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Changing Faces of the Central Valley: The Ethnic Presence

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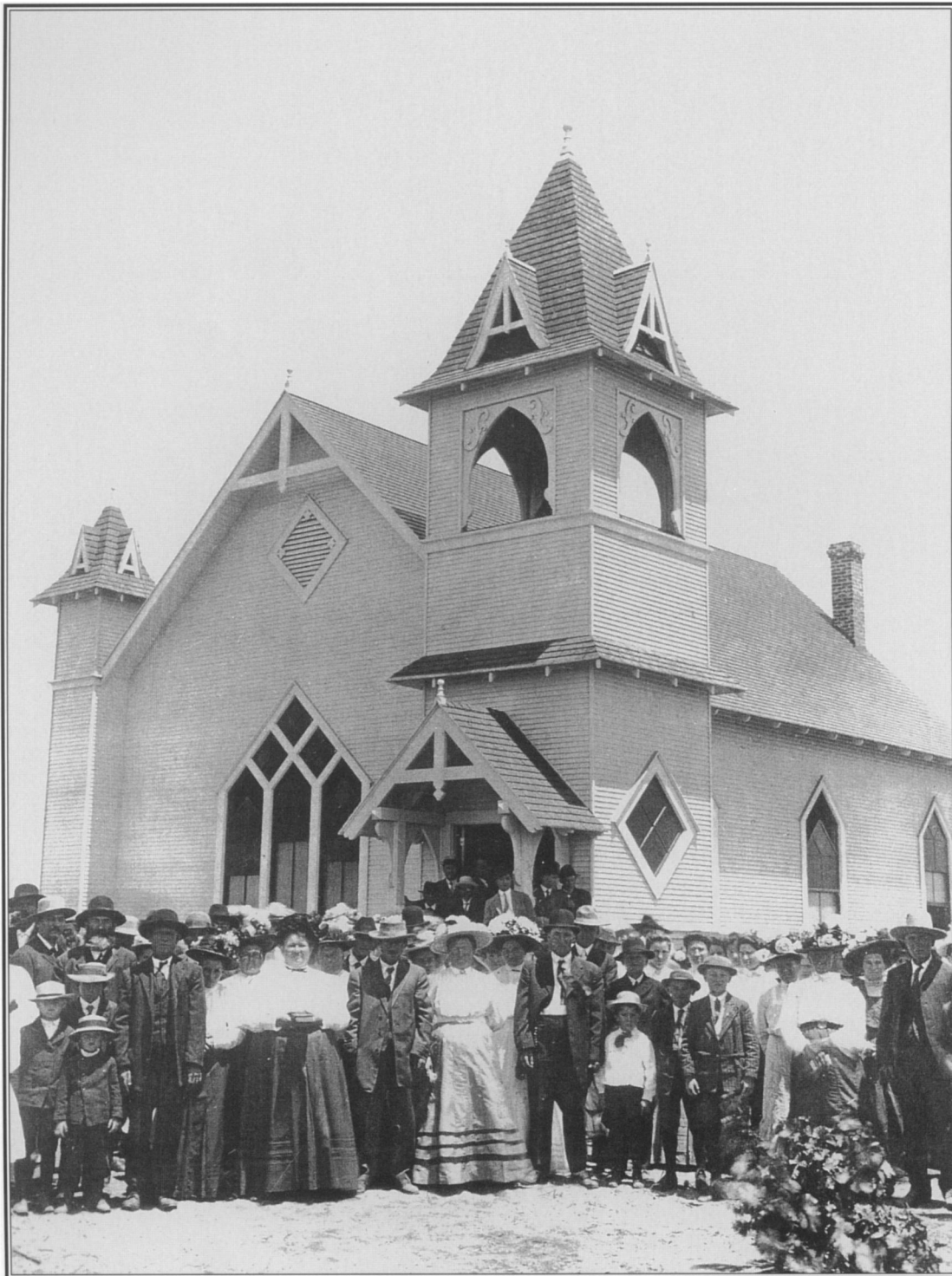
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The German-speaking congregation of the Salem Evangelical Church in Victor, California (near Lodi), 1910. The congregants migrated as a group from North Dakota, where they had first settled upon arrival in the United States. They organized the church in Victor in 1903 and chose German architectural features for the new building, which was dedicated in 1910, when this photograph was taken. Church services were conducted in German until the 1940s. *Courtesy Ralph Lea.*

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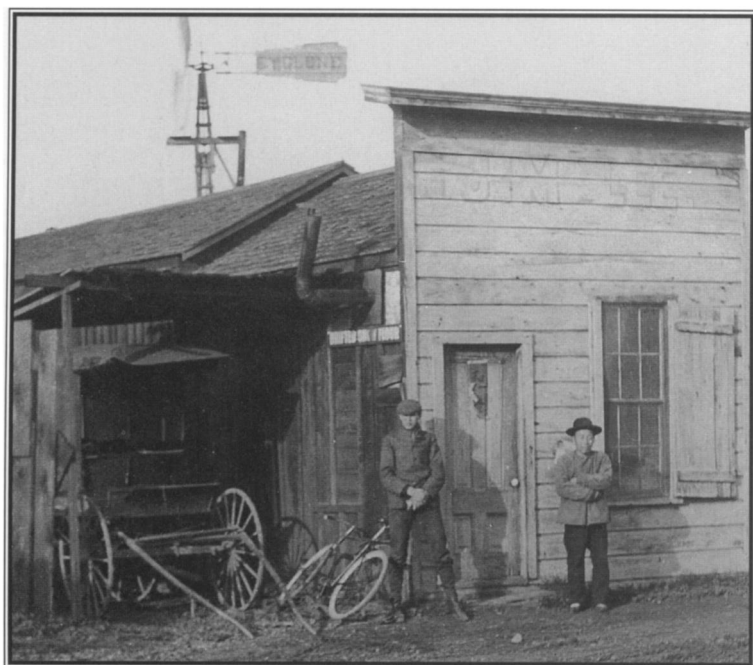
by Sally M. Miller

Ever since the Gold Rush, California's Central Valley has attracted people from across the face of the globe. When the news of the gold discovery brought a rush of people to the Mother Lode from almost everywhere, a spillover of those varied peoples to the valley followed. What lured the French and Swiss, Danes and Basques, Swedes and Hungarians, Canadians and Serbs, and Jews, Arabs, and Asians, as well as many others from a variety of lands, was the valley's non-bullion "gold," that is, the rich potential of its agriculture. Because of its possibilities, the Central Valley became the "world's promised land," to which hundreds of thousands and eventually millions flocked. As historian Wallace Smith wrote in his book, *Garden of the Sun: A History of the San Joaquin Valley*, and journalist Anne Loftis echoed in her monograph, *California—Where the Twain Did Meet*, the area became a "laboratory of races."¹ This article cannot cover all of the various groups, but it will explore a number of group experiences and highlight the roles these varied peoples played in the development of the area up to about World War II.

The Central Valley is forty to fifty miles wide and 400 to 450 miles in length. The floodplains of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and their tributaries enriched the soil. The combined Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley stretches from Shasta County and Redding in the north to Kern County and Bakersfield in the south. Geographic distinctions of the valley include the mountains that ring it and affect its climatic and weather patterns, the coastal range to the west and the Sierra to the east. In its mid-section touching on several counties—Contra Costa, Sacra-

mento, Solano, Yolo, and especially San Joaquin—another distinctive geographic feature is located, one of the major delta regions in the world. Its fertile promise became unbounded once reclamation work was carried out a century ago. The focus here will range from Sutter County in the north and its Sikh peach orchardists to Fresno County in the south and its Armenian raisin and melon ranchers. The other groups that will be considered include the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos among those of Asian origin, and the Dutch, Portuguese, Italians, and Germans among the Europeans.

The Central Valley, like California as a whole, was akin to a developing nation in the nineteenth century, and indeed, until after World War II. The phenomenal development of the basically agricultural economy of the region could not have occurred so spectacularly without the labor supplied by a constant stream of incoming workers, just as in the eastern part of the United States the arrival of immigrant workers there allowed industrialization to occur rapidly. While in the eastern U.S., as in the valley, capital, entrepreneurial skills, and key resources were required, the skills, muscle, and sweat of immigrant workers were essential ingredients in enabling the United States to take a leap forward into industrialization at a more accelerated rate than has any other economy. Simultaneously in the Central Valley, the development of agriculture at the pace and in the form that it took cannot be seen as separate from the presence of a growing and, as it happened, multi-ethnic work force. So there was a "fit" between the potential of the agricultural economy and the newcomers who could meet the existing labor needs.



A Chinese laundry in rural northern California, 1904. *Courtesy California State Library.*

Because this was a developing, rather than a mature, economy for so much of its history, it offered opportunities and even space for newcomers to achieve upward mobility. The situation was fluid, and no fixed social structure existed. Individuals might move from being hired workers and crew hands to lessors of land and even owner-operators of ranches and dairies, who in turn welcomed, and in fact depended on, the labor of more recent newcomers. Landowners or lessors could experiment and introduce new crops that might find a niche in the emerging agricultural economy, and they could offer different products or new services. The route upward was without guarantees, but nevertheless labor-intensive work could lead to rewards of independence and security, and newcomers ended up playing significant and even shaping roles in the developing economy.

Rather than the domination of homesteads occupied and operated by small families, so characteristic elsewhere in the United States, the distinctive history of California agriculture involves far-flung large ranches that require seasonally hired hands employed at labor-intensive tasks. The old Spanish-Mexican land grants evolved into agribusinesses, rather than family farms; what developed was appropriately termed “factories in the fields” in a classic study by that title published in 1939 by Carey McWilliams.² Investment and speculation were the operating variables rather than the traditional agrarian values of independent yeoman citizens. Other

factors reinforcing the trend to large-scale operations included the costs of land reclamation and irrigation and the expenses and problems related to the need of selling to distant consumer markets. The succession of incoming groups of workers was an indispensable component in a system of intensive agriculture requiring large numbers of hands at intermittent times at, it has been written, “the lowest possible cost.”³ But evidence now suggests that at times these workers were able to exercise choices about which economic possibilities would be most fruitful for them to pursue.

The Chinese are thought of as the first large group of ethnically identifiable agricultural workers; they were, in the words of a title of a recent book by Ronald Takaki on Asian immigration, “strangers from a different shore.”⁴ Never a large population (despite recurrent sensationalistic warnings of a so-called “yellow peril”), in 1870 there were 49,000 Chinese in this country, mostly in California, and in 1880 there were 75,000. From the 1880s on, federal exclusion laws prevented the growth of the Chinese population, and its numbers gradually declined (for example, there were only 61,000 in 1920). It was an overwhelmingly male population, with few families, and thus not able to reproduce itself. Chinese men filtered down from the mines in the face of declining opportunity there, including anti-Chinese measures, so that after 1870 both towns and rural areas in the Central Valley developed Chi-

nese populations. Some settled in cities such as Sacramento, Marysville, Oroville, Stockton, and Modesto (and of course San Francisco), and they provided laundry, tailoring, barbering, and other personal services, and operated restaurants, herbalist shops, and other small retail establishments. Through such occupational choices, few Chinese competed with white workers for jobs in the emerging industrial sector, a self-protective strategy that they adopted after their treatment in the Mother Lode and that some other groups would use, too. Some Chinese fished in the Delta, as well as in San Francisco Bay and Monterey Bay and elsewhere along the coast, and sold their fish to local markets while at the same time drying much of it for export to China.

A slight majority of the Chinese resided in rural areas. The valley was home to approximately twenty-eight percent of the Chinese in California in 1870, the majority of whom worked in agriculture, while others were merchants and laborers in various trades or worked as cooks and servants. Hun-

dreds were truck farmers, while thousands harvested fruits and other major crops as hired hands. By 1880, thirty percent lived in the valley, and by 1900 forty percent were found in agricultural areas, including the valley, but they were also spreading elsewhere. Not infrequently, Chinese agricultural laborers in valley counties might be forty-five percent of the farm labor force. The only valley counties in which they ever constituted the majority of the farm workers were Sacramento, Yuba, and Solano counties. Thereafter, their numbers declined, and the Chinese gradually all but disappeared from the agricultural scene.

The Chinese developed a system of labor recruitment that was later emulated by other groups. Chinese labor contractors would hire gangs to work in agriculture and also on specific construction projects. The English-speaking Chinese contractors negotiated wages with the employers, so that individual workers never dealt directly with the employers. The contractors charged the workers a commission for finding them jobs and providing them with meals,

A street scene in the Chinese hamlet of Locke, Sacramento County. The only town built and exclusively inhabited by Chinese, it was established in 1915 by newcomers from South China who built the network of levees in the Delta. *Courtesy Holt-Atherton Department, University of Pacific Libraries.*



while the workers themselves handled their own temporary housing, carrying tents or simply blankets with them as they traveled around.

The Chinese played the key role in the reclamation of Delta swamps and marshes and, therefore, in its emergence as one of the richest agricultural areas in the world. They were involved in such work on wheelbarrow gangs between the 1850s and the mid-1880s, after which they were displaced by the clamshell dredge. They toiled knee-deep in water and mud where they were subject to pneumonia and malaria. Their wages averaged ten to fifteen cents per cubic yard of earth removed, or perhaps one dollar a day, and they had to struggle to devise a foolproof method of measuring the volume of earth they removed to ensure correct wages. Wages paid by the month, rather than the amount of work, might be around \$27. Chinese workers built the first levees on mainland tracts in Rio Vista Township, on Twitchell Island, Brannan Island, and on part of Roberts Island. They performed much of the work of trying to reclaim Union Island. With boats the basic mode of transportation in the Delta, many steamboat landings were constructed on the levees, and named after companies or individuals associated with them. As a result, there were Hop Sing, Hop Good, Tai On, Gee Sang, Hop Goon, Gee Fung, Sang Wah and other steamboat landings. Some of the Chinese laborers eventually leased land parcels as tenants, with the last three decades of the nineteenth century witnessing an upward trend in Chinese leaseholdings in the Delta and elsewhere. Groups of men or companies—occasionally individuals—were able to enter into leases, usually within a decade of their having worked to reclaim the land. They were often favored by landowners faced with labor-intensive projects, who contracted with Chinese workers to bring their land under cultivation (called “developmental leasing”). Thus, it was the Chinese who often leased virgin land, drained it, built levees, broke up the soil, plowed the fields, and planted the first crops. By the decade of 1910-1920, they leased land in the central Delta, farming on Mandeville, Venice, Bacon, and Woodward islands. They frequently specialized in potatoes and beans, which brought the most return, while outside the Delta these tenant farmers often planted hops, vineyards, and orchards. When the

canneries developed as a major component in agriculture, the Chinese were hired on the work crews and as fruit packers, thus participating in nearly all aspects of the valley’s agricultural labor.

Chinatowns emerged in the Delta, as they had earlier in valley cities, and in them individuals could obtain familiar products, enjoy traditional recreation, and spend the off-season and even their declining years. The hamlet of Locke in Sacramento County, founded in 1915, became well known as the last Chinese town to emerge. And, by that time, the Chinese population in the state as a whole was shrinking, and their presence as a force in valley agriculture was over. By then, Chinese exclusion laws were taking their toll, but a small (twenty percent) female population did allow a semblance of family and community life to develop.⁵

Japanese laborers began to arrive in California at the end of the nineteenth century, some having earlier worked on plantations in Hawaii. Like the Chinese, they were men alone who assumed they would be sojourners in this country for a time, and then return to their families in their country of origin. Some settled in San Francisco, but, following the earthquake in 1906, Los Angeles more frequently became their major destination. Japanese became fishermen in the Bay Area and also in San Pedro and Santa Monica harbors in Los Angeles County. More typically, however, the Japanese went into labor-intensive farming. They worked on crews under contractors, as had the Chinese before them. They also avoided industrial employment, choosing not to invite hostility by competing with Caucasian laborers, but rather seeking their own economic niche.

As they moved into the Central Valley, those who settled in the cities offered services that previously were not readily available, such as gardening, or they opened nurseries and related businesses. They also operated restaurants, stores, and shops selling items in demand by their countrymen, thus offering products for which an untapped market existed (an economic path followed by ethnic would-be entrepreneurs in all groups). Those who farmed typically pooled their muscle and limited capital. They leased collectively and worked intensively, often on marginal soil that others had ignored: the hog wallow lands in the San Joaquin Valley and the dry lands in the



George Shima, far left, pictured with prominent California businessmen and politicians, including Governor James Rolph, on "Potato Day" at the California State Fair, ca. 1932.
Courtesy Holt-Atherton Department, University of Pacific Libraries.

Sacramento Valley, as well as desert areas to the far south in the Imperial Valley. They began to purchase or lease land, in spite of some limitations caused by California's alien land laws, which were first passed in 1913 in a partially effective attempt to limit Japanese access to agriculture. In fact, their entry into the agricultural economy of the valley was timely because of an ever-increasing demand for fresh produce in the growing cities in the early twentieth century. In addition, the increasingly sophisticated

irrigation methods and modern transportation capabilities for bringing produce to market further enhanced opportunities.

Japanese farmers concentrated on short-term specialty crops such as berries and truck vegetables. By 1920 their agricultural output was ten percent of the total value of California crops, and in the decades leading up to World War II, they produced the bulk of the strawberry, tomato, and snap bean crops, among others, and over forty percent of the onion

and green pea crops. As a testament to their achievements in agriculture, a 1921 report to the governor by the head of the California Delta Association stated that the Japanese had "convert[ed] the barren land like that at...Livingston into productive and profitable fields, orchards and vineyards, by the persistence and intelligence of their industry."⁶

Of a United States Japanese population of over 110,100 in 1925 (the great majority of whom were in California), about one-fourth of the gainfully employed worked in agriculture, mostly in the valley. Their operations were small, usually under forty-nine acres. These Issei farmers belonged to associations based on the prefecture, or *ken*, from which they had come. The associations brought them together for social activities, which allowed them to develop credit arrangements to help each other with loans and investments. The most successful and most famous Japanese farmer was George Shima, known as the "potato king." He began working in the San Joaquin Valley in 1887 as a potato picker and then became a labor contractor. He then turned to leasing and purchasing undeveloped Delta lands, which he drained and diked. Shima established a hugely successful operation, winning him the title of the "Japanese Horatio Alger." He farmed over ten thousand acres of potatoes and owned a fleet of a dozen steamboats, barges, and tugboats that transported his crops to San Francisco. At his death in 1926, he left an estate of \$15 million.

California's Japanese population in 1910 totaled just over 41,000 and jumped to almost 72,000 in 1920. That decade marked the coming of the so-called "picture brides," a phenomenon lasting about a half-dozen years, after which the practice was prohibited by U.S. law. These essentially matchmaker-arranged marriages-by-proxy (often derided by westerners, but simply an elaboration of spouse-selection practices in most traditional societies) allowed the Japanese immigrants to develop families and communities of their own, and thus ended their sojourner era.

As a case study of the development of a Japanese community in the valley, the history of the town of Del Rey, fifteen miles southeast of Fresno, is instructive. In the first decade of this century some Japanese laborers began to work in the area, including Fowler, and nearby Del Rey became a small focal

point for Issei laborers who hailed from the prefecture of Kumamoto in southern Japan. Some became crewbosses, organizing jobs for the others; the few wives were often cooks in the labor camps. Del Rey had as many as 400 to 500 Japanese workers picking grapes during the season, and some settled there. In what David Mas Masumoto describes as the "boom years" of Del Rey, four or five boarding houses, restaurants, pool halls, a fish store, and a tofu shop opened to meet the needs of the heavily bachelor Issei population. The shops specialized in a variety of Japanese products, with some selling American goods, too. By 1919 the Japanese of Del Rey were sufficiently settled that they built their own community center, which served as a centerpiece for the Issei and their children, the Nisei. The hall was the site of community gatherings, language and other Japanese cultural instruction, recreational activities, and both Christian and Buddhist religious services. Through the dark days of a disastrous town fire, the Depression, and until the Japanese relocation that occurred during the first year of World War II, the hall was symbolic of a thriving ethnic agrarian community. Numerous other examples can be cited of individual Japanese communities in the valley.⁷

Generally arriving after the Japanese, Filipinos also became a fixture in agriculture in the Central Valley. They first traveled to California as a minuscule student population at the beginning of the twentieth century and then in the 1920s mostly as laborers. Forty-five thousand lived in the continental United States by World War II, 30,000 of them in California, with the majority working in the Central Valley and in other agricultural centers like the Salinas Valley.⁸ Filipinos entered the United States freely in this period because the Philippine Islands were a possession of the United States and they were therefore American nationals; but hailing from Asia, they were barred by law from becoming naturalized citizens. In the United States, they lacked political representation, were ineligible for many professions, could not purchase land, and were subject to segregated housing restrictions and anti-miscegenation laws. In an editorial comment reflective of antagonistic attitudes toward them, the *Stockton Record* in 1930 wrote about them that "while the lit-



A poolhall in downtown Stockton, ca. 1920, frequented by Filipino workers, who had few other options for recreation in their leisure time.
Courtesy Holt-Atherton Department, University of Pacific Libraries.

tle brown brothers flock here, they are unassimilable.”⁹ Further, the Filipinos, like earlier Asians, were here as essentially a male-only population as a result of a combination of factors: the law and labor recruiters favored only men, and the women tended to remain at home for cultural reasons.

Filipinos worked at so-called “stoop labor” and at general ranch labor. They were shuttled about in crews usually composed of persons from the same area and language group in the Philippines; some-

times they drove to jobs on their own. They worked in fruit and hop picking, rice harvesting, hoeing and topping beets, lettuce harvesting, celery planting, and especially in asparagus cutting. The development of the Central Valley’s asparagus crop is impossible to imagine apart from the contribution of the Filipino workers. They also worked in fruit and vegetable packingsheds and canneries. They lived in bunkhouses, often under deplorable conditions, or even slept in the fields; in the off-season they could



The Sikh Temple of Stockton, ca. 1920. The oldest Sikh institution in the United States, this temple served as a community center for the male population of workers. Sikh women gradually joined the men in California in increasing numbers after 1965, when national immigration quotas were eliminated. *Courtesy Holt-Atherton Department, University of Pacific Libraries.*

be found in low-cost hotels and in meal-ticket restaurants in Stockton. Around 1930 they tried to organize unions and strike for better conditions, thereby winning a reputation as troublemakers among some employers who looked for alternate sources of labor. In non-agricultural work, Filipinos were often servants, janitors, and busboys; they did not become retailers, apparently because they lacked background in small business.¹⁰

Another group to come to the Central Valley from Asia was the East Indians, especially the Sikhs, who migrated from Canada at the start of this century seeking any type of labor. They worked in the lumber industry and then in agriculture. Migrant Sikh men clustered in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys and in the Imperial Valley. As early as 1910, both Sacramento and Stockton had become small centers of Punjabi Sikh life in this

country. By then, an elaborate two-story Sikh temple had been built in Stockton as a community center, the first one in this country. The men worked and lived together, skimping to save as much money as possible in hope of re-establishing themselves with a nestegg in the Punjab. Their crewbosses, as in the case of many other groups, obtained migrant work for them and negotiated their wages. As direct successors to Chinese labor, the Sikhs got the lowest pay and most menial work. They cleared levee areas, farmed on some of the islands in the Delta and, pooling their resources, some leased land, initially around Holt. Such cases of independent farming alarmed some Californians. A paper in the *Bee* newspaper chain, for example, editorialized in 1923 on the need to ensure that California's alien land laws were applied to East Indians, and stated "[t]here must be no more leasing or sale of land to such immigrants from India."¹¹ Nevertheless, some Sikhs had begun to establish themselves as independent owner-operators. The Sikhs relocated farther north later in the twentieth century, and Yuba City and Marysville in Sutter County, with a climate somewhat like the Punjab, became the main Sikh locale in California.¹²

East Indians and other Asians who settled in the Central Valley prior to World War II had difficult experiences. Because federal legislation prohibited them from becoming naturalized citizens, California laws discriminated against them, and public opinion was often antagonistic toward them, Asians had a harder time than did European immigrants in establishing themselves. It was also difficult because they initially came without women and thereby, without the structure of family life in place, lacked the basis of establishing community. Nevertheless, most of the groups in turn, at their own individual paces, managed to establish communities of their own. As an example, the Japanese prior to World War II, wherever they settled—rural areas like Del Rey and medium-sized cities like Stockton (and of course in Los Angeles)—established full-service communities. In addition to ethnic stores and restaurants, charitable, social, recreational, and cultural institutions emerged appropriate to group needs and interests. Soon, there were Buddhist temples and Japanese Christian churches, Japanese Ys and mission schools, chapters of the Japanese Association,

(an organization primarily for first-generation immigrants that sought to build bridges between Caucasians and Japanese), branches of the Japanese American Citizens League (the major Japanese Civil Rights organization, founded primarily to serve the needs of the American-born children), cultural groups based on prefectural origin—teaching flower-arranging, the tea ceremony, fencing, martial arts, and other subjects—and Japanese language schools. Though often crammed together and limited to an area of a few square blocks, these Japantowns, with their networks of organizations, were flourishing ethnic communities despite the hardships they faced.

A comprehensive history of European immigrants and their descendants in the Central Valley is beyond the parameters of this article. Virtually every European and many Middle Eastern groups have been present in the valley. After the gold-rush generation, newcomers came directly to the region, sometimes encouraged by agents of Leland Stanford and Mark Hopkins and other railroad entrepreneurs and by large-scale employers. European immigrants typically faced fewer difficulties in establishing themselves than did Asians. Moreover, they could blend in a little more easily where their cultures were not so very different from what was viewed by many earlier-arriving residents as the norm.

In Fresno County, the largest immigrant group to settle was the Armenians. They clustered in Fresno, Fowler, Reedley, Selma, Yetttem (which means "Eden" in Armenian), and Kingsburg. Armenians also congregated in Madera, Merced, and Stanislaus counties, in fact as far north as the towns of Turlock and Modesto. They first arrived in the United States in the 1880s; while some Armenians settled in New England, Fresno County became the Armenian capital of the United States, attractive to them because of a climate similar to Armenia. A persecuted group always at the mercy of the Turks or the Russians or other political powers, they had experienced *pogroms* and even genocide in the World War I era. Hence, many fled and came to this country as refugees. Refugee groups, unlike other immigrants, have never been limited to the relatively poor and uneducated; so the Armenians settled here not only as

poor unskilled laborers but also as skilled workers and as educated individuals with capital.

The Armenian population of Fresno County was 6,000 by 1915, with about 8,000 overall in the Central Valley, about eighty percent of the total in the state. Those who lived in the city of Fresno were limited to the worst housing, confined to shanties on the southwest side of the city near the railroad yards. They, like Asian and Spanish-speaking groups there, were denigrated as inferior outsiders, and they faced restrictive covenants and other discriminatory devices. In fact, the state of California, with the claim that the Armenians were Asians and thus subject to the state's alien land laws, ruled that they could not purchase land, a pronouncement that was overturned by a U.S. Court of Appeals. Some Armenians were hired for railroad and construction jobs. Some established fruit and vegetable gardens or peddled produce. Others became fruit and vegetable wholesalers or were able to open small businesses—groceries, fruit stores, carpet stores, dry cleaners, garages, and other businesses—or worked at trades. Some introduced products to the United States—Oriental rugs, for example—and in such cases did not compete in already established commercial areas. Many Armenians became farm laborers or worked in fruit or vegetable packing sheds, while others leased or invested in land, often vineyards, even though Armenians with capital typically did not bring with them experience in agriculture. As ranchers, they specialized in raisins and figs, crops that had been grown in their homeland, and they also introduced various produce items to the American market, especially types of melons, such as Casabas, Persians, and yellow watermelons. By the start of this century, Armenian farmers were responsible for producing seventy percent of U.S.-grown raisins. Some growers expanded into fruit packing and shipping.

Many of these ranchers succeeded impressively, working long days as whole family units and hiring laborers, too. Profits earned were immediately reinvested in the operation, in accord with the group's industriousness and thrift. But however successful some became, persistent outsider status led Armenians to form their own marketing and other such associations. The first California Raisin Growers Association was, in fact, an Armenian



Armenian agricultural workers at the Alameda Vineyard, Reedley, Fresno County, prepare trays of raisins for drying. *Courtesy Photo Collection, Department of Special Collections, Madden Library, California State University, Fresno.*



Among early Dutch settlers in the Central Valley, the Johannes Schaapman family, above, immigrated from Holland to Ripon in 1911 to join two sons who had gone there ahead of them. This family photograph was taken prior to their departure for the United States. *Courtesy Ripon Historical Society.*

growers' organization. Like other groups, they organized a variety of institutions to serve their needs: churches, language schools, charities, athletic associations, and coffeehouses that operated as informal social centers for the men. As a highly literate group, they also organized a library, the first one in Fresno.

Others greeted Armenians with hostility because of at least two factors. The first was their visibility. By World War I, Armenians comprised one-fourth of the foreign-born population in the Fresno area, and they became a lightning rod for ethnic prejudice, as may happen under such circumstances. In contrast, Armenians elsewhere in California—Los Angeles and its eastern neighbor, Riverside County, for example—were not as great a component of the population and did not tend to suffer the same treatment. Second, because some Armenians were so economically successful, and far from servile (as a by-product of surviving in the homeland over the centuries of oppression), they stirred resentment and envy.¹³

The Dutch also established themselves in the valley in the late nineteenth century. Many had first lived in the Midwest, Michigan especially. In fact, some young Dutchmen who had lived in Michigan—Holland, Michigan, for example—had worked on dairy farms as milkers there and commuted to central California for the winters, where they worked as milkers for Dutch-owned dairies. As early as the 1870s, some Dutch, drawing on their experiences in Holland, had constructed a “polder,” an island of lowland reclaimed from the Delta in Sacramento County, and a few families then settled into farming there. A handful of attempts to establish Dutch colonies failed, however, including one near Merced. A mission of the Dutch Reformed Church was established in Modesto in 1904. By 1920, there were 4,592 Dutch-born people recorded as living in California, with nearly 1,000 in the Central Valley.

At the town of Ripon, located between Modesto



The Joe Souza family, Portuguese Americans, settled west of Porterville in Tulare County in the early twentieth century. They operated the former Gilligan Ranch, and their dairy farm included some fifty cows that were hand-milked daily. Family members shown, right to left, are Joe Souza, Sr., Lena, Joe, Jr., Paul, and Mrs. Marie Souza. *Private Collection of Jeff Edwards, Porterville.*

and Stockton, the first Dutch residents arrived by train from North Dakota in 1916, and it soon became the most famous Dutch town in California. A Dutch Reformed Church was established at once, and later a Dutch-language school, a convalescent home, and other ethnic facilities. The principal occupations that the Dutch of Ripon followed were dairying, including creameries, and operation of almond orchards. The population of the Ripon area eventually leveled off at about fifty percent Dutch.¹⁴

Another European group, the Portuguese, settled initially nearer the coast in Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara counties, and then spilled over into the Central Valley at the end of the nineteenth century. They worked as farm laborers, some becoming dairy owners and operators, typically in extended family partnerships. Portuguese agricultural laborers appeared in noticeable numbers in the valley as fruitpickers in the second decade of this century. By then, of the 22,000 Portuguese in California, more than 3,000 lived in the Central Valley. Arriving either as married couples or as single men, they worked in the Delta in the asparagus fields and in other crops. Typically, groups of up to about a dozen

assumed leases together. Some individuals managed to lease land of their own, and the Portuguese came to operate the bulk of the valley's truck vegetable enterprises. They also operated feedlots. Compared to most other groups, the Portuguese did not establish many community institutions. While they did form religious associations and lodges, their pattern of dispersed settlement in rural areas, and regional differences among them, as well as the long days common to an agricultural work schedule, limited other undertakings.¹⁵

Italians and Germans initially arrived during the Gold Rush, and both quickly established themselves in the valley. In the case of the Italians, many became fishermen along the coast and truck farmers in the rural San Francisco Bay area or construction workers in the city of San Francisco itself. By the early twentieth century, they were the second largest nationality group in California agriculture. In contrast to the Italians who settled on the east coast of the United States, these were mostly northern, rather than southern, Italians, although some did emigrate from the south, as well as from Sicily. Some Bay Area Italians encouraged one another to move inland

(referred to demographically as “chain migration”), and many relocated in the Central Valley as farm laborers, tenant farmers, and then as owners and operators of ranches and small businesses.

In the 1880s, Italian farm laborers displaced Chinese in various areas, such as in the Delta farmland south of Sacramento, in Alameda County orchards, and elsewhere. This was a deliberate choice by employers, and in some instances it influenced the crops—either in terms of growing crops more familiar to Italians or, as a specific example of an ethnically related agricultural change, instead of low-lying grapevines, tall vines became the norm. But Italians also experienced discrimination. They were classified by some employers as “non-white,”

and they faced occupational, housing, and credit discrimination.

Those Italians who became ranchers concentrated on grapes, other fruits, and vegetables. While many Italians, like other southern European groups and Asians, had first come as men without families, their ranches tended to be run as family efforts (what could be called “mom and pop” operations), with wives and children working in the fields (unlike northern European immigrant patterns, where wives and children were not involved in field work). Not all managed to move out of the category of hired labor to become owner-operators, but some were spectacularly successful, such as Joseph Di Giorgio, who farmed near Bakersfield and eventually took



Among the Italian population in Stockton at the end of the nineteenth century were merchants such as the Gianelli family (shown here), who owned a grocery store in the city. *Courtesy Bank of Stockton/Covello Collection.*

over and popularized the already established S&W canned-food label, the Gallo brothers of winemaking fame, as well as two other Italian immigrant partners, one of whose names was shortened to become the trademark of their "Del Monte" line of canned goods. Italians also, like some groups already considered, established a few rural or agricultural colonies. The most famous was established in the 1880s, the Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony of one hundred families, with a winery in Madera.

The Italians became one of the most visible groups in Central Valley agriculture, even to the extent that they were seen by some as synonymous with it. Twelve thousand Italians resided there by 1910. They gradually overcame most of the early prejudices against them and established a strong community, as seen not only in their economic successes but their organizational strength through chapters of the Sons of Italy, the Italian Catholic Federation, the Italian Gardeners Society, and other groups wherever they lived.¹⁶

Germans appear to have been the first northern European immigrant group to have made its mark both in the Mother Lode and in the Central Valley during the gold-rush era. Germans, in fact, pioneered in the founding of several valley cities, such as Marysville, Sacramento, and Stockton. For example, the town of Lodi, located just north of Stockton, has a unique German heritage, having been founded by Germans who migrated as a group from the Dakotas late in the nineteenth century. In a parallel to Dutch-dominated Ripon, the German Lodians established a number of German cultural institutions (an annual Octoberfest, the Order of Hermann Sons and Sisters, and the German Club), which shaped the city's ambience. As late as the eve of World War II, some California-born children entered Lodi Unified schools speaking only German.

By 1910, there were at least 15,000 first- and second-generation Germans living in the Central Valley. German agricultural communities, if not fully organized colonies, developed. However, religiously distinctive German groups, such as the Mennonites, founded more formal communities, perhaps the most famous of which was in the Livingston-Winton area in Merced County, where they became successful and industrious orchardists. Germans, settling in California either as immigrants coming

directly from the Old World or as migrants from the Midwest, became the largest ethnic group in California agriculture. Furthermore, they were the foreign-born group with the largest percentage of landowners in the early twentieth century. Germans often went into grape-growing and winemaking, resulting in some moving to the Napa and Sonoma valleys, but those in the Central Valley also grew other fruits and vegetables. It is difficult to trace the Germans in as much detail as other groups in the valley. For the most part—with the obvious exception of the Lodi Germans—they blended into the general population rather quickly. Not retaining separate visibility, except in regard to name recognition, they simply became part of the valley's agricultural population.¹⁷

The various peoples referred to above, as well as others, transformed the Central Valley. Without them, it would no doubt have become only a marginally successful agricultural region, struggling with both arid and swamp lands. The population base of the valley in the early years of statehood was simply inadequate for large-scale agriculture. Indeed, an enormous labor shortage existed, and therefore serious limitations on development prevailed. That shortage was alleviated by the incoming immigrant groups, who provided the critical mass for the emergence of large-scale agriculture. While virtually all writers have emphasized the role of the Chinese (see the dissertation by Varden Fuller cited in note 2) and the subsequent Asian groups, the contention here has been that not only Asian, but also European, immigrants filled a vital gap and provided the essential ingredient of farm labor that permitted the system of large-scale intensive agriculture to develop.

Moreover, as the valley became the fruit and vegetable cornucopia of the United States, immigrant ranchers and entrepreneurs emerged and provided another crucial ingredient in its economic development. Some became innovators introducing crops from the Old World to California agriculture, whether Japanese eggplants, Casaba melons, Dutch and Portuguese dairy products, or grapes for the Italian and German viticulture industry. Crops often rotated as successive groups came to dominate a particular valley area. Some individuals of various

Born in Steinweden, Germany, in 1813, Charles M. Weber immigrated to the United States in 1836. Traveling to California overland with the Bidwell-Bartleson Party in the early 1840s, he settled first in San Jose. A successful merchant, he acquired a vast land grant in the Central Valley, some of which he set aside to found the city of Stockton. *Courtesy Holt-Atherton Department, University of Pacific Libraries.*



backgrounds also became merchants, offering new products and services to their own groups first and then to the larger public, typically aided by credit available through community-support networks of relatives and associates. The determining factor in a particular individual's path was the nexus between the variables present in the local area and in that individual's own background and experience.

In conclusion, although most immigrants faced discrimination, many traveled a rewarding road. The upward socioeconomic mobility that some realized meant that the persistent dream of countless immigrants of a land with streets paved with gold had come true in another version for them: in the California Central Valley blessed with rich soil, they had been able to shape their own lives as well as the valley itself.

CHS

See notes beginning on page 218.

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