

# Stanislaus County Agricultural Change: Wheat Fields to Irrigation, 1900-1910

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**Robert LeRoy Santos**  
**Turlock, California**  
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[bsantos@toto.csustan.edu](mailto:bsantos@toto.csustan.edu)

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## WHEAT RANCHES GAVE UNDER IRRIGATION

During the decade following the first flow of water into the ditches of the Turlock Irrigation District (1901) and the Modesto Irrigation District (1903), Stanislaus County transformed from a wheat producing area of great renown to a community of small farms with diversified crops. Almost as fast as the water was turned into the canals, the huge wheat ranches and the life that went with that form of agriculture were wiped out as definitely as if an eraser had passed over them.

At the turn of the century, wheat was still the number one crop of the county, but it was destroying the soil. Evidence of soil depletion could be seen in the decline of rich harvests. W.W. Walters, a prominent county farmer, noted in 1901 that he used to get 12-15 sacks of grain per acre but now his production was a meager 5 or 6 sacks.

Different strains of wheat were being developed with the hope of restoring the crop to its once grand state. James Thompson of Lanark Park was working on a type of wheat that would require less water; however, it was all to naught. The long-tried method of soil restoration, summer fallowing, was not even effective. Irrigation seemed to be the answer, and most landowners welcomed it as a solution to their predicament.

People like Ephraim Hatch began to anticipate a change in land usage. In 1899, he bought up "hard scrubble" to add to his already burgeoning holdings - he would reap huge profits in later landsales. It was not uncommon for owners to allow their vast acreages to lie dormant awaiting the inevitable subdivision of their land. It simply was not worth the effort to farm grain for the yields. Some landowners made improvements on their holdings - leveling, putting in irrigation ditches and gates, and in some cases, even

constructing houses and farm buildings, thereby increasing their property's value. Many landowners actively and vocally supported the irrigation program, as L.M. Hickman in the T.I.D. did, much to the chagrin of his dyed-in-the-wool wheat-growing neighbors.

Once water began to flow down the laterals, large land holdings began to be parceled and sold. These figures testify to that transformation: In 1901, there were 951 farms in Stanislaus County. By 1910 that number had increased to 2,200 farms. The average size of a county farm in 1901 was 874 acres, with many farms being over 1,000 acres, as compared to 1910 when the average farm acreage was 242, with a great number of farms of the 20-49 acre size.

Price per acre during the decade spiraled upward along with property sales. In 1901, one could buy land for \$18 an acre. By 1910, the cost per acre was \$60, with some prime land going for \$100 to \$200 and acre. Real estate became a big business overnight.

Land companies sprang up. Once such one was the Fin de Siecle, owned by a number of local prominent men including Horace and Stephen Crane, George S. Bloss, George S. Bloss, Jr., and Harry F. Geer. The company purchased the John W. Mitchell holdings and placed all 120,000 acres for sale in small parcels.

There were many local efforts to attract potential landbuyers as everyone would stand to profit from landsales. The county Board of Trade was actively engaged in an advertisement programs. Railroads had an immense stake. Private investors were on the bandwagon. Many times these local entrepreneurs joint efforts to bring buyers to the county.

#### RAILROADS HAD AN IMMENSE STAKE

S.W. Ferguson was one such entrepreneur. He was the manager of the Kern County Land Bureau, land agent of the Southern Pacific Railroad (SPRR), a representative of realties in the state and a representative of the local entrepreneurs. He traveled frequently to the east coast and had gone once to Europe on behalf of his sponsors. He was seeking the "proper class" as he put it. Ferguson urged the local landowners to price their land low, thereby encouraging a buying surge - once buying accelerated and a trend was established, prices could be raised as situations permitted. His advise did not fall on deaf ears.

Land was not on the market for long. One reason was that advertisement programs were so effective. SPRR for one had a multi-headed program. Not only did it advertise land in numerous newspapers and magazines throughout the United States, it provided low fares to landseekers. These rates were offered most often during the winter months when farmers could take advantage of the offseason to inspect land.

Rates to California from March/April, 1902 ran:

\$25 from the Missouri River and Houston  
\$33 from Chicago  
\$31 from Peoria  
\$30 from St. Louis, Cairo, Memphis, and New Orleans

In February 1902, E. O. McCormick, passenger traffic manager of SPRR, reported the reduced-rate program simply was not worked as only one-third of the 21,000 excursionists in 1901 had settled in California. As irrigation broadened and agriculture matured, more and more people bought land. Many who went home empty-handed returned to buy land later. They provided the oldest form of advertisement, word-of-mouth. Also, the buyers who went home to settle estates and collect belongings engaged in this type of advertisement.

#### SOLICITING LANDBUYERS

Postcards were another source of county advertisement. In June 1901, SPRR agent J.T. Keating of Modesto asked the Stanislaus County Board Trade for photographs and information on county agriculture, industry and scenic spots for postcards presentation. The following year, Board Secretary G.P. Schafer reported that he had distributed 3,000 postcards to local residents to send to distant acquaintances.

Not everyone was encouraged to settle. Stern warnings such as the following accompanied the leaflets and newspaper advertisements:

"The man who has no means, no profession or trade, and no position assured is bad off in California as in the Eastern States."

The planned excursion became a favored way of soliciting landbuyers. Fares were next to nothing. For example, in 1907, a trip of 60 individuals cost one regular fare and that was paid for by the local communities. Most of the excursionists were visitors from either Los Angeles or the northern coast of California.

In March 1907, 50 excursionists visited Turlock and Modesto areas. Each area was given equal time, a condition which was specifically required by the promoters. H.H. Whitmore, who was the excursion's organizer, requested that the local residents show courtesy and above all not inflate prices for local goods and services. He reminded them that they might be catering to new neighbors. He was right to a large extent, as 42 of the 50 bought property.

The group visitors were treated with plenty of fanfare. They were paraded around the county in fine carriages and shiny automobiles, meals were cooked on home stoves and lodgings were made especially comfortable. In Modesto, the people would gather in the court house park to hear speeches, listen to music, view slides, and read promotional literature.

The lecture program was another advertising technique. Many prominent men in the county, such as A.B. Shoemake, volunteered time for the Board of Trade's lecture program. G.T. McCabe, under contract to the board, lectured frequently, primarily in the Los Angeles area. In 1908, McCabe gave 24 lectures a month, with an average attendance of 74, or a grand total of 21,370 persons addressed. Of these, 455 spoke to McCabe privately after his speech; he sent 135 potential buyers to the county, and 50 actually bought land with the purchases averaging 30 acres each. At \$65 an acre, the going price, he sold \$97,500 worth of land in 1908. In his annual report, McCabe stated that the lecture-interview as probably the most effective method of reaching potential landbuyers.

Exhibits also were used. In 1902, a glass-topped case with a banner-like curtain, 11 x 7 feet, was displayed in Los Angeles. Inside was a map of California with the words, "STANISLAUS COUNTY - MODESTO, THE COUNTY SEAT," above it. Lines radiated from Modesto to the chief cities of the state. Navigable rivers and irrigated acreage were shown, with a statement that the people of the county owned the water rights. In the case there were 14 boxes of county products.

A display of equal importance was at the Ferry Building in San Francisco. Located in a prominent place, the exhibit was manned by a representative who told of the virtues of the county, gave lectures and showed slides.

At the 1902 Conclave of the Knights of Pythias in San Francisco, members of Stanislaus County lodges and the Board of Trade provided an immense model of the county irrigation system, dominated by a 7-foot high, 16 x 14, model of the La Grange Dam. County products were displayed in three dozen glass jars.

An even grander display was the traveling exhibit of two railroad cars sponsored jointly by the A.B. Shoemake Company and the Board of Trade. Besides local products, the display exhibited a number of curiosities, e.g., stuffed fish, weapons from the South Pacific, a few live animals and, in keeping with fads of the time, a teddy bear. Area representatives went along to answer questions and extol the promise of Stanislaus County.

The traveling exhibit was mainly used in the Midwest. In some communities, promotional literature had to be translated into Swedish, Finnish, Slovenian, and Italian, among others.

Many who inquired were leery of traveling to California after reading about the 1906 earthquake. Stanislaus County representatives calmed their fears by arguing that earthquakes were infrequent and seldom if ever occurred in the Central Valley. They were armed, also, with a battery of statistics on the dangers of tornadoes and blizzards in the Midwest.

T.I.D. & M.I.D. LAND SALES

Actual sales in the T.I.D. began to blossom in late 1901. L.F. Hastings,

a civil engineer from Tulare, bought 240 acres of the W.H. Harp ranch owned by Mrs. Mary L. Stone. It was located in the T.I.D., three miles south of Modesto and sold for \$35 an acre. J.Q. Bush of Watsonville bought 40 acres of the same ranch for \$32.50 an acre. Mrs. E. Casey of Turlock sold 40 acres to a Mr. Grenwold of Porterville. He was the first of many settlers to come from that town. C.N. Whitmore sold 55 acres to Peter Hansen of San Lucas, 25 acres to Peter Runge of the same town, and 10 acres to Antoine V. Mattuos of Newman.

M.I.D. sales were stalled at this time as the district was tied up in water rights litigation; however, some sales were contracted. Elmer E. Hayden of Los Angeles bought 40 acres of land north of Modesto for \$30 an acre. He was one of the first to buy some of the newly subdivided land in the M.I.D. J.B. Wallis, a longtime county resident, acquired 40 acres in the Coldwell tract north of Modesto. H.A. Bates, manager of the Harlacher and Kahn Warehouses in Modesto, bought 160 acres for \$1,870 in the M.I.D. south of town.

The Fin de Siecle Association reported numerous land sales, primarily to people of Scandinavian descent. E. Henstrom of Nebraska purchased 740 acres for himself and friends southwest of Turlock. N. Hendricksen of Minnesota bought 80 acres; C. Lindblom, also of Minnesota, bought 147 acres. E.E. Larsen and the Peterson brothers of Idaho Falls acquired 80 acres, and A. Ericksen of the same city bought 40. Other buyers, from as far away as Illinois and as near as Fresno, also bought land. They were mostly Scandinavian.

There was an ever-increasing placement of large estates on the market. A.B. Shoemake advertised 10,000 acres available for new settlers. The Woods ranch, three miles north of Modesto, owned jointly by Shoemake and Oramil McHenry, was subdivided into 24-acre plots. The Hughson ranch, surrounding the town by the same name, put 3,300 acres up for sale.

Most buyers came from Southern California and the Midwest. W.P. Stevens of Los Angeles bought 40 acres of the Whitmore estate at \$35 per acre, while A. Marshall of Kansas acquired 40 acres at \$42.50. A prominent fruit grower from Los Angeles, Frederick Schmidt, paid \$12,000 for 320 acres of land northeast of Modesto. A.T. Covell of Woodbridge paid \$45 an acre for 266 acres in the M.I.D.

The occupations and hometowns of the purchasers of the Ellenwood Tract near the Stanislaus River show the variety of backgrounds from which the new owners came. J.F. Hixon was a district freight and passenger agent of the SPRR in Fresno; W. J. Miller was a conductor for the same railroad line; Dr. A. Stevenson was a prominent physician from El Paso; and Herman Hintze was a Modesto musician. These men bought the entire tract of 172 acres for \$32.50 per acre. They tossed coins to divide the land among themselves.

Colonies often were formed by people of similar background, i.e., same religion, same ethnic origin, or neighbors in a distant community or township. For example William Meier of Sutter County visited Stanislaus and brought back with him a number of his neighbors to buy land and settle. Some Nebraska neighbors collectively bought 560 acres of land in the county. S.E. Garber, leader of a group of Dunkards, settled his group near Modesto. Outside of Hilmar a colony of Swedes was established. The planned a settlement of 990 and by May 1904, 100 houses had been built and many fields had been converted to irrigated farming. Mennonites from Pennsylvania bought land in the Wood Tract which later became known as Wood Colony. Swiss dairymen settled in the west side. Armenians were considering making Stanislaus center of settlement for their countrymen.

The largest recorded purchase at the time was made by a group of Quakers. They bought 4,000 acres of land which included the community of Elmwood later to be named Denair. It was a planned settlement of 200 families.

A group of missionaries in India, after seeing an advertisement, bought acreage from the Whitmore estate by mail. A representative of Rhineland grape growers, a Mr. Gillig, was sent to look for land suitable for vines.

The large holdings continued to be subdivided. J.T. Davis of San Francisco sold 3,000 acres east of Turlock to C.N. Whitmore for \$120,000, who divided the land into small plots. O. McHenry subdivided the McHenry Colony near Keys (sic) Switch, had the land

leveled for irrigation and parceled it into 40-acre pieces. The Los Angeles Realty Trust bought 6,000 acres from the Fin de Siecle Company and divided it into small farms.

John Denair, a superintendent of the Santa Fe Railroad, and Mr. Cunningham, a Needles banker, purchased 4,500 acres of land jointly. The purchase included 700 acres near Delhi, 2,900 acres west of Turlock and 960 acres of the Kehoe Ranch. This land was subdivided and sold for around \$50 an acre. Later, the Pritchard-Denair Lumber Company bought 800 acres north of Elmwood from Mrs. Clara Sperry, paying \$40,000 and later subdividing it.

Two sections of the Hiram Hughson ranch were bought and divided by Charles Geer. W.F. Coffee put 480 acres of his land on the market. Two Root ranchers, totaling 1,400 acres, located between Dry Creek and the Tuolumne River and four miles east of Modesto, were cut into small farms.

The widow of J.D. Patterson of the west side sold 28,000 acres of Rancho E. Pescadero. This was purchased by the San Joaquin and King River Canal and Irrigation Company at \$20 per acre. This acquisition cleared the way for the Miller and Lux Canal to cross the rancho, thereby bringing more irrigation to the area.

The wheat era had ended. Irrigation brought about a radical alteration of the county's complexion. Farms now were smaller, crops were diversified, the population was larger and more ethnically diverse.

#### NEW AGRICULTURAL CROPS

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Stanislaus County was in the midst of an agricultural revolution. A king was about to be deposed and replaced by a pluralistic regime. Grain had ruled for years, taxing the soil of its life-giving nutrients. With the introduction of irrigation by the M.I.D. and T.I.D., it was hoped the introduction of a number of different crops would replace the nutrients, restoring the soil fully and allowing these "new crops" to develop to their fullest potential. These hopes were soon realized.

Many new crops were introduced during the first decade. Paradise Farm, west of Modesto along the Tuolumne River, had been growing fruits, nuts and vegetables for years. So had the Bald Eagle Ranch, north of Modesto, owned by Oramil McHenry. They fed their crops with well water. and were successful in their efforts. These isolated examples, and there were others, served as models in demonstrating the land's growing potential.

#### ORCHARDS

The county saw a surge of new settlement. New and old settlers worked at planting new orchards and vineyards. Seedlings were needed. In December 1899, Reed and Richards, owners of the San Joaquin Valley Nursery, bought 40 acres and leased another 40 of the Whitmore Ranch near Ceres and planted 5,000 peach pits.

Ceres developed the first new orchards. In July 1901, one newspaper account described the area as one of "new ditches, recently leveled fields and young fruit orchards." A prime example of new settlement and orchard planting was the purchase of land in the Ceres area by E.P. Ackley of Wisconsin and his planting of 700 apricot and 500 peach trees.

Seedlings ran 10 to 15 cents each from the nursery. An orchardist could count upon an expenditure of \$100 an acre to plant and maintain an orchard up to five years or nearing the full maturity stage. A laborer ran \$1 a day; a foreman drew a salary that averaged \$2 a day; and a team and driver cost \$3 a day.

County orchard acreage did not expand quickly during this decade, however. For example, in 1905, the county claimed only 220 acres of apricots, 1,113 acres of peaches, 236 acres of almonds, and 80 acres of walnuts. In 1910, apricot acreage had increased to about 450, peach to 5,000, almond to 800 and walnut 90.

One reason for slow expansion was that orchards took money to develop. After buying acreage, the new settlers usually had to grow

cash crops to make ends meet. Orchards were secondary and would be planted only if they could be afforded. So the new settler took to ground crops and some dairying to draw regular paychecks.

It must be remembered too, that many of the fruit crops were relatively untried. Many settlers took a look-see position, planting in some cases one-tree orchards to see how the trees adapted to the soil. It was not uncommon to see small plantings of apples, cherries, lemons, oranges, plums, prunes, quince, fig, and other fruits. Gradually some kinds of tree crops were eliminate for the more productive and profitable ones.

A tree crop with a shaky beginning was the Calimyrna fig. The first Calimyrna orchard appeared in 1904 when George Stoddard planted seven acres on his ranch. In order to bear fruit, the trees needed the help of the blastophaga wasp. The wasp was rare in California and was a slow propagator.

The federal government got involved in importing the highly needed wasp from Algiers. A special container made of tinfoil which insured survival during the long trip was developed. Still, the imported wasps, being slow propagators, did not meet the crisis and the Calimyrna fig, wanted for its sweetness and flavor, looked doomed at least as a county crop.

In March 1909, a large swarm of the blastophaga wasp was found. It seems that a Louis Adams purchased land nine miles west of Modesto in 1867 and planted a fig tree. He sold his land after one year to Samuel Gates and left the area, never being heard from again. The tree grew, and Gates loved the tree's shade, but he disliked the pesky little "bugs" on its limbs. He threatened to chop the tree down many times. Walter T. Swingle, developer of the tinfoil container, heard of Gates' problem "bugs." He investigated and found that the tree contained swarms of the crucial blastophaga wasp. Gates made a fortune selling wasp-covered limbs off his fig tree. Before long fig orchards dotted the county in patches of 10 to 40 acres.

#### GRAPES

Viticulture seemed to take hold quickly in the county. Here again, Paradise Ranch and the Bald Eagle Ranch served as examples of the land's grape-growing potential. With the emergence of irrigation, the new settlers and the longtime county residents planted vineyards. W.E. Garrison planted 50 acres on his ranch with grapes in 1904, while Frank and Joseph Martin of Salinas bought the F.F. Hardwich Ranch and planted 80 acres of grapes.

In 1906, Woodland Colony planted 22,000 Thompson seedless vines. Five hundred acres near Hughson were settled by people from Stockton and planted with grapes. J.E. Ward planted 60 acres of Thompson seedless on his ranch and A.E. Moore set in 40 acres of Zinfindel vines. The Maze Ranch, west of Modesto, planted 40 acres of Zinfindel and 20 of Tokay; Broughton Colony reported 250 acres of grapes. The newly planted acreage was getting \$200 an acre by the end of the decade, up from \$30 in 1900.

Viticulture had its crises during the decade. Prices fell from \$14 a ton at one point to \$4.50. N.O. Hultberg refused to sell his crop for what he felt was a shamefully low price and ended up feeding the grapes to his hogs. He found that they fattened quickly and sold well on the market. His experiment earned him profits. In 1905, some imported grape rootstocks were found diseased. The county supervisors passed an ordinance halting all further importation of them. In the future, rootstocks had to be inspected and fumigated before planting.

#### GROUND CROPS

During the first decade, a number of ground crops were tried. Sugar beets, peanuts, cotton, flax, and tobacco proved not so successful as melons, beans, and sweet potatoes. The T.I.D. became known for the latter crops. IN 1906, at least three railroad cars of cantaloupes and six railroad cars of watermelons were being shipped from Turlock in one day at the height of the harvest. There were 1,500 acres of sweet potatoes reported under production in 1907. Further plantings were indicated.

Sugar-beet growing had a dismal beginning as blight hit the early

crops. The California- Hawaiian Sugar Refining Co. promised to build a processing plant locally if the county would commit 3,000 acres to sugar beet growing. Oramil McHenry offered 1,000 acres; C.N. Whitmore and Amos Hiatt together promised 1,000; local businessmen collectively added the final 1,000 acres. Blight hit the young crop because the soil lacked sodium chloride. Initial investments were lost, but once sodium chloride was added, sugar beet farming went into full production.

Another interesting story during this period concerned eucalyptus growing. Eucalyptus trees were imported from Australia to provide shade, windbreaks and firewood. Fast growing, the trees were used along irrigation ditches to strengthen the banks. Some farmers grew eucalyptus commercially as the wood was milled for poles and railroad ties or sold for firewood. A Dunkard colony near Modesto grew trees for this purpose as did C.N. Whitmore of Ceres. By 1908, there were many inquiries into the eucalyptus tree industry. This troubled a number of local people as they felt the soil too valuable to use for a milling industry. Professor Shaw of the University of California Agricultural Advisory Service supported these people. A debate ensued, in which the side led by Dr. Adolph Ekstein of Modesto, the "Eucalyptus King," felt it was a proper use of county soil. Many prominent farmers were eucalyptus growers; Shaw and those he supported lost the argument.

Alfalfa grew heartily, was a great feed for dairy cows, restored the soil and became a rich fertilizer after ingesting. Technical problems occurred at first. Checks were made too large and the levees mounded too high. After irrigation, the slowly draining water burned the alfalfa plants. Haymowers and wagons had problems negotiating the high levees. Soon though, proper alfalfa-growing techniques were developed and the crop's production blossomed. The west side in particular became known for its large plantings. An eastern newspaper, the Farmer's Voice, in its June 22, 1906 issue, claimed that Stanislaus County alfalfa was the finest around.

Thus, during the first decade of the twentieth century the county countryside was taking on a dramatic new appearance. Swaying fields of golden wheat, that glistened in the hot sun, were being replaced by the rustle of leaves in the young orchards, odors of ripening fruit and the lowing of dairy cows.

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[Back to Home Page](#)