GROWING CONFLICT

AGRICULTURE, INNOVATION, AND IMMIGRATION IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY, 1837-1937

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Abstract

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The history of San Luis Obispo and its surrounding areas is complex. Agriculture, innovation, and immigration have all contributed to the formation of the region. The Spanish, Mexican, and early American periods established the framework successive waves of immigrants had to live within. Native Americans and immigrants from China, Portugal, Switzerland, Japan, the Philippines, and other regions of the United States have all toiled in the fields and contributed to America's tables at various points throughout county history. Many contingencies determined the treatment of successive waves of immigrants. Growth and development are taking place at exponential rates on the very land that witnessed the first local agriculture and the conflicts surrounding the burgeoning industry.

Keywords: San Luis Obispo County, Immigration, Technology, Nipomo, Native Americans, Chinese, Portuguese, Swiss, Japanese, Filipino, Dustbowl, Dorothea Lange, William Dana, Pea

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Introduction

William Goodwin Dana came to Mexico during the 1830s from Boston, and followed the typical pattern that most American immigrants pursued on California's Central Coast. Dana travelled around the Pacific Ocean as a trader and eventually established himself in Santa Barbara. At the time, Santa Barbara was a major hub of the otter pelt trade and Dana opened a general store to take advantage of the pueblo marketplace. He met Maria Josefa Petra del Carmen and married her in 1828 while living in Santa Barbara. She too, followed a typical pattern of marrying an American man, as all of her sisters did the same. Following his marriage, William Dana petitioned the Mexican government for citizenship, which it granted in 1835. This made him eligible for free land from the Mexican government. He applied for a land grant from the government, which subsequently ceded an area called Nipomo, a native Chumash location meaning "At the Foot of the Hills". It consisted of 37,887 acres on California's Central Coast. Dana employed local Chumash residents to build his adobe house, but coming from Boston, he built the house in a typical New England style. Thus lived San Luis Obispo County's first non-mission resident in a settlement amalgamating the cultures of Mexico, New England, and the Chumash.¹

Figure 1- William Goodwin Dana, courtesy of the Dana Adobe Nipomo Amigos.

¹ Rocky Dana and Marie Harrington, *The Blond Ranchero: Memories of Juan Francisco Dana* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1960), 14-16. According to this oral history by one of Dana's sons, the four local ranch owners that received Mexican land grants (Branch, Price, Sparks, and Dana) were all Americans who moved to the region, married Mexican women, and converted to Catholicism in order to be eligible to receive land. All of Maria Josefa Carrillo's sisters also married American men in Santa Barbara.

A century after Dana (See Figure 1) established himself in Nipomo, labor strikes took place in the pea fields that were once his cattle ranch. Each spring when the local pea crop was ready for harvest, thousands of laborers, most of which were Filipino or migrants escaping the Dustbowl, would descend upon Nipomo looking for work in hopes of enduring the hardships caused by the economic downturn facing the nation. These laborers were destitute and living in squalor. The 1930s saw an abundance of labor organization in an effort to combat the inadequate and substandard conditions in which laborers had to live in order to toil in Nipomo's pea fields. One of these moments was when Dorothea Lange, a New Deal photographer hired by the Roosevelt administration to document suffering during the Great Depression, was traveling along California's Highway 101. She came across a migrant labor camp where she took her famous picture entitled "Migrant Mother" in 1936 (See Figure 2) that will forever remain a major contribution to American history. The photo encapsulates the suffering of laborers during the Great Depression.

The century between William Dana's arrival and Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother"

Figure 2 - Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother,"
courtesy of the Library of Congress

was a decisive period of transition. That dramatic transformation the land experienced begs the question: How is it that the same piece of land transformed from a rural rancho to the site of a labor dispute between thousands of itinerant workers and pea farmers? It is important to analyze this period because it explains the process in which men of European descent were able to

gain control of the majority of land and agriculture in the area. By extension, studying San Luis Obispo County during the period can serve as a case study to provide an explanation for how the European- American population gained control over the region, and how they were able to maintain that control. There were periodical waves of new immigrant population groups that came to the area, only to be discriminated against and subject to strict race laws. Successive acts of government legislation that banned land ownership by particular immigrant groups provide a partial explanation for current community demographics and helps explain why certain groups hold a substantial amount of land and the majority of farms.

There are two facets to this thesis. First, the advancement of agriculture in the region occurred because of immigration to the area (in the form of farmer and laborer) and technological advance. Secondly, those immigrant groups found opportunity in agriculture but faced varying levels of acceptance in the industry depending on many factors such as their origins and the circumstances in America upon their arrival. It is going to investigate local events, many of which took place on what was once Dana's vast tract of land. Looking at the events on this large piece of land will demonstrate the interconnected relationship between agriculture, immigration, and technological innovation. Innovation provided for higher yields. Farms required more laborers to cultivate and harvest the increased number of crops, which offered increased opportunity to those willing to move to the region. Laborers and technological advance ultimately enabled farmers to survive, grow, and profit, even in dire economic circumstances such as the Great Depression. Immigrants diversified the communities in which they immigrated to, but some groups contributed to the "melting pot" more than others did because of racial issues. Promoters would also play a role in immigration to the region due to

the subdivision of the ranchos, the building of the railroads, the sensationalist literature written about the region's fertility to attract more farmers, and the need to recruit more laborers.²

In many ways, this thesis fits into the broader historiography of Western United States history that focuses on the development of locations where diverse peoples met one another. It also calls into question the way people view, think of, and remember the West. Many historians have heavily criticized Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893, "Frontier Thesis" delivered at the Chicago World's Fair because of his version of the West. Turner's version is a romanticized one. He argued that the West allowed a unique American identity to form differently from any other culture that the world had previously witnessed.³ In a way, Turner was correct. Those who happened to be sufficiently lucky had plenty of freedom available for the formation of a new American identity, one in which people become individualistic and formed an "antisocial" and "primitive" society based on the family.⁴ However, settlers fortunate enough to have the luxury of such freedom were usually European-American males, as was the case locally. Turner completely failed to acknowledge the limited amount of freedom and opportunity to contribute to the larger culture available to non-whites. Furthermore, the blending of cultures that Turner claimed took place on the Frontier was not a blending at all, but rather the domination of his so-called American culture. Many of these people never had the opportunity to contribute to an

² In "Agricultural Improvement and Technological Innovation in a Slave Society: The Case of Early National Northern Virginia," *Agricultural History* 75, no. 2 (Spring, 2001), pp. 135-167, A. Glenn Crothers tries to dispel the argument that historians typically make about a region they see as backward. He, however, argues that local farmers enthusiastically embraced new farming methods that resulted in new staples being grown. The price of tobacco fell which encouraged farmers to switch to wheat. Diversifying crops also enabled farmers to keep their slaves employed on a year-round basis by switching to crops that could be harvesting in different seasons. New technologies also arose to meet the needs of the grain farmers as well as spin-off industries that resulted from the products being produced. Similarly, many view the rural Central Coast as somewhat backwards as little academic energy has been spent studying the region. In reality, there was much taking place during the nineteenth century. New technology also arose in the region in response to the development of agriculture. However, without an enslaved workforce, farmers developed a system that relied on farm laborers that became increasingly migratory due to the types of crops grown and the times in which they came into season around the California.

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Martin Ridge, ed., *Frederick Jackson Turner: Wisconsin's Historian of the Frontier* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986).

⁴ Turner, 15.

American identity. Examples of such people are those that immigrated to the West Coast - laborers that recruiters enticed to the United States with the promise of labor and wages but legally excluded from property ownership. Turner's romanticized west, one of the rugged individualist European-American male, was not the same West that many experienced, with the exception of a fortunate few. The situation that occurred locally is an example that calls Turner's "Frontier Thesis" into question.

Like Turner, cultural formation and advancement is one of the themes of David Vaught's *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920*. Vaught argues that historians have neglected the roots of the state's agricultural labor relations and the culture that growers established. According to Vaught, Central Valley farmers aspired to create a community ideal based upon a "class of people" who wanted to achieve "intellectual fulfillment, satisfying work, and cultural advancement" in the agricultural realm. Vaught admits that, as agriculture expanded, growers became increasingly dependent on Asian laborers. Unfortunately, Asians were not a part of their cultural ideal.⁵ Vaught may be correct in his assertion that California farmers saw themselves as "cultural guardians," but he fails to mention the costs associated with this perceived guardianship. As can be seen in this thesis, farmers as guardians of American culture were a failure – they had a limited version of what American culture included and they simultaneously imported groups of immigrant workers that did not fit into their ideal and many times left local, state, and federal governments with the associated costs. Like Turner, Vaught fails to explain that European-American farmers were a privileged class of people who wanted to protect their version of culture. They were cultivating lands that once belonged to other groups of people while preventing new waves of immigrant groups from

⁵ David Vaught's *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 44-45.

taking part in the industry in forms other than as laborers. He also fails to explain the process that allowed the farmers to gain access and maintain control over their land.

Ian Tyrrell accounts for the motivation behind cultivating the land and the development of culture in California. In his comparative study, *True Garden of the Gods: California-Australians Environmental Reform, 1860-1930*, Tyrrell maintains that economic and institutional motives were not the sole reasons behind agricultural innovation. Rather, white Californians wanted to establish a landscape that would provide a foundation for their ideal society. A mixture of farms, small towns, and forests, they believed would provide California with balanced development – something that nineteenth century mining could not provide. Contemporary Californians saw agriculture as containing their moral ideas of temperance, health, and family values. Tyrell provides an insight that Vaught does not; his work maintains that advocates of horticultural diversity in California are probably best viewed as part of an alternative culture that sought reform while participating in the imperial dream of expansionism. Horticultural diversity took form in what Tyrell calls a garden inspired by social and economic objectives, in which small land holdings dominated instead of vast corporate operations and peasant operations of minority ethnic groups. European and American immigrants to California fashioned their own cultural landscape using the environment and human labor.⁶

Other recent western historiography has focused on immigration and the formation of culture. One pattern formed in which immigrants traveled directly to a destination in search of profit or a better life, as was the case during the California Gold Rush. Susan Lee Johnson focuses on immigration and the California Gold Rush in her work, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*. Johnson argues that the California Gold Rush was one of the

⁶ Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860-1930* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

most multicultural and diverse events in American history, which gave rise to a social world unique to the mines of California. This is much different from the Gold Rush history typically remembered in popular culture and history textbooks.⁷ Johnson's work fails to meet the pattern established in this thesis, at least in its initial stages. While the Gold Rush was occurring in the Sierra Nevada mines, San Luis Obispo County was still very much rural and lacked a diverse population even though the Gold Rush occurred in a place that was relatively close to the region. During this period, the local population consisted mainly of the elites formed under the Mexican land grant system and their laborers. However, in later years the area became one similar to Johnson's account of the Gold Rush era. Many people from diverse places met in San Luis Obispo County.

Another pattern established in Western historiography appears to be circumstances in which immigrants ended up at a location that they were not originally destined. An example is Thomas Andrews' *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*. Andrews argues nature, capitalists, and laborers formed a unique culture that led to coal strikes and the Ludlow Massacre.⁸ Capitalists and laborers came from around the nation, as well as from around the world to work in Colorado's coal mines. There they formed a unique culture specific to the region, one that resulted from the combination of the dangers of working in an underground environment and industrial paternalism. This situation culminated in the Ludlow Massacre in which nearly 100 people died. This thesis fits into the model established by Andrews because very few people initially immigrated to San Luis Obispo County directly. Rather, immigrants usually came to the region after they were originally bound for somewhere else. While one of

⁷ Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000), 12.

⁸ Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19.

the nation's most multicultural events was taking place a few hundred miles to the north of the region, it took nearly 30 years for the area to see the result in the form of changing demographics, similar to the Colorado coalmines.

Not until the 1880s, when the rest of the nation was feeling a recession, did a large and diverse group of immigrants appear in San Luis Obispo County in search of opportunity. San Luis Obispo County became a meeting place for people from around the world during the end of the nineteenth century. The people that immigrated here created an agricultural environment and interacted in a way that was unique to agricultural communities where labor-intensive crops grew. Subsequent waves of immigrants also contributed to the circumstances that led up to the labor strikes of the 1930s and the conditions that Dorothea Lange encountered when she photographed her "Migrant Mother."

This thesis describes the process in which some landowners were able to prosper while others faced obstacles established by an intolerant society. The process complicates public memory at the local and national level. Communities celebrate local farmers as rugged individualists that succeeded in establishing the current cities and towns. However, the story is much more complex than simply that of some families succeeding while others did not. This thesis attempts to demonstrate the process that took place and allowed these farmers to succeed, and continue succeeding while other farmers failed. Collectively, farmers were also able to maintain control of their land while local society and the government it elected banned others – mainly non-white minorities- from landownership. Many times immigrants started gaining a level of success but, as a result, were subject to even more obstacles. It is also important to realize that this thesis deals with major trends. Its goal is not to convey the sense that groups were monolithic – not every farmer took part in discrimination and not every immigrant faced

eviction from their land. Many people, both farmers and laborers, were simply trying to survive in a very complex world. The world those people inhabited shaped the world we live in today.

The thesis is broken into two sections. The first portion will focus on the introduction of agriculture and the role immigrants played in biological and technological advancement. Advancement increased production and the variety of agriculture that took place. Increased production and a larger variety of produce linked agricultural advancement to a growing population. This trend began with the Spanish mission settlements as sedentary living required farming and labor. When the Spaniards had more labor at their disposal, they produced more goods. Mexican independence and secularization brought more people and biological change, much of which was in the form of cattle. This system provided the foundation on which American agriculture and labor formed. Later, drought and the transition from Mexican to American governance allowed developers to take advantage of the situation and subdivide Mexican land grants. Freed land allowed for more immigration after American annexation, paving the way for the production of different types of agriculture that appears on Census data throughout the late nineteenth century. Innovations caused higher yields and more diversified production, requiring even more labor. This occurred while promoters encouraged increasing amounts immigration by way of literary pieces and traveling shows containing local agricultural goods that demonstrated the productivity of the region to audiences across the United States. Promoters also encouraged experimentation among farmers, leading to San Luis Obispo County's first exotic produce such as tobacco, lemons, and the eucalyptus groves that are still visible today. Population growth that was initially due to agriculture gradually created other spin-off industries, resulting in employment opportunities for people outside of agriculture. This period witnessed an exponential increase in innovation and immigration.

The second section of this thesis examines the laborers that immigrated to the region because of the ever-increasing need for agricultural workers. These immigrants reshaped the county landscape and the local demography while having to work within the framework established by prior (European and American) groups. The soil and climate of the region created the perfect circumstances to grow labor-intensive specialty crops that machinery lacked the ability to cultivate and harvest. The crops required human labor. Promoters, hired by farmers, and the opportunity for work drew people to the area's fields. Labor patterns developed, beginning during the rancho period that utilized Native Americans. While Native Americans were not immigrants, their treatment set a precedent for the conduct of later waves of immigrants. Some immigrant groups were able to assimilate and advance in the agricultural arena, while others lacked the same opportunities. Many contingencies determined the success of the various waves of immigrant groups that came to the San Luis Obispo County, including race, country of origin, religion, and the economic circumstances of the United States at the time of their arrival. The Great Depression brought migrant European-American farm workers to California where they encountered many other peoples, causing turmoil in the fields.

There are several important frames used to view history throughout this thesis, including the area's geography. San Luis Obispo County is located on the Pacific Ocean, which is an important factor to immigration and agriculture. Geography and the county's proximity to the ocean connected the area to the rest of the world while the soil attributes allowed for incoming people to farm. The geography enabled immigrants from throughout the Pacific to move to the area more easily by ship. It also allowed for transportation to and from major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles and San Francisco. In addition, the Pacific played a major role in the ability to import and export goods, enabling the foundations for agriculture and its subsequent success.

This thesis argues against the typical immigration history. Most works on immigrants focus on single immigrant group experience, such as Corrine Hoexter's *From Canton to California* on Chinese immigration to California.⁹ Other authors such as Robert Takaki focus on larger immigrant groups across the United States, exemplified in his book, *A Different Mirror: A Multicultural History of America*.¹⁰ This work sets out to level the playing field by placing white Americans in the same context as other immigrant groups because all groups, excluding the Native American population, were initially foreigners. Immigrants, whether from the Philippines, China, Japan, or other parts of the United States came here searching for a better life. San Luis Obispo County became a place where many different people from around the world met. For some, hardship lasted for a few years. For other groups the hardship lasted for generations. By placing all immigrants, regardless of country of origin on the same footing, this thesis demonstrates the discrepancies in treatment among various groups. What they all had in common was agriculture.

Power is another important aspect of this thesis. Each Census taken throughout the state's history contains a certain element of demographic change. From the first California Census in 1850, to the 1930 Census (the last studied), change contained certain aspects of the struggle for power and European-American dominance. This occurred throughout history, beginning with Spanish colonialism and their dominance over their native workers. It happened again when the Mexican government distributed land grants, which created "haves" and "have-nots." The destruction of the land grants served as a struggle between incoming Americans and

⁹ Corrine K. Hoexter, *From Canton to California: The Epic of Chinese Immigration* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1976). Hoexter argues that the Chinese experience was similar to the experience of blacks in the South throughout the nineteenth century. Her book begins with her experience attempting to find a "Chinese Frederick Douglass," xiii.

¹⁰ Robert Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1989). In this work, Takaki argues that America needs a different way of viewing itself and its history to dispute the view most commonly held by Americans; the America is white and society views most everyone else as an outsider. He believes what is needed is a common history for America's diverse groups, 16.

the previous elite group that owned the majority of the land. The Americans that came after the great drought of the 1860s and settled the land also brought new types of agriculture to the region. Once drought and economic factors had destroyed the land grants, Americans were free to buy up land while promoters advertised the county to other Americans and Californians in periodicals such as *The Overland Monthly*. This would maintain wealth in the form of property in the hands of European-Americans. The twentieth century saw Alien Land Laws passed in the 1910s, which ensured land would stay in the hands of those who purchased it earlier (Europeans and Americans) and out of the control of immigrants such as the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos. Anytime groups other than European-Americans were successful in Agriculture, events seemed to push them out of the industry and to the fringes of society.

The methodology of this paper is to use an array of primary sources and works by other authors to focus on Southern San Luis Obispo County. The most important data are federal census figures. Locals traveling door-to-door hand wrote the Census Schedules and collected information on each individual. The official printed reports that resulted from these figures also contained agricultural data, among other data, that the government tabulated. The correlation between the increase in crops grown according to the official printed Census and the data provided by the handwritten Census Schedules demonstrates the connection between the two. In addition, newspaper articles provide an insight into how locals viewed the immigrants and their concerns over their increasing numbers. Ironically, many of the locals held negative views of immigrants when they themselves came from immigrant families. There are multiple strengths of using sources such as census records and newspapers. They provide insight into the people and circumstances of the past. However, these records are not always reliable due to human error, whether intentional or unintentional. Sometimes such records and figures seem inflated,

while others appear to be absent. The sources and works by other authors help create a picture of how in agriculture, innovation, and immigration were interconnected.

Finally, this thesis will fill the gaps located in other significant local histories. The most famous work on county history is Myron Angel's *History of San Luis Obispo County with Illustration and Biographical Sketches of its Prominent Men and Pioneers*. Published in 1883, Angel dedicated the large volume to all of the most specific details that, in his view, demonstrated everything great about the county. As a product of its time, the book is more of a real estate guide to promote county agriculture and its natural assets than a true historical work. It also lacks any mention of non-Europeans. Following in Angel's footsteps were Annie Morrison and John Haydon's 1917 *History of San Luis Obispo County and Environs with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County and Environs Who have been Identified with the Growth and Development of the Section from the Early Days to the Present*. Another large volume, the book contains more information than Angel's book as updated by Morrison and Haydon with more immigrants and community members. It also includes a few women and even some non-white immigrant groups to the extent that it mentions the "splendid gardens" that were cultivated by "Chinamen" and Japanese immigrants.¹¹ By 1939, a few Chinese and Japanese Americans had reached the status of leading county citizens according to Chris Jespersen and Harold McLean Meier in their *History of San Luis Obispo County, State of California: Its People and Its Resources*¹². Not as promotional as the previous two books, Jespersen and Meier follow the pattern of celebrating the people they saw as the most

¹¹ Morrison and Haydon, 91.

¹² Senator Chris N. Jespersen and Harold McLean Meier, *History of San Luis Obispo County, State of California: Its People and Its Resources* (No City Listed: Harold McLean Meier, 1939). Information on prominent Chinese and Japanese immigrants and their American descendants that contributed to the development of the county appear on pages 117, 222-224, 235, 270, and 275.

prominent citizens of the county. All three books follow in the tradition of mentioning the people that the authors viewed as the most important residents that contributed to county history, most of whom were white American immigrants or their families that came to the area during the nineteenth century. Lacking is information about the everyday people that worked to survive while simultaneously contributing to the county's output. They also all gloss over any negative events that occurred in county history.

Filling in the gaps located in local histories uncovers the complexity behind localized events. This act has major implications for the community, as well as for the state and nation. Previously written histories provide a particular image associated with local towns and the people that have inhabited them. However, adding people and events that previously lacked acknowledgement makes history more complex. It provides the possibility that a community is not what its citizens believe it is.

Chapter 1

Innovation

In 1871, a woman by the name of Josephine Clifford traveled to San Luis Obispo County from San Francisco in order to write an article for *The Overland Monthly*. It was a long and arduous trip as the region lacked railroads. She had to travel by way of horse and carriage, following a bumpy dirt road. During her stay, she ventured around the county on horseback and described its potential bounty to her readers. She commentated on the agricultural potential for those willing to immigrate to the area for farming purposes while placing blame on Mexicans for their unwillingness to advance it. These earlier immigrants were, according to Clifford, “satisfied with their dingy, adobe houses” while Americans who married into Mexican families assimilated and took on the same Mexican habits that contributed to the lack of agriculture and the opinion “with Mexican exactness, ‘that nothing would grow.’”¹³

Josephine Clifford could not have been more wrong, as agricultural advancement had been taking place from the times of first settlement. Clifford simply needed a justification for American leadership and settlement under the guise of making the land more productive. However, prior to the arrival of Americans in the county, there were mission fields established by the Spaniards and later, gardens established by the Mexican land grantees that they utilized to feed their families. Promoters such as Clifford had to make a point that the reason previous settlers lacked agriculture was because of their inability, not because of the land or its natural attributes, to justify American conquest, and encourage development. The promoters succeeded in encouraging settlers to move to the region, with each wave bringing new crops and technology with them. However, this process was more continuous than contemporaries like Clifford

¹³ Josephine Clifford, “Tropical California,” *The Overland Monthly* vol. 7 no. 4 (October, 1871) 301.

believed. Agricultural improvement had been occurring since the establishment of Spanish settlements and the first farms where settlers brought new agricultural goods when they immigrated to the region. Americans hoping to prosper in agriculture became the dominant force in the region, even during the Mexican period, essentially sealing the political fate of the region. Outsiders played an increasing role in the agricultural industry by using labor and biological and technological advancement to further their goals and expand agriculture throughout the region throughout the nineteenth century.

The First Agriculture

Prior to the beginning of agriculture in the county, and more generally in California, the established native people in the region survived by utilizing nature. They typically ate acorns, seeds, roots, wild fruit, and a number of wild animals. Natural barriers prevented the spread of sedentary agriculture into the region from other parts of the West. The native people such as the local Chumash tribe sustained themselves by these methods for thousands of years until the arrival of European explorers.¹⁴

With the arrival of the first immigrants in the 1760s, the Spanish implemented a drastic change in the sustenance methods utilized by the people living in the area. Whereas the native people lived in hunter-gatherer societies, the arriving Europeans established sedentary settlements, which required permanent types of agriculture. Examples of these early settlements that still exist are Mission San Luis Obispo, Mission San Miguel Arcangel, and Mission San Antonio de Padua. Spaniards colonized most of California and therefore agriculture in the region had Mediterranean roots. The Spaniards bought items such as wheat, cattle, horses, vines,

¹⁴ Claude B. Hutchison, *California Agriculture By Members of the Faculty of the College of Agriculture University of California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1946), 4-5.

and fruits that they were familiar with in their homeland. However, as they encountered people in their travels around the globe, they picked up other agricultural goods that they brought to California such as maize, beans, cotton, and tomatoes.¹⁵

The experimentation that took place in the earlier Spanish colonies played an important role in the establishment of California's agriculture. Prior to the colonization of Alta California the Spanish established settlements in Baja California. Here they experimented in the growing and harvesting of the conglomeration of New World and Old World crops that they collected. The Spaniards brought the first seeds and livestock from Baja California, accompanied by their knowledge gained from their experiences in agriculture, which they utilized in the initial stages of the cultivation of the region.¹⁶

Once in Alta California, the Spaniards established the coastal chain of missions, such as San Luis Obispo, where they traded with other nations and ascertained what types of crops would grow in the region. Spain was competing with other European nations to establish colonies while simultaneously trading with them. For example, the Russian presence on the north coast of California during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may have encouraged Spain to increase the size of their missions in an effort to discourage further Russian expansion. However, the seeds for rye and buckwheat grown at the missions may have actually come from trading with the Russian settlements at Fort Ross and Bodega Bay, while the Russians may have traded with the Spanish along the Alta California coastline in order to obtain their initial agricultural needs.¹⁷

Once the missions were established, the Spanish settlers learned to contend with the various microclimates found at their missions. An 1801 mission report lists the missions in San

¹⁵ Hutchison, 3.

¹⁶ Hutchison, 5.

¹⁷ Hutchison, 22.

Diego, San Juan Capistrano, San Gabriel, San Buenaventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo as having successfully grown grapes and processed wine. According to the report the missionaries admitted to having problems establishing grape vines at all of their establishments, "...despite our endeavors, we have no success, since we missionaries, being all Europeans, do not know the climate or other situations."¹⁸ What is interesting about this statement is that the missionaries admitted ignorance of local climates and experimented with agricultural methods to figure out what variety of grapes would grow in the climates specific to each mission. They arrived with an assumption that the whole region had one climate and later realized each mission was actually located in a microclimate.

One of the initial concerns of the Spaniards was to establish staple crops such as wheat and small herds of cattle, which, once mastered, allowed them to experiment in more luxuriant, agricultural commodities. The missions introduced sheep, goats, and swine from Baja California once they were successful with staple crops. The sheep were for wool while the other animals were for food.¹⁹ The missions started growing barley, maize, beans, lentils, peas, cotton, and hemp in small quantities. Mission records show that 1820 was the peak year for the missions in Alta California with 180,000 bushels of crops produced, of which two-thirds was wheat and one-fifth was maize. As the mission establishments learned from experience, they began organizing gardens that contained fruits and nuts including pears, peaches, apples, almonds, plums, oranges, lemons, limes, dates, cherries, walnuts, olives, and figs. These items received less attention from the padres as they were not an integral part of agriculture, but rather a type of luxury item since production remained small.²⁰

¹⁸ Hutchison, 13.

¹⁹ Jelinek, 12.

²⁰ Jelinek, 14.

The mission in San Luis Obispo maintained gardens scattered across what would become San Luis Obispo County. Mission laborers built stone corrals for livestock in the south county at what would eventually be the Corral de Piedra Rancho. Because of its fertile soil and easy access to a water source, the mission used the area in what is now Arroyo Grande as a gardening area for growing crops. The missions also employed Indian labor to build dams and irrigation ditches to direct water from creeks to the fields where crops were grown.²¹

The Mexican Period

In 1821, political events incited a transformation of land distribution in coastal California. It was in this year that Mexico won its independence from Spain. Mission secularization was one of the underlying issues facing the new nation. The growing Mexican population wanted access to land that the missions occupied, causing mounting pressure on the government to put an end to the mission system. Simultaneously, Mexico opened the ports of San Diego and Monterey to foreign commerce in an effort to liberalize the economy. New England's manufacturing interests were in search of raw materials, such as leather, to produce goods and soon began trading in the Mexican ports. A direct economic connection formed between the Alta California coast in Mexico and the New England manufacturing community in the United States. The Mexican government and the population at large pressed the missions into secularization since they held the best land, the majority of the Indian labor, and possessed the largest cattle herds.²² Secularization caused the region to transform from one predominantly established for religious purposes into one based on liberal economic policies and the cattle industry.

²¹ Morrison and Haydon, 32.

²² Jelinek, 15-16.

Secularization was not easy to implement. There were failed attempts at land redistribution before the Governor of Alta California, Jose Figueroa, finally enforced it in 1833. The reorganization of the land immediately surrounding the missions from church use to distribution among settlers meant that each citizen received “not more than three hundred yards square nor less than one hundred yards square.” The state government distributed half of all mission property such as cattle, roots, seeds, and agricultural implements to Indians and settlers. Missions maintained ownership of the remainder of the goods so that they could continue their operations. Freed Indians were still required to assist in the tending of vineyards and other areas of public use.²³ Figueroa offered liberation to families of indigenous descent along with land and water rights. However, few families agreed to the emancipation offer, as there were limited benefits for them to live as individuals rather than communally.²⁴

The liberalization of the land and economic policy paved the way for a new wave of settlement. Traders from New England that were docking off the coast of California began moving into the area. Mission secularization weakened the power of the Catholic Church in California and handed it to a new ranch-landowning class that developed across the countryside. This handover caused massive changes that rippled through California society. The church no longer controlled the land, but instead an elite class of mostly men of European descent ruled it. During the period of Mexican government rule between 1834 and 1846 more than seven hundred private land grants were made statewide to well favored individuals, compared to only twenty that the Spanish granted during their entire rule.²⁵ However, by handing out land to some and not others, it seems plausible that the government advertently or inadvertently created groups of

²³ Morrison and Haydon, 35.

²⁴ Street, 83.

²⁵ Street, 97.

“haves” and “have-nots” - the privileged being American immigrants and Mexican elite families in high positions; the unprivileged being the Native Americans who were left toiling in the fields.

The process of applying for a land grant was simple and open to foreigners that were willing to take advantage of the system. The rancheros simply had to petition the governor and present a map of their desired land. The boundaries were casually established using creek beds, large trees, skulls, or strange-looking rocks causing the ranches to occupy vaguely defined regions. Many of these men lived in and constructed elaborate adobe houses and villas. Rancheros were devoted to the care and maintenance of farms and cattle herds. By the mid 1840s, California’s export business boomed with the trade of hides and tallow. The hide and tallow trade was lucrative to any foreigner who was willing to learn Spanish and adhere to Mexican customs could participate.²⁶

One of the first people to take advantage of the Mexican land grant system was Captain William Goodwin Dana of Boston who transformed his land for early industrial use. Born in 1797, he became a sailor and took part in the Pacific trade routes between Asia, Hawaii, California, and Alaska. In 1825, Dana opened a general store in Santa Barbara where he married Dona Maria Josefa Carrillo, the daughter of a prominent California family. Once he married a Mexican and converted to Catholicism, he became eligible for a land grant. He received a large land tract in Nipomo in 1835 where he eventually constructed a large adobe home, built in New England style that included 13 rooms. He established a soap factory, furniture factory, looms for weaving, and a blacksmith shop that he used to sell goods to his closest neighbors, which, until other settlers moved to the area, were the missions.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Morrison and Haydon, 53.

Soon others began moving to the area. Francis Ziba Branch was born in Upstate New York in 1802 and traveled west and accompanied a trading party to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Like Dana, Branch opened a general store in Santa Barbara. He too married a woman of a prominent Mexican family, Dona Manuela Carlona in 1835, and became eligible for a land grant. In 1837, Branch received a Mexican land grant along the Arroyo Grande Creek called the Santa Manuela, which comprised over 16,950 acres. Later, Branch would purchase even more land in the area.²⁸

Following Dana and Branch was Isaac J. Sparks. Born in Maine in 1804, he followed the same route that Branch traveled to get to Los Angeles. He was part of a party that would be Jedediah Smith's last journey. During his travels, Sparks engaged in several conflicts with Native American tribes, but ultimately made it to Alta California in 1832. He began a business hunting sea otters and selling their pelts prior to opening a store in Santa Barbara. Ultimately, Sparks received the Pismo and Huasna Ranchos from the Mexican government. Both Branch and Sparks married into elite Mexican families following Dana's example.²⁹ All three would play a significant role in the development of southern San Luis Obispo County.

During this period of immigration, farming technology remained relatively stagnant, probably due to a seemingly endless supply of land and a perceived lack of need. Earlier settlers utilized the many resources around them. For example, they utilized tree branches to cover seeds with dirt while other times a log was dragged behind a wagon. The lack of major technological advancement was not due to, as Myron Angel believed, the Spaniard's religion and their reliance on biblical methods of farming which prevented advancement in areas such as fallowing fields and alternating crops to prevent soil exhaustion.³⁰ Technological advance was not connected to their level of available capital and their relative isolation. The ranchers had connections to

²⁸ Angel, 217.

²⁹ Angel, 220-221.

³⁰ Angel, 212.

outside markets to trade their hides and therefore had incoming capital. These first settlers only turned to the use of resources that were readily available on their land to complete the tasks they perceived as necessary. It is also probable that the vast amount of land available at their disposal allowed for the perception that they lacked the need for soil conservation practices.³¹

Ranchers used agriculture for multiple reasons, including self-sustenance, trade, and leisure time. The ranchers only needed to feed their families so they had their gardens. They lacked the technology to transport goods such as fruits and vegetables long distances without spoilage. Therefore, they were limited to livestock byproducts. They were also limited to livestock for use in leisure time. In 1892, the San Luis Obispo *Tribune* wrote a story on the reminiscences of Frank Dana, son of William Dana. Dana recalled that the family maintained a small garden but utilized it solely for family use. They planted the family's first wheat crop in 1848, which never exceeded 50 to 80 acres. Instead of crops, the family focused on raising cattle that roamed freely over the nearly 38,000 acres of their ranch.³² The family maintained a warehouse near the port at Cave Landing (now Avila Beach) where they stored the cattle hide and tallow they produced. Passing ships brought commodities that the family lacked the ability to produce, and, in return, picked up the hide and tallow. These delivered supplies included coffee and sugar, as well as furniture and clothing produced on the East Coast of the United

³¹ According to Jim Hardee in, "Soft Gold: Animal Skins and the Early Economy of California," in *Studies in Pacific History: Economics, Politics, and Migration*, ed. Dennis O. Flynn, Arturo Giraldez, and James Sobredo (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2002), 24; Americans that settled in Mexican California significantly influenced the commercial outlook of the region in addition to ultimately deciding the political direction that the state was going to take. In the article, Hardee argues that after the decline of the otter due to over hunting, many American businessmen in the region turned to cattle. Cattle hides and tallow is where these entrepreneurs ultimately made their money. If Hardee is correct, then local ranchers would have had incoming capital as well as important connections to outside markets via the hide and tallow trade via the close proximity to the ocean. Therefore, the lack of advancement was not due to isolation and lack of capital, but rather the settlers lacked the need for such advancements during this period.

³² The San Luis Obispo County *Tribune* republished this story on page 7 of their March 22, 1990 edition. The *Tribune* originally published it in 1892.

States.³³ Meanwhile the family also utilized their resources for times of leisure. They used horses for utilitarian purposes as well as amusement. Contemporary culture celebrated horseracing and bull fighting on the ranches. Isolation and the availability of agricultural resources caused people to use what they had at their disposal to pass the time.³⁴

The American Period

During the 1840s, another political event occurred that caused changes in political power and land distribution for the people living in San Luis Obispo County. Mission secularization, which had previously attracted American immigrants, and the addition of otter and cattle fur trading, sealed the political and economic fate of California. Americans that arrived in California affected the state's economy prior to the U.S. invasion. Political domination followed economic change in the form of the Mexican-American War.³⁵ American governance ultimately led to the destruction of the elite Mexican families that lacked the ability to assimilate into the American way of life. It also led to a land-grab by many Americans who would ultimately gain, and then maintain, control of land in the region by way of agriculture.

American land redistribution ruined many. Two years of political turmoil in the West during the Mexican-American War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the annexation of Alta California and other portions of Mexico to the United States. Among other aspects of Mexican life, the treaty guaranteed landowner's deeds. However, the landowners had to prove that the land they inhabited was legally their own with the burden of proof being on them. The United States government established a commission to hear evidence of proof of ownership. The commission's decisions were subject to appeal by the U.S. District

³³ Dana and Harrington, 83.

³⁴ Morrison and Haydon, 37.

³⁵ Hardee, 24.

and Supreme Courts. Often this resulted in long and expensive litigation, which financially ruined many of the recipients of Mexican land grants. It also opened the door to fraudulent claims. The land commission system may have been well intentioned at best, but at its worst, the system simply complied with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Either way, it often failed.³⁶

The Mexican elite property-owning class was destroyed while Americans carved up their ranches. Many large landowners had to mortgage their properties or take out loans in order to proceed through the legal system to prove the title to their land. This decision may have seemed financially feasible as the Gold Rush occurring in Northern California resulted in a high demand for beef meat from the local ranchos. This demand caused prices to increase and many ranch owners made a large profit. However, once the Gold Rush was over, prices crashed and left many in debt.³⁷ The destruction of the land grants allowed for incoming Americans and other immigrants to take up farming on their own farms that banks and developers carved out of the land grant system, while simultaneously destroying the elite property owners that formed under the Mexican government.

Land redistribution did not destroy all Mexican-American ranches. Life on the ranchos continued normally for families such as the Danas, who were able to prosper and even advance under an American California. William Dana utilized the blacksmith shop he created to build farm implements such as a plow made from oak tree branches that oxen pulled. The family and their laborers planted seeds in the ground by pulling brush on it and harvested their wheat crop with reaping hooks prior to threshing and trampling it with horses. They also built a mill for

³⁶ Angel, 213-214.

³⁷ Morrison and Haydon, 71.

cleaning the wheat. By 1849, Dana was using iron to create more technologically advanced plows.³⁸

The American way of life began to influence regional politics more than ever, while there was some recognition of the region's Mexican roots. The state officially established San Luis Obispo as a county and the local residents formed a government. Many of the rancho owners became county officials, including William Dana, who became treasurer. The mission hosted the first county and city meetings, which laid the foundation for the government and other legal aspects of the community. County officials passed laws such as the requirement of gambling halls to obtain a license for a fee of \$15 and that facility owners post rules at each facility in both English and Spanish for the protection of its patrons.³⁹ The San Luis Obispo County government recognized that it was a multicultural community, but this recognition would eventually disappear.

The First Censuses: Agriculture and Identity

During the period of the local government formation, the federal government conducted its first California census in 1850. The first census demonstrated what the American government inherited from Mexico. It lists San Luis Obispo County as lacking improved and unimproved land, as well as missing horses, asses, milk cows, working oxen, and "other oxen." Included in the census for that year are columns for wheat, rye, Indian corn, oats, rice, tobacco, cotton, wool, peas, potatoes, barley, and buckwheat; San Luis Obispo County is listed as lacking all those items.⁴⁰ Considering the agriculture that the Spaniards established during the mission period and

³⁸ Frank Dana interview published in the *Tribune* in 1892.

³⁹ Morrison, 59.

⁴⁰ 1850 Census, 966-979.

the reign of cattle during the Mexican period, it is safe to assume that the 1850 census is incorrect, but still indicates the importance of agriculture in the region.

There are several possibilities behind the incorrect census data. One possibility is that, due to the rural nature of the region, there was a perceived lack of importance on the part of data collectors that led them to ignore the area. Another potential flaw in the data is that census workers included San Luis Obispo County with Santa Barbara County's data. During that year, census figures combined all church property in San Luis Obispo County and Santa Barbara County. The Census data contains many misspelled names (for example, what appears to be Denny instead of Dana). One can conclude from the facts that no census data collector ever truly spoke with the residents of the county, but rather estimated or guessed the figures they listed on the census worksheet.⁴¹ This leads to the conclusion that, quite possibly, San Luis Obispo County was seen as a rural and backwards area. Available Census data demonstrates agriculture's importance as can be seen through residents' employment. Most of the area's residents have occupations such as rancheros, buccaria (possibly meaning buckaroo), teamster, or laborer.⁴²

⁴¹ 1850 Census.

⁴² Census Schedule of 1850 listing on pages 578-589 of census on microfiche. These records were the handwritten version tabulating the population by individuals, compared to the official typed version which tabulates all aspects of industry and economy of the area. One occupation listed repeatedly is "buccaria." According to the website <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/CA-SPANISH/2003-04/1050245140> (accessed 10/27/10), the term is derived from bucaro, which is another term for cowboy or a type of clay water vessel. Other professions counted were ranchero, laborer, blacksmith, and teamster.

Place of birth, race, and national identity are three contradictory aspects of this census. A fascinating feature of this first census is the column representing where residents were born. The column lists the birthplace of most citizens as either California or Mexico. With the exception of William Dana who the census lists as being born in Massachusetts, the column lists the Dana family as being born in California. However, California was part of Mexico during the time in which they were born which means their birthplace classification is questionable. This would mean that either there was no standard organizational process by which to classify people's places of birth, or there was a large migration of people from Mexico between statehood in 1848 and the time of the Census in 1850. A last possibility is that individuals had a different perception of their nationality and/or identity, and listed themselves accordingly. Property owners in the upper class listed California as their place of birth, while most laborers had Mexico listed as their place of birth,

demonstrating a possible developing hierarchy.⁴³ Upper class groups may have wanted closer association with California and thereby a connection to the United States. Laborers were listed as Mexican, thereby connecting them to Mexico and a foreign, lower class of people (See Figure 3).

Figure 3- The majority of the population on the 1850 Census held a job relating to agriculture. These professions consisted of ranchero, laborer, blacksmith, buccaria, and teamster. The county consisted of mainly Europeans, white Americans, and people born in the region during the Mexican period.

⁴³ Ibid.

It appears that the federal government wanted a more accurate picture of the condition of California after the 1850 tabulations or possibly recognized the flaws in the original data collection. The federal government conducted another Census in 1852, and by then the county population had risen to 502. However, its population still placed it in the bottom three counties in the state. Along with an increase in population, there was an astounding increase in agricultural figures. The 1852 Census listed 18,299 cows along with 9,333 beef cattle. They accompanied horses, mules, sheep, and hogs. There was barley, corn, wheat, and potatoes growing totaling 2,538 acres under cultivation.⁴⁴ The massive increase in agricultural numbers correlates with more incoming immigrants, demonstrating that people brought their biological goods with them when they moved and that many of these immigrants were probably farmers where they lived previously.

By 1860, there was a large increase in agricultural production over the 1852 production level. There were a total of 3,713 acres under cultivation in the county. Milch (milk) cows appeared in 1860 for the first time, at a total 896 in the county. The definition of oxen changed between 1852 and 1860. Whereas there were nearly 18,300 cows counted in 1852, there were 76,176 cattle classified as “other” in addition to horses, mules, milch cows, and working oxen.⁴⁵ What had constituted regular cows in 1852, the Census now classified as “other.” It is interesting to note that cattle from the Mexican and Spanish period were once considered to be “regular” cattle, but after a short period of Americanization they became “other.” This demonstrates a correlation between how Americans viewed both the agriculture and people that established the region prior to their arrival - American cattle and people being superior, Mexican cattle and people occupying a foreign realm.

⁴⁴ Census of 1850, 982-985.

⁴⁵ United States Census Bureau. *Census of 1860*. (Washington, D.C., 1860), 10.

The county was also a center for the sheep and wool industry. San Luis Obispo County ranked third in sheep holdings with 92,950 sheep on hand, only trailing Los Angeles and Monterey counties. These sheep produced 260,100 pounds of wool, second only to Monterey County. The fewer number of sheep producing more wool equates to the conclusion that the local sheep were more efficient wool producers.⁴⁶ Since the area lacked easy ways of transporting wool out of the area the motivation for producing mass quantities of wool was either for self usage or transporting it to ships docked offshore for selling in faraway markets. This Census coincided with the building fear of civil war, so it is possible that the United States utilized locally produced wool to compensate for the loss of cotton production in the South to produce goods such as clothing. It also means the area was developing regular connections to distant markets.

The Census in 1860 saw a continued increase of plant related goods as well. Wheat, rye, corn, oats, peas and beans, Irish potatoes, barley, buckwheat, orchard products, market-garden products, butter, cheese, and hay were all goods that farmers produced and counted by the Census that year. Wheat production increased from 1,210 bushels in 1852 to 21,095 bushels in 1860 – a huge increase in a mere eight years. Corn also had an impressive increase from 951 bushels in 1852 to 35,420 in 1860. That pushed the county into the position of California's third largest corn producing county, behind Los Angeles and Sonoma counties.⁴⁷

Overall, there was a dramatic increase in agricultural production and a relatively small population leading to the pressures for development by outsiders wanting to take part in the industry. The small population was efficiently producing goods, but would have had an

⁴⁶ Census of 1860, 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid. These figures seem astronomical considering all of the corn grown during the period would have had to been cultivated by hand. The figures need to be viewed with some amount of skepticism as the figures may be inaccurate. However, since this is the available information, it will be utilized as factual.

extremely large surplus if they were simply producing goods for themselves. Therefore, there had to have been connections to distant markets. This connection in addition to the growing potential for profit would have driven immigrants to the region, adding pressure to break up the land monopoly of the Mexican land grant system. Americans hoping to take part in the industry and improve their fortunes took advantage of the situation to destroy the land grant monopoly and the established society.

Drought and Land Ownership Change

The area again faced turmoil due to a drought in the mid 1860s that occurred after years of market prosperity. Prior to the drought of 1862-1864, newspaper editor and book publisher Myron Angel maintained that the ranchos “were at the height of their prosperity, their immense estates devoted to grazing, and their herds of cattle and horses numbered by the thousands.” The miners in Northern California and Nevada needed food, causing an increased demand for cattle beef in the local area. Ranchers produced beef as fast as they could, however, the drought wiped out most of these cattle. The little rain that did fall during those years limited the ability of grass to grow, leaving the land barren throughout the summer months. The sparse grass left the grazing cattle to starve to death and allowed the American breeds of cattle to dominate the livestock market thereafter.⁴⁸

Annie Morrison was more degrading in her version of the events surrounding the drought. She maintained that the great ranchos of the area emphasized the cattle industry

⁴⁸ Angel, 222. In Alan Olmstead and Paul Rhodes *Creating Abundance: Biological Innovation and American Agricultural Development*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), they maintain that little advancement in agriculture could have taken place without biological innovations. They point to California due to its prominence as the nation’s leading agricultural state and use the biological diversification that took the place during the Spanish and Mexican period as an example. However, what is problematic about this example is that biological innovations were not always intentional, and in this case, they were the consequence of environmental factors. Had the drought not taken place, for example, biological innovation and new cattle breeds may not have occurred.

because it required little work as they simply let their cattle roam free and did not grow hay. Since there was no hay reserved to feed the cattle when grass was low, all of the Spanish long-horned cattle died out. She went further by arguing that the lack of income from the ranches' main commodity caused them to pay their bills in the form of land as payment. Many were still paying mortgages they had taken out on their property to pay the litigation fees incurred while trying to prove the title to their land grants to the American government. Some ranchers had to sell their land cheaply, resulting in an increase in land available for settlement in the area.⁴⁹ In many ways, it appears that the drought assisted in the division of the land still held by the elite established under Mexico.

In addition to the death of thousands of cattle, previous mortgages, and the need to pay bills, the lack of agricultural diversity more than likely contributed in the subdivision of land. Had ranchers been able to diversify their products, only one aspect of their income would have been hurt. However, "There were no good roads, nor railroads, nor, in spite of seventy miles of sea coast and three or four good harbors, no wharves where schooners or steamers could take on or deliver cargoes. Cattle could be driven off to market, so cattle it was and nothing else" according to Morrison.⁵⁰ Some of the rancheros such as William Dana also subdivided his land among his children as they grew to adulthood and after death,⁵¹ while others were forced because of market and environmental forces.

Land redistribution meant opportunities for promoters and other industries to form in San Luis Obispo County. Banks and developers subdivided the land for the purchase of settlers. Promoters encouraged population growth of the area, modernization, and development for land speculative purposes, as well as for what they considered the general good of the community.

⁴⁹ Morrison and Haydon, 72-73.

⁵⁰ Morrison and Haydon, 71.

⁵¹ Angel, 107.

These promoters included Myron Angel, whose publications appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in addition to his regular editing duties at the San Luis Obispo *Tribune*. He appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 1, 1887. The promotionalism was blatant and included the title, “San Luis Obispo: A County Rich in Soils, Pastures and Mines.” Like previous articles he published, he described the highly desirable geographic characteristics and agricultural potential of the county, this time adding gold, onyx, and quicksilver to the lists of possible ways to get rich in the region.⁵²

One of the men who took advantage of the cheap land and the opportunity to profit was John Harford. Prior to the 1860s drought, Miguel Avila owned San Luis Bay, which was the most convenient port in the county. Mexican Governor Juan B. Alvarado granted Avila two square leagues around the bay. In 1842, Governor Pio Pico amended the grant to include a provision requiring a road remain open to the port from San Luis Obispo. After the drought, Avila suffered heavy financial losses resulting in the need to subdivide and sell his land. John Harford purchased the land and built a 1,800-foot wharf that included a narrow-gauge railroad that ran from Port Harford to San Luis Obispo, being the first in the county in 1885. The railroad and the port allowed for the transportation of people and cargo inland to San Luis Obispo from the port and the shipment of products out from the area.⁵³

Landownership turnover led to change in San Luis Obispo County. There were more landowners with smaller tracts of land. Promoters encouraged increased numbers of people to move to the region. New industry took place. All of these aspects meant advancement and stronger connections to distant markets, but these changes were built upon the destruction of a way of life for an entire group of people.

⁵² “San Luis Obispo: A County Rich in Soils, Pastures, and Mines,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 1887.

⁵³ Dan Krieger, *San Luis Obispo County: Looking Backwards into the Middle Kingdom* (San Luis Obispo, CA: EZ Nature Books, 1990), 53-54.

Biological and Technological Innovation

After the United States annexed California, biological and technological innovations became increasingly important. Americans built upon the foundation of technological innovations that farmers and ranchers utilized during the Spanish and Mexican periods. Sometimes these innovations came about because of environmental issues, while other times innovation spurred from need. Advancements encouraged more innovation and as time passed, distant markets were more accessible via rail and ship for transportation of locally produced goods for sale. Technological innovations came in the form of machines such as mills and tractors, while biological innovations included new cattle and crops that produced increasing yields of a wider variety of produce.

The drought and subsequent subdivision of land drove innovation in the type of agriculture that took place in San Luis Obispo County. While conditions forced many Mexican land grant owners to give up their land, some were able to adapt and succeed. New immigrants were also able to utilize the environment, both physical and economic, to produce the agricultural goods they thought appropriate. The resulting increase in agricultural production not only brought about the growth of other industries, but also caused the need for more labor. Increased production, new industries, and the need for labor all contributed to the rapid growth in the region.

While the drought was devastating to the cattle industry, the county's agricultural sector continued to grow. There were 76,176, "other cattle" listed on the 1860 Agricultural Census, and that number dwindled to 15,838 by 1870. In comparison, the number of dairy cows increased from 896 to 4,813 in the same period. This variation represents a change in the type of

cows and industry in the area. The sheep industry also continued to grow in that time period, from 92,950 in 1860 to 191,909 in 1870, still only remaining behind Monterey and Los Angeles counties in wool production. The Census estimated the total value of livestock in the county at \$1,559,818, behind San Joaquin, Monterey, and Colusa counties. Wheat production also continued to grow at extreme rates, from 21,095 bushels to 38,864 in the same period. Barley went from minimal production amounts, to out producing wheat with 126,604 bushels produced. Rye, Indian corn, and oats were also produced in the county, but in smaller amounts than in the prior census.⁵⁴ William Dana's son recalled that even though 1864 was a dry year, they utilized an irrigation system developed using the Nipomo Creek to grow wheat when other farmers lacked for foresight to do. The Danas were able to sell the wheat for \$40 a ton due to demand and the lack of supply on the market. By 1868, the Danas developed a horse-powered thresher to process the wheat.⁵⁵ Some local ranchers paid for the drought dearly, while other adapted to new forms of agriculture.⁵⁶

E.W. Steele of San Mateo was one bargain-shopping settler that took advantage of the cheap subdivided land. In 1866, Steele came to San Luis Obispo County looking for areas to expand his dairy business. According to Myron Angel, Steele found the grass "luxuriant and ungrazed." Steele purchased the Corral de Piedra Rancho and established his dairies. He subsequently purchased other ranchos in the area and entered business with his brothers. Steele

⁵⁴ United States Census Bureau. *Census of 1870*. (Washington, D.C., 1870), 105.

⁵⁵ Frank Dana interview in 1892 published in the *Tribune*.

⁵⁶ In his book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* William Cronon argues that the ecology of New England affected the way both Native Americans and European colonists survived, but that they altered their environments in different ways according to their cultural practices. A cycle occurred when the alterations to the environment caused changes that the inhabitants then had to make further adjustments to. In this way, the people living on the land modified it according to their cultural standards and had to subsequently adjust to changes that took place, such as a drought in this case. The environment changed, yet people were able to constantly adapt to these changes. These adjustments also changed the social relations between the colonists and the Native Americans.⁵⁶ These same ideas can be applied to the history of agriculture in San Luis Obispo County. Each period of colonization brought varying degrees of change to agriculture in the area. Each period also brought in different forms of agricultural labor that was utilized and resulted in changes to the culture of the area.

was able to purchase his land for \$1.10 an acre, which included portions of the Bolsa de Chamisal, Pismo, and Arroyo Grande ranchos. In this period, ranchers believed that the only cattle that had potential for profit were those that could provide their own transportation. Steele proved them wrong while he managed to turn a profit in the dairy industry. “Their success was proof that the county was good for other purposes than raising cattle for beef, hides, and tallow” according to Angel.⁵⁷

Early newspapers were some of the first promoters of the region. Rome G. Vickers established San Luis Obispo County’s first newspaper, *The Pioneer*, in 1868. The paper advocated experimentation of agriculture in the region in areas such as wheat production. Vickers assured his readers that the small lots developers carved out of the ranchos and sold would support cereal grains, citing examples set by missionaries and rancheros; in Nipomo by the Danas, in Arroyo Grande by Branch, in Huasna, and on other ranchos and public lands near San Luis Obispo. Vickers argued that the drought years were proof that ranchers overgrazed cattle in California, and that “agriculture must necessarily assume a much larger preponderance over the former pursuit, if the State at large was expected to prosper.”⁵⁸

Vickers firmly backed the growing of wheat and believed, that because of the regional climate, it was the key to economic success but saw the importation of biological goods as a potential drawback. He cited a settler that came in the 1850s named Moses W. Perry who sowed wheat and barley “from sixty to eighty acres, and never failed of raising a good crop, although always planting late.” Vickers mentioned Francis Ziba Branch’s grist mill in Arroyo Grande that he built in 1854 to process wheat for personal use and limited local market consumption. The only drawback, according to Vickers, was the spread of wheat smut. He blamed Moses Perry for

⁵⁷ Angel, 222-223.

⁵⁸ Rome G. Vickers’ article was republished in Myron Angel’s book, 223.

the spread of the disease from “the grossest neglect in preparing the seed properly” which came from San Francisco, prior to which the disease was unknown in the area.⁵⁹ While Vickers saw wheat as the key to agricultural improvement in San Luis Obispo County, he blamed Perry, an outsider, for importing the disease.

While subdivision and sale awaited a lot of rancho land, San Luis Obispo’s *Tribune* continuously ran articles demonstrating the potential bounty for anyone who was willing to farm in San Luis Obispo County. On July 3, 1875, the paper ran an article entitled “The Capability of Our Soil.” It mentioned that the soil was so fertile that volunteer crops grew near creeks and rivers. Angel wrote, “As great faith as we have always had in the productive quality of the soil of San Luis Obispo County, the facts far exceed anything we had ever dreamed of.” He even mentions that a farmer by the name of William Dempsey brought in a sample of the wheat and barley he grew on his farm that were, “astounding to behold.”⁶⁰

Later in the month, Angel focused on other cities and types of crops to demonstrate the potential of the land. He ran an article on July 14 about Arroyo Grande where he wrote, “Arroyo Grande is not a port of entry, but yet it can boast of having one of the finest agricultural districts in the State.”⁶¹ He also promoted beans as a type of crop that the area was conducive to growing. The pea-bean had become an “extensive and profitable business.” He continued, “We think it safe to calculate that one man and one pair of horses can do all the work necessary to produce a good crop of beans on ten acres of land inside four months.”⁶²

The *Tribune* made it seem like there was something for everyone in San Luis Obispo County. An article entitled “Foot-hill Farming” addressed immigrants that were, “...fleeing

⁵⁹ Vickers in Angel, 224.

⁶⁰ “The Capability of Our Soil,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 3 July 1875.

⁶¹ “Arroyo Grande,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 14 July 1875.

⁶² “Late Beans,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 31 July 1875.

from the invasion of grasshoppers and tornadoes; the floods and fires of the older states; for a refuge in the land of milk and honey...” The article also addressed men in industry and those of limited means, “This land that we have described is all cleared ready for the plow, and although in the hands of legitimate owners, can be bought at very low rates, say ten to twenty dollars the acre.”⁶³ The paper made it sound as if there would be easy money in agriculture for those willing to take the risk and move to San Luis Obispo County, which was sure to be attractive to any prospective immigrants. Of course, the type of immigrant they were hoping to attract is also questionable, as the article focuses on those who are already farming as well as those who are working in industry. These two types of people would probably be Americans from other regions of the country. The article also encourages the purchase of land that is already in the hands of “legitimate” owners. Apparently, these owners lacked the means to keep the land for themselves, whether they were the Mexican elite whose land grants were torn apart or the settlers who attempted to farm but ultimately failed.

Without a railroad, it was difficult for many to get to the area, but some were willing to brave the trip to the rural area while also bringing with them their baggage, both literal and figurative. Josephine Clifford was one of those people willing to brave the long trip to a rural area for the article she wrote in *The Overland Monthly*. She documented her trip through the county in an article entitled “Tropical California.” She was racist in sentiment, and commented that, “The country here has been lying asleep till within the last five years, though there are Americans and Englishmen who came previous to 1849...and imperceptibly fell into the ways and habits of Spanish life.” After the drought in 1866, she pointed out that many Americans moved to the area, which demonstrated the “new life brought into the country with them...Thrifty, hard-working men occupied the farms and ranches; and people of cultivated

⁶³ “Foot-hill Farming,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 12 July 1875.

tastes came to live in the town...” She went further to point out, “Orchards were planted, and grain was sown, where formerly it was affirmed, with Mexican exactness, that ‘nothing would grow.’” She was a woman of her time, feeding into her readers’ established notions of racial and economic hierarchy in a society where hard-workers lived in the country and those with “cultivated tastes” lived in urban areas.⁶⁴

Clifford surveyed the county and described its potential and its inhabitants for her readers. In her article, she described orchards “of almost every kind of fruit, tropical and semitropical...” She observed tomatoes growing on the banks of streams and barley and wheat flourishing on locals’ farms. “The truth is that people are only just now awakening to the fact that almost anything can be raised here.” Finally, she wrote of her trip into the well-established old Mission garden that was around a hundred years old. She saw an old fig tree that she wanted to measure, but “a resolute-looking Spanish woman, who rose up before us, hoe in hand, forbade us to eat the fruit, and wanted to cast us out of the garden. But I looked defiance at her, for I was determined to take the dimensions of that tree.”⁶⁵ Clifford’s account not only demonstrates a promoter-type attitude in attempting to describe the fertility of the area to outsiders, but it also demonstrates the changing xenophobic attitude of those that were here prior to the white Americans and a feeling of superiority and entitlement to walk where she wanted. She did not mention anyone not of European decent, so either she failed to notice the large ethnic communities dotting the county, failed to see the importance of mentioning them, or she thought they might scare her readers from coming to the area. Most likely, however, she had them in mind when she entitled her article, “Tropical California,” as many of the people she encountered may have looked to her more like inhabitants of the tropics than Europeans or Americans. Doing

⁶⁴ Clifford, 301.

⁶⁵ Clifford, 312.

so allowed her to point out the different ethnicities of people in the region without intimidating her readers. Since the magazine she was writing for had a Californian audience, the article was more than likely an attempt to attract people from other parts of the state to San Luis Obispo County; people who probably held similar opinions as Clifford. An article such as this would have been very beneficial in a state where each county was vying for population.

An author by the name of De Guy Cooper also wrote about his trip to San Luis Obispo County and encouraged people to move to the area. The preface to his book mentioned that each of the counties in the state were competing for position and rank through the acquisition of larger populations and the development of its natural resources. Each county “has presented and urged incessantly its claims to the attention of the outer world, through the instrumentality of its local press, and innumerable immigration pamphlets.” Cooper believed San Luis Obispo was one of the best as he promoted the area in his writing. He appealed to the investor, the homesteader, the farmer, and the rancher, and offered various aspects of the county’s amenities as inducements for relocation to the area.⁶⁶

Cooper continued to champion the county for his select audience. “Many localities in California present strong claims to the consideration of immigrants, especially seekers of health and comfort. While we would not decry other localities, or detract from their real merits, we do claim for San Luis Obispo and its surrounding valleys and connections, superior advantages in ease of approach, excellence of soil, beauty of scenery, proper distribution of the natural elements of prosperity...” He continued to promote the character of the people and society of the county and the comfortable climate.⁶⁷ One can only speculate about Cooper’s intended audience and which portion of the county population he was describing, but it is probably safe to

⁶⁶ De Guy Cooper, *Resources of San Luis Obispo County, California. Its Geography, Climate, Location, Soil, Productions and Institutions* (San Francisco: Bacon and Company, 1875), 5.

⁶⁷ Cooper, 9.

assume that Cooper was talking about the landowning whites and not the working class who lacked any benefit from the land's superior advantages while they toiled in the field.

Agriculture also had the potential to allow other related businesses to grow. Cooper described Arroyo Grande as having great farmland and a flourmill on the creek that serviced the area. "The Arroyo Grande Flour Mills, owned by the Branch brothers, with a capacity of making thirty barrels of flour per day, is the only manufacturing establishment on the entire stream...Here may be found excellent locations for a powder mill, woolen mill, furniture factory, beet sugar factory, tannery, etc." He continued by offering evidence for his claims that it would be an excellent area for a beet sugar factory, "On the Nipoma [sic] Ranch, situated in the southern part of this county, and owned by the Dana Brothers, there were produced in one season *fifty tons of beets per acre*."⁶⁸ By promoting industries outside of agriculture, Cooper would have been speaking to not only agriculturalists, but also to those who lacked agricultural skills or interest in the field. He was still promoting settlement and development even without agriculture.

While promoting agriculture in the more rural regions of the county, Cooper described the opposite occurring in San Luis Obispo proper. "The rapid growth of the town of San Luis Obispo has necessitated the subdivision and addition of suburban tracts of land. About two years ago, the large old mission garden, lying south of the San Luis Creek, with its olive groves and cactus patches, was divided up into lots, which were readily sold, and as promptly improved."⁶⁹ Cooper promoted agriculture in other areas of the county; he simultaneously described the destruction of already-established mission gardens for the sake of urban development. It appears that modernization at the sacrifice of agriculture in San Luis Obispo City was beneficial, while

⁶⁸ Cooper, 35.

⁶⁹ Cooper, 19.

for the rest of the county modernization meant developing land for agriculture's sake. This form of modernization would also provide opportunity or enticement to those readers uninterested in agriculture.

Cooper romanticized the agricultural assets of the area to outsiders in order to encourage immigration and settlement of the area. "It cannot be but a very few years until the favored region will attract the attention of immigrants, and be made to bloom as a garden; indeed, it might, with very great propriety be called a 'Valley of the Roses.'" In his conclusion, he continued promoting the San Luis Obispo area, describing the fields with their "rich burden" that are causing the harvested crops to go to waste, rotting in the open air because the area lacks steamers to transport the "vast surplus."⁷⁰ Lastly, Cooper attached a copy of the United States Homestead Law, which allowed anyone who was 21 and over or the head of a family to occupy 160 acres of government land. Once cultivated for five years, they could apply to the District Land Office for full ownership.⁷¹ De Guy Cooper left little to the imagination in terms of his opinion on settling San Luis Obispo County. He encouraged people to settle on government land, to populate the region, and to modernize it.

The railroad played a part in the subdivision and subsequent development of land. By 1881, the Pacific Coast Railway connected to Arroyo Grande. The following year it extended to Nipomo and Santa Maria. In 1887, it continued south to Los Alamos in Santa Barbara County. Many landowners along the route gave right-of-way passage as gifts to the railroad that in turn, caused the value of their land to skyrocket due to its direct railroad access. Once the railroad dissected the large tracts of land, many of the owners subdivided and sold it for a higher value. These included the Arroyo Grande, Bolsa de Chamisal, the Corral de Piedra, and El Pismo land

⁷⁰ Cooper, 38.

⁷¹ Cooper, 59.

grants in the South County, each originally granted by the Mexican government. With the introduction of the railroad, locally produced products now had access to far-away markets.⁷²

As immigration continued, local agriculture garnered national attention at fairs and competitions. In 1888, the Burpee Seed Company introduced its seed catalog and featured many locals who had won various contests using Burpee seeds. However, shortly after the release of the catalog, the company banned locals from future competition, as it considered them to have an unfair advantage. Dr. Paulding of Arroyo Grande even wrote home, “Many a farmer has paid for his land in this valley out of the proceeds from his first crop...There is a pumpkin field across the creek here that has so many pumpkins in it you could run across the field on them and not touch your foot to the ground once.” The Pacific Coast Railroad would run special cars between San Luis Obispo and Santa Maria specifically for local agricultural events and flower shows celebrating the produce being produced from Burpee seeds or otherwise.⁷³ There is a large possibility that locals exaggerated statements about the agricultural production of the region, such as the Burpee Seed claims and that of Dr. Paulding, to bring attention to the area. Whatever the motivation behind such claims, it appears to have worked as it brought early tourist dollars to the area. The railroad did its part to demonstrate the productivity of the land – it profited from the incoming tourists, which also brought an income to the local community.

Locally grown agricultural goods traveled the nation for potential immigrants to see first-hand. The Pacific Rural Press ran an article describing a traveling display of fruit products from the area. A traveling mechanics fair contained 600 plates of produce that was “too numerous to mention” but the author attempted to do so anyway. According to the article, the traveling display contained apples, pears, quinces, peaches, plums, prunes, nectarines, apricots, lemons,

⁷² Loren Nicholson, *Rails Across the Ranchos: Centennial Edition Celebrating the Southern Pacific Railroad Coastal Line* (San Luis Obispo, CA: California Heritage Publishing Associates, 1993), 11.

⁷³ “Local farmers banned from National Competitions,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 17 January 1976.

oranges, figs, persimmons, and grapes among other things. Most of this produce coming from Arroyo Grande.⁷⁴ The *Los Angeles Times* reported how excited the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce was to receive “A fine display of fruits and vegetable contributed by the Arroyo Grande Agricultural Association.” The article described an exhibit in which “there are forty-five varieties of apples of as excellent quality as one could desire to see...there are big pumpkins that weigh 200 pounds each, squashes, carrots, beets, large white onions, Chinese radishes, etc. The display is pronounced to be the finest of the kind that has ever been shown at the Chamber of Commerce.”⁷⁵

In addition to the traveling shows, newspaper articles tried to entice people to the area. An article entitled “About California: Some Practical Suggestions for Intending Settlers” blatantly spoke to attract more people to the region. It claimed that the climate was excellent for crops as they voluntarily grew without cultivation by farmers. Pears and raspberries grew all year long, even picked in December because of the ideal climate.⁷⁶ Anyone familiar with the region knows this is plainly incorrect; however, publicity such as this served its purpose of attracting settlers by speaking to the ease of growing crops and the success of those who had already begun cultivating the land.

The nineteenth century saw local produce boasted at even more renowned events. A Chas. B. Turrill, manager of the California Building at Chicago’s World Fair, solicited San Luis Obispo County for goods to demonstrate California’s resources. He was also looking for agricultural implements used in “the early days of California” for display. The exhibit’s first stop was the Mechanic’s Pavilion in San Francisco, after which it proceeded to Chicago. Turrill

⁷⁴ “*Mechanics Fair*,” *Pacific Rural Press*, 15 September 1888.

⁷⁵ “Arroyo Grande Fruits. A Fine Display Attracts Attention at the Chamber of Commerce,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 October 1898.

⁷⁶ “About California: Some Practical Suggestions For Intending Settlers” printed in 1887, located in San Luis Obispo County Historical Society, file VF.2.01000.

expressed his disappointment that no state museum existed to preserve the rapidly disappearing historical agricultural artifacts.⁷⁷ The *Los Angeles Times* reported, “Renewed activity in the matter of the World’s Fair work is noticed in San Luis Obispo County, since the Supervisors made an appropriation of \$2300” and they gave a J.V.N. Young of Arroyo Grande the responsibility of collecting exhibit material from throughout the county.⁷⁸ It seems like sending produce to events such as the World’s Fair or the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce served the purpose of not only promoting the area to potential immigrants, but also to make a name for the produce as well. This may have created demand for locally produced goods outside of the area. San Luis Obispo County promoters created their own miniature public relations campaign that had the potential of benefiting the real estate market as well as already established farmers.

As agriculture consumed increasing percentages of land, the local media encouraged farmers to further experiment in crops. The *San Luis Obispo Breeze* ran an article with the long title, “Lemons in this County: The Finest Verities May Be Grown Here – Pruning and Curing of the Lemon.” The paper informed its readers that many parcels of land in the county were “admirably adapted to the successful growing of the lemon.” It also encouraged people living in particular areas to grow lemons, as “the fruit can be grown to perfection on the west side of the mountains to the east of San Luis Obispo.” To prove to readers that it was true, they used Mr. H. Mehlman’s property named “Estrada Gardens” as an example of someone who mastered the art of growing lemons. In the article, Mehlman said he used bone and ashes as fertilizer. The article closed with a statement written to entice entrepreneurs to grow the fruit, “The opportunity of the

⁷⁷ “World’s Fair,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 16 July 1892.

⁷⁸ “World’s Fair Notes: Work of the California Commission – Progress and Preparation,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 October 1892.

enterprising fruit farmer is at hand.”⁷⁹ One can speculate about the motivation behind the encouragement of crop experimentation, but in all probability, it had to do with encouraging development of county lands and to devote them to a diversity of crops that when sold would make as much money as possible, compared to the potential of growing only one type of crop and flooding the market.

The turn of the century also saw the production of tobacco in San Luis Obispo County. Hundreds of pages of the census figures over several decades are dedicated to the production and curing of the crop, but little actually came from California. The 1890 Census shows that small numbers of acres were cultivated across the state totaling 27 acres, with one acre located locally. This acre produced 100 pounds of tobacco. Interestingly enough, tobacco production was not recorded in later years, but an article in the *Tribune* from 1908 mentioned a Judge Cliff who grew “a fine grade of tobacco.” The article described the tobacco that was brought into the newspaper office in detail, “...it has the fragrant aroma that lulls one to sleep in the noon days ‘siesta’ and it has the big broad leaves that make the best of wrappers.”⁸⁰

The twentieth century saw a completely different type of agricultural commodity in San Luis Obispo County as residents were on the constant chase for the next big agricultural commodity – the Australian eucalyptus tree. Around 1909 William A. Britnall of Los Angeles purchased property on the Nipomo Mesa, which Annie Morrison declares, “This great ranch nine years ago was nothing but a sandy waste, thought to be well-nigh worthless, and none but a capitalist could possibly have undertaken such a project as transforming the barren mesa to a valuable timber tract.” The ranch grew different types of eucalyptus trees and included nine

⁷⁹ “Lemons in this County: The Five Orchards of H. Mehlman. The Finest Verities May Be Grown Here – Pruning and Curing of the Lemon,” *San Luis Obispo Breeze* vol. 16, no. 5 (dated 15 January 1901).

⁸⁰ “A Fine Grade of the Fragrant Weed Grown by Judge Cliff at Creston,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune* 28 January 1908.

hundred acres. “There are twenty acres, for example, planted to resiniferous eucalyptus, or red gum; fifteen acres are given to gray gum; and ten acres, to sugar gum. The ranch contains about a thousand acres, and some six hundred forty trees are planted to the acre.” The trees represented an extensive investment of both time and capital as they were slow growing. Ranch employees had just started thinning the trees in their seventh year of existence. At the time of the publication of Morrison’s book in 1917, she stated that the trees were from six to eight inches thick. The eucalyptus ranch also contained a distilling plant for extracting the tree’s fragrant oil and a wood department that created firewood and handles for tools.⁸¹

Innovation took place on the supply side of agriculture as well. Lewis C. Routzahn came from Illinois to Arroyo Grande in 1893 due to health problems. Upon his arrival, he realized his interest in plant hybridization. He began studying flower seed growing. “...during the past twenty-four years he has originated over one hundred varieties of flower and vegetable species, many of them standards, and on the markets today in various parts of the world,” Annie Morrison wrote in the publication of her book in 1917.⁸² One of Routzahn’s emphases was on sweet pea flowers, which he gradually evolved into the Arroyo Grande Sweet Pea Festival. Sweet Peas were the flower of choice when decorating for most functions and community events, which included the visit by Vice President Adlai E. Stevenson.⁸³ Routzahn began his flower farm with a small amount of acreage and increased production rapidly with the use of Chinese labor; and was the first to utilize Japanese labor in the area.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Morrison and Haydon, 949-950. The author’s book was published in 1917 and she states that Britnall came to the area nine years prior to her writing when the land was empty, which would mean the trees were planted around 1909.

⁸² Morrison and Haydon, 466.

⁸³ Morrison and Haydon, 147.

⁸⁴ Doris Olson, “Lewis Routzahn: Imprint on Arroyo Grande Valley History,” *Santa Maria Times*, 21 July 1968. The article covered Routzahn because the Lopez Lake and dam was being built at the time resulting in the flooding of the area where the Routzahn seed farm and the park with his namesake was located.

Nurseries also developed in the area to supply residents with crops and other plants they may have needed or desired to grow. San Luis Obispo Nursery published a price guide for the 1875-76 year that listed many varieties of apples, pears, peaches, plums and prunes, apricots, nectarines, and cherries. In July of 1887, Beckett's Nursery in Arroyo Grande published an advertisement in the *Tribune* that listed a wide variety of fruit, nut, eucalyptus, and other ornamental trees available for purchase. The ad boasted that the nursery had the "largest and best assorted nursery stock in San Luis Obispo County, embracing specialties of the best varieties of orchard fruits, cheap trees, and cuttings for timber culture and other plantations all grown without irrigation."⁸⁵ The nursery probably made the point about its plants not requiring irrigation because most of the county lacked irrigation during the time. If the nursery hoped to make money, it had to appeal to customers who lacked water and convince them that the imported plants could grow by utilizing the amount of water provided by nature. Advertising that the plants lacked the need for irrigation also would have calmed fears about what to do if another drought occurred.

More drought brought change in the local industry. In an April 1898 article in the *Los Angeles Times* Myron Angel declared, "Disaster, to the strong, brings out the latent energies and incites to higher efforts and enterprise. Too long have we tread in the footsteps of olden times and depended on the gifts of Nature". He continued, "Our chief dependence has been upon the grass of our hill and valleys. Now we are punished for such dependence, and admonished to develop other resources and to make better use of the resources of the soil." He was encouraging whatever industries he could entice to come to the area, including miners, oil drillers, and even pearl button factories as "the coast affords an abundance of shells for the manufactory and of the

⁸⁵ Price guide located in file VF.2.01000 at San Luis Obispo Historical Society.

best quality.”⁸⁶ This also speaks to an attempt at modernization and development at times when nature prevented progress through agriculture during dry periods. By “making better use of the resources of the soil,” Angel was speaking to the need of soil conservation practices. In all probability, only a problem with production would have caused Angel to mention these issues.

Myron Angel’s wish did seem to come true as some varying industry began to develop, resulting in further access to distant markets. A local man invented a new style of fruit dehydrator in Arroyo Grande. A G.W. Crawford from the *Los Angeles Times* took a trip to Arroyo Grande to see the fruit dryer, named the Shearer drier. The article continues with a description issued with the circular that C.W. Phillips, the owner, issued. “Two men working on shifts can, after fruit is spread on trays and placed on racks, handle twenty tons of green fruit per day.”⁸⁷ A fruit dehydrator would have enabled the shipping of larger quantities of products and more densely packed fruit. It would also enable the fruit to be shipped longer distances without spoiling. This would be beneficial to local farmers as the area still lacked efficient transportation to distant markets.

The generation of landowners that initially subdivided the Mexican ranchos gave way to a second generation of subdivision that further increased agricultural diversity. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that the Barling and Morrison Company signed a five-year lease from the Steele Brothers for five hundred acres of the Bolsa de Chemisal Ranch. The purpose was to grow celery on land that the Steeles had previously drained. The company planned to cultivate half the tract with celery, the other half would be with “probably asparagus, cauliflower, and other delicate and valuable vegetables.” The article also mentions that the Southern Pacific Railroad ran through the land with a depot in Oceano for easy shipment, specifically to the Chicago

⁸⁶ “In Tributary Territory. San Luis Obispo County Industries,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 1898.

⁸⁷ “A Successful Fruit-Drier,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 February 1897.

market.⁸⁸ The following month another article announced that the company would be looking for employees when the fruit was matured and ready for shipment, which was when “the eastern celery is cleaned out of the market.” It continued, “When that time arrives any one who knows how to put a plant into the ground can expect to get a job, for then they will want to rush the work.” Women and children were encouraged to work planting young plants, and girls “really make the most expert packers, and for this reason as many girls as can be found will be employed.”⁸⁹ This marks the first time that promotional literature intended to attract workers willing to plant and harvest, rather than simply suggesting people could move to the area and expect to be a successful farmer. It is also interesting to note that the inclusion of women and girls. They may have been cheaper to pay than male laborers while allowing for the complete exclusion of minority workers.

In the time span of forty years, a pattern appeared relating to immigration, subdivision, and advancement. People that moved to the county took advantage of the subdivided land that developers carved out of the large ranchos in order to work the land themselves. During the same period, the total percent of people who were farmers dropped from nearly 100% to 11.12%. This reduction meant that agriculture spurred new industries and employment opportunities outside of the industry for local residents. According to the 1890 census, there were 1,788 farm owners in San Luis Obispo County (none of which relied on irrigation for farming, which seems like an amazing feat). These farms totaled 1,084,398 acres, placing the county only behind Fresno County in total area occupied by farms.⁹⁰ The majority of these recently formed farms ranged in size from 100 to 500 acres. Owners operated most of these farms as opposed to renting, with only 199 farms rented to tenants for cash, and one rented in exchange for

⁸⁸ “In Tributary Territory,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 1898.

⁸⁹ “In Tributary Territory. Celery Growing,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1898.

⁹⁰ United States Census Bureau. *Census of 1890*. (Washington, D.C., 1890), 41.

products.⁹¹ As the farming population grew, so did technological advancement and the need for labor.

Promotional literature continued to encourage settlement while also realizing the importance of the ability to transport products to distant markets via railroads and ship. Author Mrs. Yda Addis Storke boasted of cabbages weighing ninety pounds, “All kinds of garden vegetables, such as beets, peas, beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, turnips, onions, etc., are successfully and profitably cultivated, the crop is enormous, the quality good, and the market for all that is not needed at home is sure at paying prices.” She continued with “The market is a consideration not to be overlooked by intending settlers, since abundant crops would be of little value if no market at remunerative rates was to be had close at home, or within easy reach by rail.”⁹² Since the railroad was available, it now played into the reasons why farmers had potential for success if they moved to San Luis Obispo County. Whereas prior to this, farmers could apparently be successful without the railroad as it lacked mention as a necessity in all prior promotional literature.

All of the promotional literature appears to have worked. The population increased immensely during the 1800s as people from around the United States and the world poured into the area to take part in the agricultural

Place of Birth	Farm Owners		Farm Laborers	
	1850	1900	1850	1900
California	58%	15%	42%	52%
Other U.S. States	11%	44%	10%	25%
Other Countries	31%	41%	48%	23%

Table 1- Farm Owners Compared to Farm Laborers in 1850 and 1900.

potential of San Luis Obispo County. When comparing the census data collected in 1850 to that of 1900 (See Table 1), larger trends develop. First, the most dramatic increase in population was the percent of farm owners from other states, proving that promotional literature directed at other

⁹¹ Ibid., 124.

⁹² Yda Addis Storke, *A Memorial and Biographical History of the Counties of Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Ventura, California* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1891), 164.

Americans was successful. The percentage of Californians that owned farms dramatically decreased during the period while the number of Californians working on farms as laborers increased, leading to the conclusion that laborers and other hopeful agriculturalists moved to the area from other parts of the state to find work. Promotional articles such as that in *The Overland Monthly* would have been attractive to immigrants all over the state. Another explanation is that, perhaps farming lacked the promise that promotional literature suggested because of problems such as drought, causing local farmers to go out of business while outsiders bought into the hype and purchased farms. Children that were born and raised in California may also have been more likely to become laborers. In comparison, the number of foreign farm owners increased while the number of foreign farm laborers decreased during the period, suggesting that immigrants were purchasing farms with capital from their country of origin or capital that they saved from working as laborers. What is definite, however, is that people from outside the area played an increasing role in agriculture.⁹³ The outsiders took advantage of environmental and economic conditions to turn the area's agriculture into the vision painted by so many promoters.

Waves of new immigrants brought change. They strained the landholding system and forced the collapse of the Mexican land grants. Additionally, they subdivided the land and grew different types of crops. Immigrants also increased the rate of innovation, from sticks to machines in order to handle the new crops. On a large scale, they changed San Luis Obispo's landscape as much as they changed the organization of society and demographics. With connection to outside markets and the availability of new land, the only aspect missing from mass production was labor.

The late 1800s represents an important turning point in county history. The Spanish and Mexican mission period preceded this period and was a time of land speculation and rapid

⁹³ 1850 and 1900 Census Schedules.

population growth. The county shifted from being largely remote to having greater integration with the outside world. This brought with it a larger population. Promoters demonstrated their thoughts on the potential of the land to produce for the outside area, while immigrants took advantage of subdivided land. The ethnic makeup of the county also began to change during the period, from largely white, whether Spanish or American, to a more demographically diverse community containing people from all over the world, but remained mostly of European ancestry. California, and more specifically San Luis Obispo County, became a place where people from areas of little opportunity could move. It was a region where agriculture seemed to hold promise for a better future. Promotional literature would continue to play an important role in attracting people to the area, but for different reasons than before.

Chapter 2

Immigration

In 1939, John Steinbeck wrote what many consider his most important work highlighting the plight of the migrant farm worker during the Great Depression. *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles the trials and tribulations of an Oklahoma family that experience devastation on their farm. The Joad family, lured to California by advertisements claiming the abundance of high-wage work picking produce, filled their jalopy and drove to the state in hopes of beginning a new life in agriculture. One handbill advertisement claimed, “Pea Pickers Wanted in California. Good Wages All Season. 800 Pickers Wanted.”⁹⁴ Once they arrived, however, they experienced a shortage of work and witnessed labor strikes because of an overabundance of laborers that immigrated to California.

The fictional Joad Family was among a long line of people that came to California searching for agriculture work, and the Great Depression was just one point in a long, continual process in which people came to the region hoping to carve out a new life. Migrant farm workers traveled around California, following the crops as they came and out of season. Because of the amount of work available, they often found themselves in San Luis Obispo County. When the migrant farm workers arrived in the area, they encountered a world in which county agriculturists had previously established themselves by parceling the land and they were given little opportunity to do so themselves. However, some groups of migrant workers were able to participate more so than others. This was dependent upon the circumstances of their

⁹⁴ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1939), 147.

arrival and their national origin. Both farmers and laborers contributed to the economic and agricultural output of the region while simultaneously picking food for America's tables.

Scientific Confirmation and Specialty Crops

The story of the migrant farm worker begins with the soil. Around the turn of the twentieth century, California researchers began investigating all of the promotional literature and claims of soil fertility. A University of California study tested soil samples from around the state and determined that of all the soil samples researched, the sample from Arroyo Grande contained the highest percentage of nitrogen. "In the upper three feet, Arroyo Grande and Guillocos valleys are the richest in nitrogen, the approximate amount being 12,000 pounds per acre in three feet," the study concluded.⁹⁵ The Arroyo Grande Valley, including the Routzahn Seed Farm, was among locations with the highest percentage of humus in the soil. Humus represents organic material in various stages of decomposition and directly affects the fertility of the soil.⁹⁶ Science proved that not all of the sensationalism surrounding the fertility of the local soil was invalid. The fertile soil provided the foundation on which the specialty crop industry grew to be successful. The variations in soil and microclimates enabled regions such as sections of San Luis Obispo County to specialize in particular crops. By the early twentieth century, growers developed an understanding of the unusual assets that allowed for the growth of specialty crops - diverse crops that can grow in small, specific sub regions due to unique climates, soils, topography, and natural vegetation.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ "Report of the College of Agriculture and the Agricultural Experiment State of the University of California, From July 1, 1913 to June 30, 1914 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1914), 72. The study is available on Google Books and states that the California Experiment Station provided free soil examination for farmers since 1875.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 50.

⁹⁷ Vaught, 15.

By the time of the 1900 census, small amounts of specialty crops had been growing in the area for quite awhile, but production escalated after the turn of the century and around the same time as the University of California study. They antecedently appeared in literature, encouraging people to move to the area specifically to take advantage of the fertile soil. The 1900 Census states, “California has perhaps not increased its total output of vegetables as rapidly as some other states. But within the last few years it has discovered especial fitness of soil and climate for certain special varieties, and the increase in production and shipment of these has been marvelous.” Among these crops were asparagus, cauliflower, cabbage, celery, sprouts, and onions, all of which grew in San Luis Obispo County.⁹⁸ The specialty crops that the soil enabled, were labor intensive due to the inability to harvest them using machinery. The combination of an increase in agricultural production and an increase in the production of labor-intensive crops created a labor shortage that needed filling.

Indians: The First Laborers

Native Americans were the first group of people utilized for labor in San Luis Obispo County and set a precedent for future waves of laborers. Originally, Spanish missionaries retained the local Chumash people to work at Mission San Luis Obispo. After secularization, they worked on the Mexican Land Grants. The land grants employed large communities of natives to support their operations. These included vaqueros, tanners, soap makers, harness makers, shepherds, winemakers, cooks, carpenters, blacksmiths, servants, and field hands. Field

⁹⁸ 1900 Census. According to Williard W. Cochrane in *The Development of American Agriculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), current agriculture is built upon generations of agricultural successes. He states, “Advances in one farming operation require advances in others. It is of little advantage of a farmer to be able to undertake and complete one operation speedily and efficiently if other operations in the production process act as a bottleneck (p. 4).” Such is the case with soil fertility and laborers. Farmers from previous generations discovered the fertility of the soil, without which crops would lack the ability to grow. However, it took labor and markets to take full advantage of the agricultural potential of the area. All aspects required each other for success and built upon previous successes and failures.

hands were of the utmost importance as they grew and harvested the food used to support life on the ranch. Their numbers would increase during the harvest season. Without these workers, the ranchos would not have survived or prospered.⁹⁹ The once independent natives went from managed labor in the mission system to managed labor on the Mexican land grants. Yet, they are intriguingly absent from the 1850 Census and reappear on the 1860 Census to comprise 4% of the total population.¹⁰⁰

The lack of Native Americans on the 1850 Census Schedule may reflect their perceived lack of importance in the eyes of the local Census taker.¹⁰¹ This changed in 1860, which was coincidentally when the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians expanded to include adults into a system of indentured servitude under the label of apprenticeship.¹⁰² Originally designed to allow Americans to gain custody of Native American children for apprenticeship purposes and to allow for the forced labor on Native American convicts, the act essentially declared a form of debt peonage legal in California for all Native Americans. The act satisfied the state's high demand for servants and agricultural laborers.¹⁰³ The newly expanded power of ranchers and farmers to utilize Native American labor would have made that portion of the population more important for census conductors; thereby giving the census taker a reason to notice the natives in the area.

The 1860 Census treats the entire native population extremely poorly. The Census listed them as housekeepers, servants, or laborers. Each had "N.N." written for their last name, presumably meaning No Name. Many had derogatory generic names given to them, at best

⁹⁹ Street, 98.

¹⁰⁰ 1850 Census Schedule.

¹⁰¹ San Luis Obispo is one of the few counties in California not listed as having "Indians Domesticated" living within its boundaries. Also included are El Dorado, Klamath, Santa Barbara, and Sierra counties.

¹⁰² Michael Magliari, "Free Soil, Unfree Labor: Cave Johnson Coutts and the Binding of Indian Workers in California, 1850-1867." *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Aug., 2004): 354.

¹⁰³ Magliari, 350.

“Juan” for men and “Jauna” for women; at worst, the census-taker assigned them names such as “Jeronimo.” The Census listed them as Mexican with a side note that they were Indian. A few Native Americans were able to rise through the system and became farmers. Most, however, served as laborers in the area’s burgeoning agricultural industry.

Sadly, Native Americans were living and laboring on land that was previously theirs with very little opportunity for advancement. Native labor was sufficient for the limited amount of agriculture that took place during the rancho period, especially since there were fewer crops and a smaller variety growing in the region. However, growth required more labor. In some ways, the treatment of the Native American laboring population set a precedent for later immigrant groups who traveled to the region to work in agriculture.¹⁰⁴ All of the laboring groups that followed the Native Americans were immigrants, which is in some ways ironic considering, in the end, Americans treated Native Americans like immigrants on their own land. Americans built upon the native labor system established by Mexican ranchers while ultimately destroying the Mexican rancho system. Interestingly enough, once other immigrant groups were available for labor, the Native Americans again disappeared from Census records in 1870.

The Swiss, Portuguese, and Chinese Comparison

Many immigrant groups appeared in San Luis Obispo County during the late nineteenth century. Among them were the Swiss-Italians, the Portuguese, and the Chinese. While these three groups were attracted to the region for various reasons, they all came to San Luis Obispo in search of a better life and found work in agriculture. A variety of factors such as nationality, religion, and the circumstances upon their arrival may have determined the treatment of the three groups, which was very different from one another.

¹⁰⁴ Magliari, 388.

Figure 4 - The County became a little more diverse in the period 1850-1860. Europeans continued to dominate farming in the area. Excluded are people of unknown, Russian, Swiss, German, Canadian, Spanish, and Portuguese birth whose figures represented less than 1% of the population.

One of the most renowned immigrant groups in the history of California's Central Coast are the Swiss-Italians. They first appeared as employees in the dairies of the Steele Brothers, which, by the late nineteenth century had consolidated all of their land in the Edna Valley.

Many of these immigrants utilized agricultural knowledge from their homeland while working for the Steeles. As of the publication date of Morrison's book in 1917, many of these immigrants still ran their dairy farms around San Luis Obispo County. In referring to the prominence of Swiss workers in the dairy industry and Portuguese in the bean industry, Morrison declares, "The Swiss for the dairies and the Portuguese for the beans." She also maintains that the Swiss-Italians revolutionized the dairy industry.¹⁰⁵

Unfortunately, one hugely significant missing piece of Census information is the lack of large numbers of Swiss immigrants that so many local authors write about, both in their contemporary histories and more recently. Swiss immigrants made up less than 1% of the farming population in 1860 (See Figure 4) and they were equally insignificant until 1900 when they comprised 4% of the total population of agricultural professionals. It is interesting to note

¹⁰⁵ Morrison and Haydon, 93-94.

that this group of immigrants received so much attention since there were so few of them while other immigrants, such as Mexicans, are non-existent in the historical record but appear in larger numbers.¹⁰⁶

Compared to the Swiss, Chinese immigrants were somewhat accidental farm laborers as they came to California under circumstances that were unrelated to agriculture. The first Chinese immigrants came to the state to participate in the Gold Rush and to escape the poverty-stricken conditions of their homeland. Rumors spread to China of men striking it rich and many sailed to San Francisco where they dispersed to the Gold Mines in various parts of the state.¹⁰⁷ A large amount of labor was required to lay tracks for the Transcontinental Railroad and tunnel through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. However, European-American workers disappeared every time they received word of a new gold discovery. Labor contractors for the railroad recruited Chinese miners from around the state to help build the railroad. When more labor was needed, major players in California development - Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Collis P. Huntington- recruited Chinese workers directly from China and Hong Kong to work on the railroad. They did this by hiring San Francisco recruiting firms such as Sisson, Wallace and Company and Cornelius Koopmanschap, with payment per recruit. The firms placed placards in town squares around the Pearl River Delta in China looking for workers that were willing to travel to the United States and make money building the railroad.¹⁰⁸ After the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, the Chinese men diffused around the State to work on other sections of railroad.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ According to the Census records, Mexicans comprised 14% of the agricultural population in 1860, the same in 1870, but fell to 4% in the 1880 Census. They receive little mention in books on local history. Also of note is that some Mexicans have their state listed as their place of origin instead of their nation. This includes Sonora.

¹⁰⁷ Corrine K. Hoexter, *From Canton to California: The Epic of Chinese Immigration* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1976), 10.

¹⁰⁸ Hoexter, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Hoexter, 88.

Since many of the Chinese immigrants were originally farmers in China, they fit in well with the largely agricultural society in California. Chinese laborers worked at draining marshes in wet areas and building irrigation ditches in dry areas. Chinese workers plowed, planted, and harvested most of

Figure 5 – For the first time the Census was broken into precincts making it possible to identify people specifically in South County. Excluded are immigrants from Canada, Denmark, Switzerland, Australia, Chile, and Italy for they totaled less than 1%.

the grain produced in California. They also cultivated two-thirds of all vegetables in the state. California's fruit growers were dependent on Chinese workers from 1870 to 1890 when the Japanese began to replace them. Later, the mechanization of wheat production caused the majority of migrant labor to shift to the cultivation of specialty field crops that were, and still are, more labor intensive.¹¹⁰

Chinese immigrants began to appear in San Luis Obispo County later than in other portions of California. Given that, in 1882, President Chester A. Arthur passed and signed discriminatory policies with the Chinese Exclusion Act, effectively banning immigration from China, the existing immigrants never had the opportunity to establish their presence in the local area regardless of how residents may have felt about them. The first Chinese immigrants appeared on the 1870 Census for the Arroyo Grande Township, demonstrating that they arrived in the area during the 1860s when they made up a small portion of the agricultural industry and a

¹¹⁰ Hoexter, 96.

larger portion of the overall community (See Figure 5). They were laborers, shepherders, anglers, cooks, servants, and a few laundrymen.¹¹¹ Chinese men found themselves relegated to remedial professions because of their low place in society. For example, shepherding was a profession that local society typically saved for lesser men and boys.¹¹² Chinese immigrants also contributed to the infrastructure of the county when they helped build the narrow-gauge railroad from Port Harford to San Luis Obispo. De Guy Cooper wrote in 1885 that since Harford lacked community funding for the project, he was forced to personally fund the first narrow-gauge railroad in Southern California and employed “a handful of Chinamen...”.¹¹³ The fact that the railroad enabled the shipment of goods into and out of the area demonstrates that the Chinese contributed to agriculture in direct and indirect ways.

Port Harford’s close association to one of San Luis Obispo County’s most famous Chinese figures demonstrates the interconnection between the Chinese and San Luis Obispo County agriculture. Ah Louis, whose real last name was Wong, came to California in 1874 seeking gold. He worked with John Harford to supply Chinese workers for the project. Two years later, in 1876, he supplied workers for the stage road over the Cuesta Grade. The projects allowed Ah Louis to build up San Luis Obispo’s Chinatown where his store was located. He also began supervising thousands of acres of farmland around San Luis Obispo.¹¹⁴ By 1882, Ah Louis received a contract for \$1,100 to drain portions of the Laguna Lake area to reclaim it for cultivation. He became a pioneer in the flower and vegetable industry in San Luis Obispo.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ United States Census Bureau. *1870 Census*. (Washington, D.C., 1870). The entire entity of southern San Luis Obispo County was counted and organized under Arroyo Grande Township.

¹¹² Frank Dana’s oral history published July 18, 1892 in the *Tribune*.

¹¹³ Cooper, 26-27.

¹¹⁴ Senator Chris N. Jespersen and Harold McLean Meier, *History of San Luis Obispo County, State of California: Its People and Its Resources* (No City Listed: Harold McLean Meier, 1939), 117.

¹¹⁵ Nancy Wey, *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Parks and Recreation Office of Historic Preservation, 1988): Ah Louis Store, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/5views/5views3h2.htm (accessed 17 November 2010).

Ah Louis farmed portions of San Luis Obispo, Edna, and the Oso Flaco region to market vegetable and flower seeds in 1900.¹¹⁶

Chinese immigrants also supported local farming families in other ways. The 1880 Census Schedule shows that the Branches and the Danas, both farming families, employed Chinese workers as cooks and listed them as living in the same household that each family occupied. The Danas employed a “Sam Chinaman,”¹¹⁷ showing that, while the family was willing to employ someone who was seen as occupying the bottom of the social ladder, the family or the census conductor lacked enough respect for the man to call him by his real name. The 1900 Census Schedule shows that the Steele family employed two Chinese workers; a first generation cook by the name of Aye Gin, and a second generation servant named Poy Gin that both lived in the same household as the family.¹¹⁸ For the most part, however, only the Chinese workers that lived with their employers seem to have stayed in southern San Luis Obispo County while most of them disappeared by the time of the 1900 Census.

Xenophobia formed among people in San Luis Obispo County beginning during the Mexican period and extended to the Chinese. However, unlike previous victims, the Chinese were the subject of threatening newspaper articles. Appearing in February 1886 in the *Los Angeles Times* was a one-line article entitled “Most [sic] Do In Twenty Days” which contained one line – “The Anti-Chinese Club of Arroyo Grande has notified the Chinese to leave within twenty days.”¹¹⁹ Another appeared a few days later, stating “Last night the anti-Chinese club of

¹¹⁶ Jespersen and Meier, 270.

¹¹⁷ 1880 Census Schedule.

¹¹⁸ 1900 Census Schedule.

¹¹⁹ “Most Do In Twenty Days,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 February 1886.

this town formed in a procession and marched to Chinatown in a tenty [sic] and notified the Chinese to leave Arroyo Grande in five days.”¹²⁰

Most local information about Chinese immigrants working in the agricultural industry appeared in stories about crimes. “We learn that on the evening of the 18th about 9 o’clock, several masked men attacked two Chinamen who had rented land at Oceano, and were engaged in setting out cabbage plants” one *Tribune* story reported in 1897. The attackers beat and robbed the men, and destroyed any remaining property. The author finished with a personal opinion, “Their excuse of lawlessness was that no Chinaman should work in the Arroyo Grande Valley. Such assassins destroy and pull down values more rapidly than 100 good men can build.”

Jealousy of the Chinese workers on the part of the Caucasian public helps to explain the xenophobia and violence against the Chinese. In 1899, two trains filled with Chinese workers arrived in San Luis Obispo County to work in the sugar beet fields in Betteravia. According to San Luis Obispo’s *Breeze*, additional workers were on the way. The article explained, “Recently it was given out that the beetfields of Betteravia would furnish employment for a large number of boys and men during the season; but the advent of the moon-eyed celestial closes the door on white labor.” The paper complained that the sugar company decided on Chinese labor solely for the reason of cost, “...and that is the only consideration that enters into the calculations of their concern.”¹²¹ In 1901, the *Breeze* reported that a well-known Chinese gardener by the name of Wing Lung was returning to China with other immigrants, “...each, of course, taking a good sized wad of U.S. money, which will keep them in style in China the rest of their lives, for they do not expect to try to return to America again.”¹²² A couple of weeks later there was an uproar

¹²⁰ “Ordered To Leave Arroyo Grande,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 February 1886.

¹²¹ “Chinese Labor Will Be Employed at Betteravia. Two Carloads of Mongolians Bound for the Beet Fields,” *San Luis Obispo Breeze*, 7 April 1899.

¹²² “Returns to China,” *San Luis Obispo Breeze*, 6 December 1901.

when all but one of the winners of prizes for the highest quality sugar beets were Chinese. The news explained it, “This is accounted for, not because of the superior agricultural ability of the Chinaman, but because they have paid higher rents than the white men, and have had better land to work. The Betteravia sugar refinery, which sponsored the contest, promised they would utilize better judging standards the following year, which would be, “more fair for all concerned.”¹²³ However, it seems likely that the Chinese were paying higher rent because of their race and not because of the quality of the land. In all likelihood, a group of people that were referred to with such racist undertones would not be the recipients of such highly productive land. They grew beets because they were good at it, not because of the land they used.

While many people were growing a dislike for the Chinese, others were instead realizing their valuable contributions. An editorial in San Luis Obispo’s *Reasoner* complained about the conflict arising from a Chinese immigrant wanting to open a store on Higuera Street, among white-owned businesses. The author stated, “With these merchants it is a matter of pure selfishness, and nothing else. Most of them eat vegetables grown by Chinamen, smoke cigars rolled by them, wear clothes laundried by them – support Chinamen in our midst in every other way and never growl until he comes in direct competition with them.”¹²⁴ Another un-attributed editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* complained about the “miscreants who clubbed two Mongolians nearly to death at Arroyo Grande...” The author argued that the Chinese have as a much of a right to be in California as any other immigrants or “native son” and that “We cannot afford to emulate the Indian example out this way; we are not that sort of people.”¹²⁵ The author

¹²³ “Results of the Contest: Chinamen Win Prizes for the Best Sugar Beets,” *San Luis Obispo Breeze*, 17 December 1901.

¹²⁴ No Title, *The Reasoner*, 21 April 1896.

¹²⁵ No Title, *Los Angeles Times*, 30 September 1897.

also makes a valid point that most Americans supported free market capitalism and competition until they themselves were subjected to the direct competition that may cost them their business.

To demonstrate the difficulties that Chinese immigrants experienced, it is helpful to compare their experience to that of another set of immigrants that arrived during the same period. The first Portuguese immigrants came to California on whaling ships, which advertised available jobs traveling the world's oceans. Most of the Portuguese immigrants came from the Azores on ships traveling between Europe and North America, which would often stop at the island chain. Once stopped, these ships made it easy enough for people to come on board and travel the oceans to escape the lack of opportunity facing the islands during the nineteenth century.¹²⁶ Like many of the other diverse groups of people that arrived in California, the majority of Portuguese immigrants arrived in the late 1850s to take advantage of the Gold Rush, while many continued to participate in whaling. Two whaling stations were located locally, one at San Simeon and the other at San Luis Bay, where they dominated the industry.¹²⁷

California's Central Coast became a hub for Portuguese immigrant and their families. The nearby whaling stations located on the Pacific allowed the immigrants to participate in whaling while simultaneously having the ability to live near their families and farm nearby land. Most whaling took place during the winter when relatively little farming occurred, which was convenient for those working in both industries. Between 1860 and 1880, the majority of Portuguese immigrants to the United States ultimately ended up living on the Central Coast.¹²⁸ In California, most of these Portuguese immigrants chose to work in agricultural ventures; 27 %

¹²⁶ Alvin Ray Graves, *The Portuguese Californians: Immigrants in Agriculture* (San Jose, CA: Portuguese Heritage Publications of California, Inc., 2004), 16.

¹²⁷ Graves, 21.

¹²⁸ Graves, 24-25.

Figure 6 – The Portuguese population began to grow on the 1880 Census. Excluded are immigrants from Denmark, Italy, Australia, China, Sweden, and Chile as they totaled 1% or less.

of them were the owners or operators of their own farms by 1880, 24% of them of them were farm laborers, and 32% of them were common laborers (See Figure 6).¹²⁹

With thousands of immigrants coming to a rural area such as San Luis Obispo, it would seem logical if there was public resentment or an uprising similar to what the Chinese population

experienced. However, any such discrimination is largely absent from the historical record.

Local newspapers mentioned the Portuguese immigrants around the turn of the century. The *San Luis Obispo Tribune* wrote an article about the founding of a Portuguese woman's organization entitled, "Amor Da Patria: Ladies of Portuguese Descent in this City Organize into a Council of Prominent Order." The article simply stated that the women were founding an organization, and that, "This Tribune welcomes the new society to the list of fraternal orders in this city and wishes for it great success and prosperity".¹³⁰

Later that same year another article appeared that announced the formation of another Portuguese organization. The Portuguese fraternal order of California (UPEC) started a branch in San Luis Obispo. The *Tribune* announced that the organization was created "with the assistance of a number of well known people in this city...It has upon its rolls of membership some of our city's very best citizens." This included a Mr. A.B. Machado, which the paper

¹²⁹ Graves, 27.

¹³⁰ "Amor Da Patria: Ladies of Portuguese Descent in this City Organize into a Council of Prominent Order," *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 24 May 1901.

heralded as “an industrious young farmer.”¹³¹ The Portuguese population of San Luis Obispo County seems to have escaped any form of violence. In fact, they had the opportunity for upward mobility to become industrious farmers.

While initially positive, later views of immigration would color the group’s experience living on the Central Coast. An Arroyo Grande article about Portuguese pioneers announced, “Every race has it’s [sic] good, it’s bad and its indifferent individuals and the Portuguese who have settled in California are no different in this respect than ony [sic] other races of Europe who have become adopted sons of the United States. But, tho [sic] nationalities may protect their crooks and undesirables the Portuguese are the only to demand that those of their ranks who are crooked shall mend their ways and become law abiding.” The article continued to tell an anecdotal story about the local effort to collect money for World War I. Local citizens had to coerce some Portuguese immigrants into donating to the war effort. It concluded that some Portuguese immigrants needed more appreciation for the care given to them by “native born” Americans and their adopted country.¹³² It appears that San Luis Obispo County displayed a wide spectrum of acceptance for the immigrant groups and that level of acceptance fluctuated change over time. While the Portuguese received more acceptance than the Chinese, they did not receive the same celebratory attitude as the Swiss.

Comparing the events surrounding the Swiss-Italian, the Chinese, and the Portuguese immigrant groups provide a better lens to view their collective experiences. Each of these groups immigrated to the area during the same time and occupied the same space. However, each underwent completely different experiences. The Swiss-Italians came specifically to work in agriculture and the local community celebrated them, particularly in the dairy industry. The

¹³¹ “San Luis Council: History of the Branch of the UPEC in San Luis Obispo Organized February 11, 1901,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 15 October 1901.

¹³² “Pioneers of Our Valley: Early Portuguese Settlers,” *Arroyo Grande Herald-Recorder*, 1 June 1934.

other groups immigrated for non-agricultural reasons but ended up participating in the industry anyway. The Portuguese and the Swiss, for the most part, had the potential for upward mobility that the Chinese lacked. Even though the number of Swiss immigrants was on par with the Chinese, and the Portuguese population surpassed both, there was no mass movement to ban them for fear of them encroaching on the business opportunities of others. There are two possible explanations for this: religion and race. The Chinese emigrated from Asia whereas the Portuguese and Swiss emigrated from Europe and therefore had very different cultural backgrounds from Americans. Chinese immigrants looked physically different and came from a continent that the local population could have viewed as exotic or filled with “otherness” whereas most Americans were familiar with Europe. The Swiss and the Portuguese also had the option of blending in with their surrounding society while the Chinese lacked that ability. Religion may have also played a role in the acceptance of foreigners from the outside. The Portuguese and the Swiss Italians emigrated from Catholic regions and would have found acceptance among the Catholic population already established by the Spaniards. The Chinese lacked the luxury of being descended from a European-Catholic society.

The Japanese Exception

The first group of immigrants of non-European descent to prove upwardly mobile was the Japanese. Like their non-European predecessors, they found employment in agriculture and faced violence and resistance to their integration at the federal, state, and local level. Locally, however, due to timing and circumstances, they were able to advance into management and the property-owning class. Eventually they would hold a position of power over other farm workers,

and even appear in books as celebrated prominent citizens.¹³³ This praise forced anti-Japanese writers in California to use pseudonyms during the New Deal era to deflect potential repercussions.¹³⁴

Initially, Japanese immigration occurred because of both the lack of Chinese labor, which itself was due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the upward mobility of the other immigrant groups. Combined with constantly increasing agricultural production, this decline in the labor pool created a vacuum that needed workers in some form. From 1885 to 1900, Japanese workers began to immigrate to California to find work, mainly finding it in industries that required manual labor, filling positions that the Chinese exclusion left vacant. One of the contributing factors was the annexation of Hawaii where thousands of Japanese workers were already laboring in the sugar cane industry. In an effort to make money, steamship lines and labor contracting companies encouraged immigration to California from both Hawaii and then Japan. Most of these ships docked in San Francisco, where approximately 11,000 Japanese immigrants arrived in 1900. That number reached 23,000 in 1907, coming both from Hawaii and directly from Japan. Like the Chinese Exclusion Act before it, the United States government enacted the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1907 in which Imperial Japan agreed to stop the immigration of laborers to the United States.¹³⁵

Like other immigrant groups before them, the Japanese were no strangers to friction with white society. Throughout the late nineteenth century, Japanese workers lived in Hawaii working on sugar plantations. They were part of the territory's paternalistic racial hierarchy.

¹³³ Jespersen and Meier, 235-236.

¹³⁴ United States Works Progress Administration. *The Story of Japanese Farming in America* (Berkeley, California: No Date listed), 1. The book was written by someone with the initials E.T.H.B. and was sponsored by the University of California. It was Administration Progress Number 165-05-6336 and was published in book format in 1957.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Most of the island's inhabitants were of Asian descent and most of their problems surrounded working conditions and wages. Due to their large numbers, they were able to unionize and strike for better conditions. However, in California they only comprised 2% of the total population and were the target of violent white workers. Initially Japanese immigrants worked in agriculture, railroad construction, and canneries. However, after facing limited employment opportunities because of racist sentiment, they often took part in entrepreneurship in agriculture-an industry that allowed them an amount of success.¹³⁶

The number of immigrants from Japan transformed society in southern San Luis Obispo County in the first decade of the twentieth century. For the first time in county history, the majority of people working in agricultural industries were not of European descent (See Figure 77). While the majority of farmers were still white and from California and other states around the U.S., the majority of farm laborers were Japanese by the time the 1910 Census was taken (51% of total farm laborers were

Japanese, while a mere three percent were farmers). Most of these Japanese workers were in Nipomo, employed at labor camps working on either the Eucalyptus tree farms or the beet farms in the area.¹³⁷ Each camp also employed a labor contractor,

Figure 7 - By 1910 Japanese immigrants were the dominant force behind farm labor. Excluded are immigrants that totaled less than 1% from Austria, Ireland, German, Australia, and Sweden.

¹³⁶ Takaki, 266-267.

¹³⁷ By the 1930 Census, San Luis Obispo County would lead the state in the production of fence posts and railroad ties because of the abundantly grown eucalyptus trees.

usually a Japanese worker, to help find laborers for the farms.¹³⁸ The appearance of these workers in San Luis Obispo County coincided with a time that the sugar beet industry experienced its largest run in history.¹³⁹ Not only were these workers contributing to the agricultural abundance by planting and harvesting beets, but they also transformed the landscape by planting and maintaining the forests of eucalyptus trees in the region.

While local agriculturalists hired many Japanese employees, the population felt increasingly threatened by them. One of the leading farmers of the area complained to the *Tribune* while visiting Arroyo Grande for the town's Swiss festival in 1907, "There are altogether too many of the Japs in and around Guadalupe. They are the most dangerous class of labor our state has. They will, if given the chance, become complete masters of the community. They start in at small wages and after freezing out white labor, seek to form a trust among themselves to regulate wages. The employment of Japs is a menace to our state."¹⁴⁰ Ironically, the man came from a family of Swiss immigrants and complained about the very things that most immigrants coming to the United States achieve. In addition, it appears that race and economics were tied together as the complaining citizen were afraid of unionization and being forced to pay higher wages to farm workers.

Local papers continually published complaints about the Japanese population. Two days after publishing the previous article, another article appeared, also complaining about the local Japanese population. "Miss M. Evelyn Stokes, editor of the Guadalupe *Moon*, was a visitor in Arroyo Grande...she says the Japs of Guadalupe, of which there is a large colony, are becoming

¹³⁸ United States Census Bureau. *1910 Census*. (Washington, D.C., 1910). The data collected for southern San Luis Obispo County on this census was organized as Arroyo Grande Township and Nipomo Township.

¹³⁹ "San Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties. News Reports From Times Correspondents," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 April 1902.

¹⁴⁰ "Danger in Japs: L. Tognazzini of Guadalupe Discusses It- He says that the Little Brown Menace to our Golden State Must Go," *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 25 September 1907.

very independent and inclined to look for trouble...The man who employs Japanese labor in this state today is a disgrace to California. The time has come when the people of California must arise against the menace of Japanese labor.”¹⁴¹ A controversy arose when a Japanese immigrant wanted to open a store in Arroyo Grande. “The town here is strongly opposed to Orientals and has always been noted for so being in the past,” reported the *Tribune*. “By working and living cheaper they have gradually driven out the white working population and where ever they have succeeded in doing so they have started stores where the Japs do all their trading.” The article continued complaining about how Japanese stores also serve as local employment agencies to help other Japanese immigrants find work on land or crops. It threatened, “This is not a pretty picture to contemplate, but it is within the bounds of possibility in the Arroyo Grande Valley if the Japs are permitted to gain a foothold here.”¹⁴²

The Japanese faced scenarios similar to their Chinese predecessors. A 1902 article in the *Los Angeles Times* contained similar threats. “The farm laborers in the Arroyo Grande Valley have served notice on the Japanese who have been employed in the beet fields in that section, that they must never again seek employment there.” The article continued, citing experiences that Chinese workers faced when they refused to leave, “About twelve years ago a similar warning was served upon a band of Chinese at work in the Arroyo Grande Valley. The Celestials refused to leave, whereupon all their camps and effects were burned, and the Chinese themselves were placed on flat car and deported.”¹⁴³ Some of the Japanese workers refused to give in to the threats. “The Japs who are employed in the Arroyo Grande Valley have refused to accept the warning to leave given by the white laborers in that section. A number of white

¹⁴¹ “Again the Bad Jap: Miss Stokes of the Guadalupe Moon Points Out the Danger,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 29 January 1907.

¹⁴² “Opposed to Japanese Store: Oriental Merchant from Santa Barbara Fails to Secure Business Location in Arroyo Grande,” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 4 August 1908.

¹⁴³ “San Luis Obispo Laborers Threaten Violence,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 January 1902.

people visited the camp in the dead of night, routed the Japs from their tents, and relieved them of their watches and other things.” Fortunately, the local police caught one of the suspects of the crime. However, the article also noted, “The Japs have armed themselves and declare that they will remain. More trouble is expected.”¹⁴⁴

Many Japanese laborers worked hard and efficiently while also able to saving their money. They began to use this savings to buy and lease land, thus entering the land-owning class. The first of a series of landholder legislation against the Japanese, the California Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited Asians from buying agricultural land or leasing land for more than three years at a time. To counteract the law, many Japanese farmers formed corporations in the names of their American-born children and then purchased or leased land through these corporations.¹⁴⁵ By the 1920s, seven counties, of which San Luis Obispo was one, showed gains in Japanese rural population and an increase in Japanese-owned acreage. San Luis Obispo, Imperial, and Madera accounted for almost the entire gain in acreage.¹⁴⁶ The crops that the Japanese immigrants concentrated in were diverse and high labor specialty crops, including green vegetables, sugar beets, grapes, and fruits and nuts. This product range demonstrated that the Japanese were able to enter the agricultural industry and participate in crop diversification on par with Caucasians.¹⁴⁷

Agriculture was an industry that Japanese immigrants were able to enter at a period when other industries lacked opportunity for them. Many of them only spoke Japanese and agriculture afforded them the ability to be self-employed and work with their families, including their American-born children. Lettuce was one of the first items that the Japanese specialized in, but

¹⁴⁴ “San Luis Obispo. Japs Know Their Rights,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 1902.

¹⁴⁵ WPA, 2.

¹⁴⁶ WPA, 57-58.

¹⁴⁷ WPA, 26.

their main success was in peas. Over time, the Japanese developed notoriety for their high-quality peas, so much so that they were able to do fairly well even during the Great Depression. At a period when many were poor, the Japanese immigrants that accrued capital were able to either invest in more land under their children's names or lease more land and expand their operations.¹⁴⁸

Eventually it appears that by the late 1920s the Japanese immigrants gained some level of acceptance in the local agricultural community. An article about the pea harvest in December of 1925 declared that the growing conditions at the time “already indicate that returns this season will far outrank those of any previous year.” It continued, “Most of these crops are being worked by Japanese owners and Japanese labor who keep the plants in the finest growing condition, with the result that the landscape in most of this part of San Luis Obispo county has a pleasing verdant look that is most attractive.”¹⁴⁹ The county newspaper declared the Japanese immigrants a success that contributed to both business and environmental beautification.

Many locals also took note of these Japanese accomplishments. Portions of a historical monograph by Senator Chris N. Jespersen and Harold McLean Meier about San Luis Obispo County even included biographical sketches of notable local Japanese farmers. The book described Tamezi Eto as having, “science and enterprise” which spread fame for San Luis Obispo County crops all over the country, as well as being the first to grow winter peas in the area. He was also a leader in several organizations including the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce and the county farm bureau.¹⁵⁰ The authors even specify that the community should be interested in Eto's work, not because of curiosity, but rather because of gratitude as “Eto and

¹⁴⁸ Interview with the Ikeda family and Craig Rock by Charles Meyers on *Keeping it Fresh*. Aired 2 April 2008 on KCPX, available at <http://kcbx.org/mp3archive/kif080402.mp3> (accessed 4 June 2010).

¹⁴⁹ “Pismo Section is Green With Fields of Peas,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 December 1925.

¹⁵⁰ Jespersen and Meier, 222-223.

his splendid family never shirked a duty, and his family is one of the most public-spirited and charitable in the county and truly merits their many close friendships here.”¹⁵¹ Robert F. Fukunaga had humble beginnings working as a bookkeeper for the Pismo Pea Growers Association where he eventually became the organization’s leader in 1930 when he consolidated it with the Arroyo Grande Pea Growers Association and the Oceano Vegetable Exchange, forming the Pismo-Oceano Vegetable Exchange. Jespersen and Meier demonstrate Fukunaga’s accomplishments, “Mr. Fukunaga has originated many improved methods in packaging and marketing and is a recognized authority on handling of vegetables. He is a member of the San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau, the United Fruit and Vegetable Association, with headquarters in Chicago, and the Western Growers and Shippers, Los Angeles.”¹⁵²

Several possible factors connect crop diversification with Japanese immigration. First, following World War I, wartime demand for food collapsed. This caused any farmers who lacked the foresight to save profits during the war to go bankrupt when prices dropped following a slowdown in food demand after the war.¹⁵³ The region’s cattle industry also suffered from the spread of hoof and mouth disease during the 1920s, preventing the economic boom that occurred in other industries during the same period.¹⁵⁴ The drop in prices following World War I in addition to the other agricultural problems may have caused many to lose interest in farming. This decrease opened up the industry for the Japanese. These circumstances allowed many Japanese immigrants to utilize the niches left open to them by white Americans for economic advancement. These niches included truck farming and the nursery industry; a type of specialty

¹⁵¹ Jespersen and Meier, 224.

¹⁵² Jespersen and Meier, 235-236.

¹⁵³ Krieger, 73.

¹⁵⁴ Krieger, 90.

agriculture that few had previously attempted. They changed crops to meet demands, worked fields that were near transportation centers, and set up a system for rapid distribution. They also inter-planted crops, meaning they grew compatible plants on the same land, thereby getting several harvests simultaneously. The 1920s saw Japanese immigrant farmers produce ten percent of California's crops on one percent of the state's farm acreage.¹⁵⁵ This means that along with the change in the makeup of the population of farm laborers, the 1920s and 1930s saw many changes in the types of crops grown in San Luis Obispo County.

Stranger in One's Own Country: The Filipinos

Prior global events outside the realm of agriculture affected the local industry during the 1920s, and would have an impact on events later to come, particularly in labor relations. While Japanese immigrants contributed greatly to the growth of the local agricultural industry, the interconnected cycle of agricultural production, technological innovations, and increased farm labor immigration continued. During and after the 1920s, technological advances appeared in the form of irrigation. The majority of immigrants came from the Philippines (an American possession annexed after the Spanish-American War in 1898). This new wave of immigrants would have an important impact on labor relations.

Growth in immigration and crop diversification accompanied an increase in irrigation, possibly because the diverse specialty crops that farmers were increasingly growing required more water. According to the 1920 Census, San Luis Obispo County led the state in the production of dry beans, grains for hay, and sugar beets.¹⁵⁶ The county also contended as a major player in the cattle industry with 88,677 head of cattle, only behind Kern, Merced, and

¹⁵⁵ White, 444-445.

¹⁵⁶ United States Census Bureau. *1920 Census of Agriculture*. (Washington, D.C., 1920), 91.

Tulare counties.¹⁵⁷ Cattle growth would have required the growing of hay, which required more water. All of these changes occurred simultaneously with a 350% increase in areas irrigated, an exponential rate only second behind Alameda County. The period from 1910 to 1920 saw a capacity increase in flowing wells from 70 gallons per minute to 3,808 gallons per minute. Simultaneously, pumped well volume increased from 4,416 gallons per minute to 35,862 per minute.¹⁵⁸ In 1917 when Annie Morrison wrote, "...when, in a word, we control the water instead of letting it control us, with irrigation we can choose our crops and arrange the 'season' to suit our needs," this is certainly what she had in mind.¹⁵⁹

Crops continually changed at an exponential rate during this period. The *Los Angeles Times* boasted on January 1, 1924, "The outstanding agricultural development of the year is along the line of artichoke culture. The coast section of San Luis Obispo county [sic] has been discovered to possess ideal conditions for artichoke culture." The article continued, "The fruit production of the county is steadily increasing. Apples, peaches, plums, apricots, pears, prunes, walnuts and almonds are grown in large quantities..."¹⁶⁰ While the article was sensationalizing the amount of fruit growing in the county, the county did have more almond trees within its borders than any other county in the state, numbering at 659,969.¹⁶¹ The region maintained its prominence in wheat and grain for hay while becoming a major player in artichokes, beets, carrots, cauliflower, lettuce, onions, and peas. Only Imperial County surpassed San Luis Obispo

¹⁵⁷ 1920 *Census of Agriculture* 84.

¹⁵⁸ 1920 *Census of Agriculture* 112.

¹⁵⁹ Morrison and Haydon, 90. In Lawrence J. Jelinek's book *Harvest Empire: A History of California Agriculture* (San Francisco: Boyd and Frasier, 1979), the author lists four reasons behind California's successful agriculture; the ability to irrigate, crop experimentation, access to a large labor supply, and marketing. This model is somewhat applicable to this situation. The initial stages of San Luis Obispo County agriculture lacked marketing and irrigation. However, once successful irrigation was utilized, produce production increased meaning that irrigation helped increase production but lacked the necessity in its initial stages that Jelinek implies due to the availability of naturally occurring water sources.

¹⁶⁰ "New Industries, More Planting in San Luis Obispo: Many New Industries Established; Poultry-Raising Flourishes; Canneries to be Erected," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 1924.

¹⁶¹ United States Census Bureau. 1930 *Census of Agriculture*. (Washington, D.C., 1930), 564.

County in pea production.¹⁶² The period saw the production of beef trend down while poultry production experienced an upward trend, possibly due to the state of the economy in 1930 and increased demand for less expensive products.¹⁶³

All of the emerging crops had one thing in common; they were labor-intensive specialty crops that required laborers, which because of anti-immigrant government legislation, the region lacked. The lack this resource forced agricultural businesses to adapt. Government regulations suppressing immigration could account for the scarcity of labor. The series of government restrictions on immigration, including the Chinese Exclusion Act that prohibited Chinese labor, the Gentleman's Agreement that prohibited the importation of Japanese labor and the Immigration Act of 1924 all hindered the number of immigrants allowed into the United States from around the world. The growing list of immigration suppression created a huge labor vacuum. Consequently, labor contractors turned to the Philippine Islands for workers, as it was a United States territory acquired during the Spanish-American War and therefore not subject to immigration laws. Planters encouraged immigration by sending labor agents referred to as "drummers" to the Philippines. They traveled around the islands showing movies about how Filipinos could get rich by working as farm laborers.¹⁶⁴ Once the immigrants docked in San Francisco, they found themselves organized into crews and dispersed throughout the state to follow the ripening fruits and vegetables. Farmers, both white and Japanese, often kept the Filipino laborers racially isolated and paid them the lowest wages of any other racial group.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² *1930 Census of Agriculture*, 546.

¹⁶³ *1930 Census of Agriculture*, 536.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1989), 57-58.

¹⁶⁵ Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1939), 23.

The importation of Filipino workers changed the makeup of the local communities. The 1930 Census Schedule shows groups of Filipino laborers camped in labor camps all over southern San Luis Obispo County. They lived in rural settlements allowing small laborer-communities to form. These communities would often contain dance halls where the men would drink, gamble, and enjoy the company of prostitutes. Many farmers owned these dance halls and used them as opportunities to exploit the workers of their incomes while they were in town for the harvests.¹⁶⁶ These camps included locations in Pismo Beach on Dolliver Road, Ocean View Drive, all along Highway 1, and Cave Landing Road in Avila Beach. They also had encampments in Nipomo, Arroyo Grande, and the Corral de Piedra Precinct (Edna Valley). Filipino workers comprised 46% of the total farm labor workforce, outnumbering all other workers. The Census listed all of the workers as “Pea Picker” or “General Farm Laborer.”¹⁶⁷ With the completion of the Census in April, it appears that peas were in season that month.

During this time, California saw the largest influx of Filipino immigrants, which alarmed some while others, defended it. Republican Congressman Richard Welch submitted legislation to add Filipinos to the list of excluded immigrant groups, even though they were technically U.S. nationals. Welch compared the Filipino immigrants to the Chinese and Japanese when he dubbed them, the “Third Asiatic Invasion.” Initially the legislation failed to garner much attention, but soon after the start of the Great Depression, Filipinos found themselves blamed for increasing unemployment levels among whites. The Native Sons of the Golden West supported

¹⁶⁶ McWilliams, 144.

¹⁶⁷ United States Census Bureau. 1930 *Census Schedule*. (Washington, D.C., 1930). The Cesus Schedule is organized so that the South County consisted of the regions of Arroyo Grande City, Pismo Beach, Corral de Piedra Precinct, Oceano Town, and Nipomo Township.

Welch's legislation, while farming groups and steamship lines opposed it as they were making profits from the travelers.¹⁶⁸

The attitude towards immigration of Central Coast residents seemed to have mirrored that of California and the rest of the nation. Reporting on a car accident that took place in Nipomo, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a man by the name of Virgil C. White died in the incident, while his son, Reginald White, was seriously injured. The head-on collision also injured three Filipino immigrants, but these immigrants apparently lacked importance as the newspaper failed to mention their names, age, or gender.¹⁶⁹ By 1934, anti-Filipino immigration was so rampant in America that the nation was willing to give up its claim over the island chain in order to halt the movement. Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, which gave the Philippines independence and changed the immigration status of the Filipino people from nationals to aliens, thereby banning further immigration.¹⁷⁰ To add insult to injury, Congress introduced repatriation bills to deport immigrants in order to destroy the Filipino population that was legally living in the United States, the majority of which were in California.¹⁷¹ .

The crops that Filipino laborers picked were extremely important, and included peas and strawberries – some of the most important crops to the area during the period demonstrated by press attention the crops received. The pea crop made major headlines every year if there was a disaster. In May of 1934, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a potential catastrophe of “grasshoppers arrayed in mass formation around the mesa and foothill lands from Santa Ynez, Santa Barbara County, to Nipomo, San Luis Obispo County, forming almost a perfect semicircle

¹⁶⁸ James Sobredo, “The 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act and Filipino Exclusion: Social, Political and Economic Context Revisited,” in *Studies in Pacific History: Economics, Politics, and Migration*, ed. Dennis O. Flynn, Arturo Giraldez, and James Sobredo (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 160.

¹⁶⁹ “Man Dies in Crash; Son Severely Hurt,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 1937.

¹⁷⁰ Sobredo, 160.

¹⁷¹ Sobredo, 161.

around the far famed ‘salad bowl’ district.” Two years later the paper reported, “Blight has killed the early pea crop in Southern San Luis Obispo county [sic]. An estimated 2000 acres between Santa Maria River and Berros Creek, including the area known as Nipomo Mesa, has been hit by the blight and the early crop, as a consequence, will amount to nothing...”¹⁷²

Even though the crops cultivated by Filipino immigrants were extremely important, they were another immigrant group who faced barriers preventing them from social and economical success. Interestingly enough, like the Swiss and Portuguese immigrants that came before them, the Filipino groups came from a predominantly Catholic nation. However, they were unable to assimilate in the same ways that the other two groups were able to achieve. It appears in this particular situation, Filipinos lacked the ability to fit into the prevailing culture because of the economic circumstances taking place at the time of their arrival. The dominant culture utilized race as a reason to deport immigrants in an effort to open up the job market for white Americans. Filipino immigrants tried to fight injustice in the fields during the Depression and would eventually entangle other immigrant groups in their protests.

The Great Depression

San Luis Obispo County suffered in ways different from the rest of the nation during the Great Depression, resulting in conflict. This was, in part, due to the local dairy and cattle industries already greatly impaired during the 1920s from hoof and mouth disease. Therefore, the market never greatly expanded and regional farmers lacked the many debt obligations accrued by others during the Roaring 20s. In addition, the nation still needed to eat, meaning that San Luis Obispo County farmers continued to maintain production levels but amassed less profit. While the local economy lacked the same contraction in the economy that the rest of the

¹⁷² “San Luis Obispo Pea Crop Killed,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 February 1936.

nation experienced, the area received many unemployed agricultural workers that flooded into the region from the Midwest Dustbowl and other environs. Mostly white, these immigrants came to the region to pick peas, but were surprised to find Filipinos laboring in the fields and filling the jobs they pursued.¹⁷³ Conflict and labor strikes ensued. Depending on your position, the media either credits or blames the Filipino Labor Union for the strikes, but it appears that everyone in Nipomo was involved to some extent.

Nipomo's pea crop attracted workers hoping to make money picking the vegetable. "The supervisors are preparing to establish a transient camp for approximately 10,000 people at Nipomo to handle the influx of pea pickers and their families who already have started to come in," one *Tribune* article wrote in December 1934. Local residents protested the camp near their homes on the sandy mesa, but government health officials declared that the area provided the needed drainage for the camps that housed the masses. The State Emergency Relief Association (SERA) guaranteed sewage disposal, water and garbage systems, and supervision for the camp, but residents still protested. A descendent of William Dana, Amos Dana blamed free-lancers, "who flock to the pea district with no assurance of work but only hopes of a few days labor." That year, according to Dana, there were 4,000 acres of peas planted around Nipomo and early fall rains brought a sooner than expected harvest that would last longer. An earlier and longer harvest season was good for farmers, but it also consequently meant that they also needed more workers for a longer period. These workers needed housing and subsistence supplies that the government ended up paying for. In part, Amos Dana was correct in his assessment, but many of these "free lancers" came to the region to pick peas to survive. Like the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, labor recruiters hired by the farmers attracted the migrant farm workers with promise of

¹⁷³ Krieger, 90.

work and wages, so it was not their fault that they were lured to the farms, only to arrive and encounter a lack of work.¹⁷⁴

Nipomo residents continued to object to the establishment of a labor camp and the arrival of migrant workers in Nipomo. They offered a site two miles away from town. The SERA objected to the site due to its distance from facilities and the school for migrant farm workers children. A member of the Nipomo Mesa Protective League wrote to Arroyo Grande's *Herald-Recorder* and argued that the county spent \$2000 the prior year on food and gasoline to provide the workers with a way to leave the county. "This year it is anticipated that there shall be an influx into the Nipomo district of some 12,000 family member of Mexican pea pickers, jobless itinerants, transient laborers, and/or vagrants..." The letter continued by stating that the county board of supervisors should prevent the importation of families "for whom there will be no work, and anticipate the problem of those other hundreds of families who will probably be out of funds as soon as their temporary employment ceases."¹⁷⁵

The debate raged on every year. Residents began to believe that pea farmers were at fault for the employees they were attracting. A 1935 article reported, "The legislative battle between the pea growers and the Mesa homeowners following filing of a petition by the residents, seeking restrictive zoning of their district." It continued, "Pea growers on the other hand, argue that it is necessary to their industry to maintain camps for the pickers and that they should be privileged to

¹⁷⁴ "Pea Pickers' Camp to Be Established," *Arroyo Grande Herald-Recorder*, 7 December 1934. Applicable here is David Vaught's *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999). Vaught maintains that the complex system that comprised the famer-labor relationship has lacked sufficient attention. He focuses on four Central Valley town labor riots to dispute Cary McWilliam's portrayal of farm laborers as victims of farm employment practices. However, he focuses on the period before McWilliams began writing, and therefore his book may not hold up to tests of a different time period. It is also difficult to blame unions and laborers for the practices that farmers utilized to entice laborers to their farms and the changing economic and technological shifts occurring in the agricultural community. It is also worthy to note that the government always ended up picking up the tab for the complicated labor mess that resulted from farmer employment practices. To Vaught's credit, he attempts to make farmers and laborers out to be something other than monolithic groups.

¹⁷⁵ "Residents proposed area two miles out of town, but SERA didn't like it," *Arroyo Grande Herald-Recorder*, 14 December, 1934.

maintain these ‘nomad cities’ of their own properties within the zone proposed area.”¹⁷⁶ The County Board of Supervisors caved into pressure by Nipomo residents when a “delegation of ranchers in the proposed zone appeared to protest and the matter was continued.”¹⁷⁷ Nipomo residents and farmers argued with one another over the migrant workers attracted to the town for its booming pea industry. The County Board of Supervisors, trapped in the middle of the two factions, failed to provide much guidance.

With the lack of control on the part of the local government, federal authorities stepped in. The Rural Rehabilitation Division faced hundreds of stranded families that year. Disease spread among the people living in their makeshift camps. As a result, the agency built a migratory workers’ camp and spent \$18,648 of federal funds to take care of the people. The federal government used an existing warehouse as an emergency hospital and the county built a pump and well to supply the farm workers with water. After 1935, the Federal Transient Service abandoned the camp buildings because of lost funding from the national government and resident complaints about having a camp in their neighborhood.¹⁷⁸

By 1936, regional papers advertised Nipomo pea picking season, causing its commencement to become well known. These articles also demonstrated a little about how local workers contributed to the meals of people in far off places and the lack of incentive for farmers to hire workers directly. In February of 1936 a newspaper announced, “Pea Picking Begins In

¹⁷⁶ “Controversy Rages Over Location of Pea Pickers Camp,” *Arroyo Grande Herald-Recorder*, 7 September 1935.

¹⁷⁷ “Nipomoans Protest Itinerant Project,” *Arroyo Grande Herald-Recorder*, 13 September 1935.

¹⁷⁸ Raymond P. Barry, *Migratory Labor in The California Market Pea Crop* (Oakland: Federal Writers Project, 1938), 69; http://www.oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb88700929&chunk.id=div00081&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text (accessed 30 November 2010). Also applicable here is Paul Conkin’s *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929* (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2008). Conkin maintains that the federal government was the force behind the success of American agriculture. However, Conkin argues that the government provided for things like distribution of public lands, produce transportation, and grants to fund public education programs such as 4H. In this particular situation the federal government also provided necessities for farm laborers so that they could continue to work which enabled farmers to profit from the temporary employment of migrant farm workers rather than being forced to hire full-time workers.

Nipomo District.” The article described the process of growing peas and listed the farmers that had peas that were ready for harvesting. It also described who bought the peas. “The local peas are now being trucked to San Francisco markets principally while some go to packing houses in Santa Maria, Guadalupe, or Oceano to make up mixed cars destined for eastern or Pacific-northwest shipment.” Pea farmers used labor contractors, “as growers do not wish to bear the burden of workmen’s compensation and detailed time-keeping.”¹⁷⁹ The article seems to justify the existence of labor contractors even though the contractors were manipulating the system to keep themselves employed and forcing mass quantities of laborers to compete for the same work, thereby lowering wages. Labor contracts made labor issues less arduous for farmers, and therefore justified their existence, even though the government ended up footing the bill for the private labor practices. The labor procedures that contractors followed allowed farmers a better bottom line at the expense of taxpayers.

The following month saw environmental catastrophe for the pea crop, which directly affected those working in the pea fields. “Blight Hits Pea Pickers” the *Los Angeles Times* announced in March of 1936. “A camp of itinerant harvest workers, stranded without food or money due to a crop failure in the midst of a rich coastal pea farming country, tonight awaited food supplied doled by the Federal government” the article reported. The blight and heavy rains destroyed the pea crop stranding hundreds of families. The destitute campers, rather than being taken care of by San Luis Obispo County, were discovered by a Federal Survey Bureau photographer, “sent into the area to photograph typical agricultural labor camps...”¹⁸⁰ The next day the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the government stepped in to help the stranded migrant workers. “Food for 2000 itinerant fruit pickers, danger of privation, will be distributed here

¹⁷⁹ “Pea Picking Begins In Nipomo District,” *Arroyo Grande Herald-Recorder*, 7 February 1936.

¹⁸⁰ “Blight Hits Pea Pickers: Several Hundred Stranded in Camp as Crop Fails Near Santa Maria,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 1936.

tomorrow by SERA.” The families were living in tents while children attended a temporary school in a grain warehouse.¹⁸¹ Dortha Lange captured her “Migrant Mother” photograph in February of 1936, so she may be the Federal Survey Bureau photographer to which the article refers.

By 1937, conditions continued to worsen as relationships between farmers and laborers deteriorated and the environmental conditions once again left workers stranded in Nipomo’s pea fields with a shortage of peas to pick. Environmental conditions caused a shortage of peas, and therefore jobs were scarce, resulting in elevated tensions. The disaster followed much the same pattern as in previous years. “Pea Pickers to Receive Aid” was the headline of a *Los Angeles Times* article. “Federal authorities speeded plans tonight to extend relief to 2000 nomad pea pickers, stranded by an unripened crop which was even further retarded by continued heavy rains.” Conditions were worse as the pea crop only required 600 workers, but the Federal relief authorities blamed labor contractors for luring more workers than was necessary with promotional literature that advertised jobs using the same advertisement in different states- “Wanted, at once, fifty families to pick peas. Long job, free camp, good water.” The camp population numbers continued to soar and conditions grew even desperate.¹⁸²

That same year, the economy and environmental conditions pushed the relationship between farmers and laborers to the breaking point. The year 1937 began with Filipino laborers striking against their farmer-employers. The local newspaper decreed, “The most important grievance heard at the meeting was the objection to the recent wage cut when the growers reduced wages from 35c to 30c per hour...More than 500 workers engaged in the pea industry are affected by the present situation.” The strikers were asking for 35 cents an hour, no

¹⁸¹ “Food Rations Provided 2000 Fruit Pickers,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 March 1936.

¹⁸² “Pea Pickers to Receive Aid,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 1937.

discrimination based on union affiliation, a legal workday of ten hours and time and a half overtime, and they wanted payment every fifteen days.¹⁸³ The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) backed the Filipino Labor Union (FLU).¹⁸⁴ Farmers felt threatened by the organization as it became more powerful.

By April of 1937, the labor strikes spread among all of the pea pickers regardless of race or nationality. Growers abused workers, county officials treated them indifferently, while state and federal aid poured in year after year to clean up the mess. One author with the Federal Writer's Project in 1938 pondered, "Perhaps the prevailing belief was held that since these people had starved for so long any wage would look inviting to them." The growers offered 25 cents per basket of peas picked, but the laborers' destitution and the poor weather had pushed them into striking. Striking laborers demanded 45 cents per hamper or one and a half cents per pound picked, free transportation to and from the pea fields, and free hampers to utilize for harvesting. Prior to this, they had to pay for their own hampers. The strike began on Saturday, April 10, 1937 and 1,000 workers participated on the first day.¹⁸⁵

Farmers and county officials reacted in anger because laborers were forcing them into negotiations. Farmers threatened to plow under the crop if pickers refused 30 cents per hamper. By April 15, Sheriff Henry Haskins issued an ultimatum to either return to work, face arrest for vagrancy, or leave the county. Workers began leaving the county and labor contractors recruited more workers to come to the area. Faced with starvation, union members voted to end the strike and settle for a twenty percent wage increase and the unconditional release of half a dozen

¹⁸³ "Filipino-Japanese Labor Conflict Countywide Threat," *San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram*, 2 January 1937.

¹⁸⁴ "Pickers' Unions Ask Increases: Salad Bowl Workers Want Close Shop," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 November 1937.

¹⁸⁵ Barry, 77-78.

members who the police arrested during the strike.¹⁸⁶ This was a small victory for the squalid camps. While they had waste disposal, workers still had to live in tents and lacked bathrooms.¹⁸⁷

During this time, the Nipomo pea strike was gaining media attention. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that 100 special sheriff deputies were sworn in to control the strikers, while the county's justice of the peace, Melbourne Dana (of the farming family) reported that all the strikers had returned to work. However, picketing also spread to Pismo and the Berros areas.¹⁸⁸ The following day the same paper reported that strikers returned to work after police threats with vagrant charges and jail if they did not leave the county.¹⁸⁹ In May the paper reported that those responsible for the strike were fined, "Ed D. Bushnell and C.D. Mensalves, secretary of the Filipino Laborers' Union, were fined \$100 each today on charges of disturbing the peace during the April strike of pea pickets in the Nipomo Area."¹⁹⁰ By the end of the year, laborers were already discussing strikes. "Last

night, C.I.O Filipino vegetable pickers, packers and field workers served demands on growers and shippers for a close shop and increased wages." They wanted 45 cents an hour and employment restricted to

Figure 8 – Beginning in 1929, local officials began tabulating county agricultural production. Some years are missing from the records.

¹⁸⁶ Barry, 79.

¹⁸⁷ Barry, 121.

¹⁸⁸ "Pea Picking Strikers Told To Work Or Leave: Sheriff Issues Defi to Workers in Santa Maria Districts," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 April 1937.

¹⁸⁹ "Striking Pea Pickers Return to Work," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1937.

¹⁹⁰ "Pea Picketing Case Draws \$100 Fines," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 1937.

union members.¹⁹¹ These union members were resolute in advancing the cause of labor conditions of farm workers in the region.

The late 1930s saw change in the types of vegetables grown, and therefore changing labor conditions. Peas tended to deplete soil nutrients, and therefore the production of vegetables in the county experienced a decline. The federal government began subsidizing crops such as wheat and sugar beets, making those crops more attractive to farmers hoping to make a living during harsh economic times (See Figure 9).¹⁹² The decline in pea production coincided with a decline in labor issues.

Demographic Change

In many ways, San Luis Obispo County during the 1930s reflects a very Western story. Circumstances brought many different people from various areas together to seek survival and job opportunities in the Nipomo pea fields. Years of immigration brought a wide variety of people together. Labor recruits brought these people to the region to work on farms, but unfortunately, conditions forced them to live in squalor. These laborers contributed to the productivity of San Luis Obispo County and providing food for the tables of many Americans across the nation. The Depression forced the general population to spend less on food, which forced farmers to lower overhead costs in an attempt to remain profitable. Cost cutting manifested itself in the form of poor working conditions for laborers – laborers that reshaped the county, both demographically and agriculturally.

¹⁹¹ “Pickers’ Unions Ask Increases: Salad Bowl Workers Want Closed Shop,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 November 1937.

¹⁹² Crop Report of Agricultural Products of San Luis Obispo County. *Report of Agricultural Products produced in San Luis Obispo County during 1929-1947* (San Luis Obispo, CA:Office of County Agricultural Commissioner, 1929-1947).

What occurred in the local agricultural industry reflects a statewide trend. During the 1930s, California employed 4.4% of the national agricultural workforce, but nearly all of the agricultural labor strikes (like the annual strike in Nipomo) that took place in the nation (ranging from 36 to 100% some years) were in California. The majority (96%) of agricultural strikers also called California home.¹⁹³

This situation calls into question the pattern behind the strikes that took place in California.

One possible reason is that when Dustbowl Migrants arrived in California, they encountered a demographically diverse agricultural population, which for the first time in history was mostly non-white (See Figure 9). This multicultural population formed over generations dating back to the mid nineteenth century and generated its own hierarchy between farmers and farm laborers largely based on race. For the first time since the initial Census in 1850, the majority of farm owners were California-born. This is the result of immigrants – at least those of European

Figure 9 - South SLO County Farmers and Laborers by Place of Birth - 1930

¹⁹³ Stuart Marshall Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 31. Jamieson cites a report studying the period of 1933 to 1939 by Henry H. Fowler, chief counsel of the United States Civil Liberties Committee.

descent that were allowed to stay - gave birth to children that stayed in the farming industry. All foreign-born farmers were from Europe, with the exception of the small number of Japanese (6%) that prospered. This established a homogenous group that controlled most of the resources.

The labor situation was the result of years of negotiation and conflict. Farmers welcomed some groups into the labor pool and expelled others.¹⁹⁴ The number of white farm laborers from California and other states dwindled, while the number of laborers dramatically increased like never before (See Table 2). This established a group of laborers that was the opposite of the farmers. They were a heterogeneous group composed of people that looked differently than the people in control.

Dustbowl Migrants encountered a previously established farmer-laborer framework. They would have occupied a position somewhere between farmers and farm laborers; farmers were largely white, farm laborers were largely foreign, and the Dustbowl Migrants were neither farmers nor foreigners.

The Dustbowl Migrants potentially changed the relationship between farmers and laborers by upsetting an

Place of Birth	Farm Owners			Farm Laborers		
	1850	1900	1930	1850	1900	1930
California	58%	15%	45%	42%	52%	13%
Other U.S.	11%	44%	25%	10%	25%	8%
Other Countries	31%	41%	30%	48%	23%	79%

Table 2. Percent of Farm Owners and Farm Laborers in 1850, 1900, and 1930.

established balance and garnering attention to the exploit of migrant workers that looked like many Americans. At the height of the Depression, many Americans could sympathize with the poor, especially if they looked familiar. The government and society in general largely ignored labor conditions when people seen as foreign worked in those positions. This changed during the Great Depression. Carey McWilliams estimated that fifty percent of the labor camp population in Nipomo was white, one-third Mexican, eleven percent Filipino, three percent Japanese and

¹⁹⁴ McWilliams, 306.

three percent Chinese.¹⁹⁵ This represents a huge increase from the mere 8% of the laboring force that was white according to the 1930 Census.¹⁹⁶ The rest of the work force represented groups that American farmers and labor contractors enticed from poorer regions to the area for work. The demographic shift to a largely white labor force and activists such as Dortha Langu and John Steinbeck caused the public and government to take notice of the plight of the farm laborer, largely to the dismay of farmers that wanted to spend as little as possible on their workforce. Public Support for the largely white work force encouraged union organization began by the Filipino Labor Union and backed by the CIO, giving laborers the power to strike for better working conditions.

¹⁹⁵ McWilliams, 305.

¹⁹⁶ 1930 Census Schedule.

Conclusion

Looking across the shallow valley where old Nipomo is located now, one can see the remnants of past agriculture combined with modern development. There are small eucalyptus groves still standing from the period in which Japanese laborers planted and harvested the trees for wood. Interspersed among buildings that are more recent are smaller farms, each growing a variety of produce. Avocado trees dot the hillside while alfalfa covers the valley floor. Farmers still shape the land with the crops they grow, the labor they hire, and the latest technological advances they use.

The crops currently growing in the region have roots tied to past immigration. When Spaniards initially came to the region, they had to learn to grow crops and adapt their livestock practices to the area. After the great drought of the 1860s, farmers transformed the area by switching production to produce such as fruits, nuts, and vegetables. The result was land restructuring in the form of destruction of the Mexican land grants and the creation of smaller farms. California became one of the world's principal exporters of crops. These crops required labor. Simultaneously immigrants came to the area and contributed to the pool of biological knowledge that successfully allowed for the propagation of fruit and vegetables in the area's diverse climate regions.¹⁹⁷

The 1930s saw a period of unrest due the accumulation of sour labor relations and the immigration of a large white farm laboring population. Exactly one hundred years from the first agricultural establishments in Nipomo by William G. Dana, the same land was witness to a strike by migrant farm workers on a previously unknown scale. Migrant farm workers continued to

¹⁹⁷ Olmstead and Rhode, 223 and 239.

pour into the county for the annual pea harvest, which over time caused the fertility of the soil to decline. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1939 that four camps for migrant farm workers was established in Nipomo and that there were 2,179 acres of peas to harvest that year.¹⁹⁸ That figure was much smaller than the 4,000 acres reportedly growing in Nipomo in the years prior.

Looking at the approximate period of 1837 to 1937 reveals the connection between agriculture, innovation, immigration, and to a certain extent, the struggle for equality. Immigrants established the original agricultural practices. Literature promoted the immigration of farmers to the region by sensationalizing the fertility of the soil and the potential agricultural production of the region. Many Americans and Europeans immigrated to the county and took advantage of the destruction of the Mexican land grants while carving out smaller pieces of land for their own livelihood. Most of these immigrants were white and came from European nations, particularly Switzerland and Portugal, or other states in the Union. White immigrant families such as the Danas, the Branches, or the Steeles had a relatively easy time participating in the agricultural community and establishing themselves. The immigration of Americans to the region brought about changes in agriculture, particularly in the area of technology that utilized everything from railroads, fruit dehydrators, and soil analysis. Simultaneously, the Portuguese and the Swiss immigrants initiated the successful dairy industry.

The view of immigration and farming changed towards the end of the nineteenth century as groups of people moved to the county that were not as celebrated as their predecessors. The Chinese were the first group to face local discrimination. Whenever they succeeded, local residents called foul play as demonstrated by the story of the sugar beet contest that appeared the San Luis Obispo newspaper. The Japanese were the next to face the discrimination, followed by the Filipinos. The last group of people in this period to immigrate for agricultural purposes and

¹⁹⁸ "Spring Pea Harvest Camps Established," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 February 1939.

face unrest was the Dust Bowl migrants. All of these people were responsible for the cultivation and harvesting the vegetables that made San Luis Obispo County a success, and yet they receive little acknowledgment. In many cases farm workers were, and still are, seen as a hindrance to the local population.

Some of the local immigrant groups faced a constant struggle for equality. Sadly, Japanese immigrants had the opportunity for advancement available to them and yet saw everything they struggled to earn confiscated. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese immigrants were subject to internment. Many farming associations seized the opportunity, claiming that Japanese immigrants came as laborers and stayed to take over. White farmers saw their Japanese counterparts as competitors, which left the Japanese vulnerable. On February 19, 1942, Franklin Delano Roosevelt made the unconstitutional decision to evict all Japanese residents on the West Coast from their land.¹⁹⁹ After World War II, the government ended its internment policies, but only ten local Japanese families had the land, supplies, and capital they needed to return to farming.²⁰⁰ Sadly, the one non-white portion of the local society that was able to break into the agricultural land-owning class saw everything they worked so hard for taken away.

The local Filipino community struggled for equality outside of the agricultural industry. When Japan invaded the Philippines during WWII, many Filipinos wanted to enlist in the military to fight the invading force. However, the military's discriminatory policies prevented them from doing so. However, on January 2, 1942, FDR signed a law that revised the Selective Service Act and formed a military unit based on ethnicity. Because of the large Filipino

¹⁹⁹ Takaki, 382.

²⁰⁰ Interview with the Ikeda family and Craig Rock by Charles Meyers on *Keeping it Fresh*. Aired 2 April 2008 on KCPX, available at <http://kcbx.org/mp3archive/kif080402.mp3> (accessed 4 June 2010).

population located on the Central Coast, on March 4, 1942, the military formed the First Filipino battalion and activated it at Camp San Luis Obispo. Enough Filipino men enlisted in the military that the military organized the Second Filipino Regiment at Camp Cook (now Vandenberg Air Force Base).²⁰¹ These Filipino men trained in the local community and served the nation throughout the Pacific Theater.

Agriculture provides a connection from the past to today in several ways. Yda Addis Storke prophesized in 1891, “At no far distant day this county will assuredly take a high rank as a grape and wine producing section of the State; a large area of the hill land of the county is peculiarly adapted for the grape, favored with soil and climate for every species of this luscious fruit.”²⁰² She was correct, as a century after she published her book in 1891, the county became a major wine-producing region. Grapes have become the highest grossing good of the county’s agricultural products. Agriculture has continued to grow and change despite difficulties and fear of loss. In 2008, the county was one of the top 10 counties in the state for organic farmers, demonstrating how agriculture is flexible and ever changing.²⁰³ There are many in local farming communities that fear the death of county agriculture. Similar farmers previously held fears; they blamed costs and regulations for any downfall in agriculture. Grapes and organic produce demonstrate that there is no downfall in agricultural production, only change and adjustment.

The adversity that agriculture does, in fact face appears to be due to environmental problems. During the Great Depression, massive erosion and declining soil fertility were the issues that farmers dealt with. The federal government stepped in and assigned the Work Progress Administration and Civil Conservation Corps to build erosion control dams and planted

²⁰¹ Lorraine Jacobs Crouchett, *Filipinos in California: From the Days of the Galleons to the Present* (El Cerrito, CA: Downey Place Publishing House Inc., 1982), 49.

²⁰² Storke, 165.

²⁰³ Colin Rigley, “Is Ag Dying: Not really. So why do some people complain it is?” *New Times*, 18 February 2010, 14.

trees and other crops to stabilize land that years of farming destroyed. Farmers still benefit from these introduced soil conservation practices.²⁰⁴ In 2008, a freeze destroyed many crops but sales still surpassed \$547 million that year. Currently, loss of agricultural land is one of the main threats to agricultural production because of pressure from development. However, between 2006 and 2007, San Luis Obispo County ranked 15 out of the 58 counties in California in agricultural production. In the same period, local agricultural output increased by almost \$25 million, increasing total revenue earned to \$654 million in 2007 even with these problems.²⁰⁵ With the problems that farmers face, it seems like the most logical conclusion to draw is that there should be more emphasis on environmentally sustainable practices, rather than immigration reform, which is more commonly discussed. This should include the protection of land that allows for agricultural sector growth, which would directly contribute to the economy and the feeding of America.

Conditions for immigrants have also changed somewhat, but in many ways, is a casualty of agriculture. While a portion of the population still feels affronted by the immigrant population, working conditions have improved under government direction. Migrant farm workers now have access to water, bathrooms, and they receive breaks. Safety precautions are also enforced. California is home to so much agriculture that migrant farm workers are able to become specialists in the types of crops they pick rather than being forced to pick different types of crops to making a living like what was previously the case. This helps with quality control as farm workers are able to determine the best methods for harvesting crops without damaging them.

²⁰⁴ David Sneed, "Soil success in Arroyo Grande 75 years after erosion crisis," *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 10 November 2010, <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2010/11/10/1363365/soil-success-in-arroyo-grande.html>.

²⁰⁵ Rigley, 14.

Anti-immigration legislation continues to grow in popularity, even given the precedent of similar decisions of the past. Laws such as Arizona's recently passed SB1070 will hamper agriculture because of a lack of workers. Some believe this will increase food prices for consumers because of the amount of crop that will spoil if farmers are unable to find enough workers each season. White workers may also demand higher pay to do such labor-intensive work.²⁰⁶ This scenario seems highly probable as history shows that the only time European Americans were willing to pick crops was in the midst of the Great Depression when they were dislocated and desperate.

In many ways, portions of San Luis Obispo County are still struggling to define the area in terms of its past and future. The county is rapidly developing and growth is taking place on land that sometimes-violent struggles took place on. Nipomo is still an unincorporated area that needs to choose between growth and preserving its past and rural character. In many ways, development is easier. Preserving the past for posterity and badly needed tourist dollars requires many members of the old farming families to come to terms with the events that their families and their land took part in and witnessed. To develop the land on which labor camps and strikes took place is to conceal the history that one may be ashamed. In many cases, the denial and attempts to cover up

the past is the attempt to save face for old families or cover up aspects of the past that may lack cohesion

with ones current political beliefs. However, covering up the past only furthers injustice. Local

²⁰⁶Jeremy Thomas, "Portrait of a Picker," *Santa Maria Sun*, 8 July 2010, 10-12.

Figure 10 - The Nipomo Valley Today. The county is currently developing the land where pea fields and strikes once took place into a new road and freeway overpass. Photo by Doug Jenzen.

history contains more than just stories of old farming families; there were groups of people that built our local society and lacked the opportunity to advance in the same ways that many European-Americans immigrants could. These immigrant groups deserve some form of acknowledgement for their contributions to local society.

San Luis Obispo County agriculture has always been an effort of immigrants. All immigrant groups changed agriculture, re-shaped the landscape, and harvested the crops. People came to the area to do backbreaking work with little reward. These laborers of all races built the county into the agricultural powerhouse it is today. Limiting immigration and covering up its history may be detrimental to the industry and the local communities. It is also a lesson in current demographics; the ethnic makeup of the community does not necessarily reflect the demographic makeup of the community in the past.

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