy Settlers

Stories of how prosperous the new land on the western edge of the continent was began to drift back to the other states, and even made their way abroad. In the 1880s, a wave of Danes and Swiss arrived in the valley and the dairy industry was born. Dairy barns still in use can be seen throughout the valley, although the dairy industry has long since relinquished its

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the development of the southern portion of the Salinas Valley.

In 1898, the Spreckels Company came to Salinas to plant sugarbeets. Spreckels looked beyond Salinas and saw land available near King City for increased sugarbeet acreage. Since the rail lines already extended to King City, the move to open up more land was a sound financial decision. Spreckels operated its own railroad system in the northern part of the valley. Agreements were made with tenant farmers to grow sugarbeets, and eventually some of these tenant farmers were able to buy their own land.

Some sugarbeet farmers, already accustomed to digging in the ground

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Formed shortly thereafter was another major outfit, the California Orchard Company. This new entry into the valley's agriculture planted 1900 acres of trees and vines near King City. The list of crops ranged from 45 acres of plums all the way up to 290 acres of nectarines. In between were almonds, apples, apricots, peaches, prunes, walnuts, and grapes. Some of these old trees still stand today, but their future was never very secure.

Today the Salinas Valley is famous for its vegetable production. The first large-scale vegetable operations were established by 11 shippers in the 1920s. These shippers were smart businessmen. They did not own any land and would therefore contract with farmers to grow their crops for them. Since that time, vegetable growing and shipping have become intertwined.

Cattle, dairy cows, beans, orchards, vegetables: One wonders what the valley's next major agricultural industry is going to be. As the history of these variegated enterprises shows, the future will depend primarily on the three critical resources that underpin Salinas Valley agriculture—land, water, and transportation. □