

Money grew on trees - for awhile

By Jerry Bowen

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In 1888, the land around Suisun and Fairfield was occupied predominately by prosperous grain and stock farms and, higher up in the valley, by about 3,000 acres in fruit orchards.

The largest orchard, about 950 acres, belonged to A.T. Hatch. Most of the other orchards were less than 200 acres.

August Timothy Hatch was born in 1837 in Elkhart, Ind., to parents who were early settlers of that state. When he was 6 years old, the family moved to Michigan where they lived until 1848. August, or A.T. as he later became known, returned to Indiana at age 11 to attend school. For the next four years he worked for his board and clothing, and swept the schoolhouse and built fires for his tuition.

After leaving school at age 15, he went to work at a mill and soon was put in charge of its operation. Later, after leaving the mill, he moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, and was employed in a hardware store, and then in a dry-goods store.

Tiring of just working for someone else, in 1857 A.T. traveled to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where he made arrangements to travel with a man who was herding a flock of sheep to California. He drove sheep during the day, cooked for the crew and stood guard every third night to earn his way.

In 1858 he worked for a miner on the Feather River, and bought an interest in the mine on the "Pay-as-you-make-it" plan. He made enough to pay off his debt and buy a second interest in the same mine and worked there for two seasons.

In the fall of 1860 he sold out his interests and returned east. He married in the spring of 1861 and along with his bride, Mary, he returned to California and found work on a ranch in Colusa County chopping cordwood. He soon arranged to buy the ranch on credit, paying for it from the crops he grew.

Unfortunately, the seller was a squatter on "Grant land" and another party held the actual title. Accepting the inevitable, in 1863 he struck out for the Reese River mines in Nevada. He successfully prospected, and developed several silver mines. By 1871 he had accumulated \$11,000 and returned to California where he bought land in Suisun Valley with the intention of raising grain. At the end of the year he was once again

broke but he noticed that the crop from a few pear trees that were on the land when he bought it paid a better price per acre than the grain crops.

Going against the advice of neighbors, he planted 120 acres in fruit trees. The fruit produced good profits and by 1882, A.T. began acquiring many of the surrounding ranches on credit until he had more than 900 acres. Gross receipts from his orchards eventually reached \$100,000, producing a profit of \$80,000.

He also developed several improved strains of almonds that became known worldwide for their excellent taste and easy hulling.

As a result of his success with his Suisun endeavors, he began to acquire more land until he owned properties in 20 counties in northern and central California. But they were barren land and to make them pay required the planting of orchards and installing associated improvements. All this was done under agreements that he would improve the properties and pay interest only until the orchards began producing. Then he would pay off the debt within a certain time from the profits. If he was unable to pay off the debt when it was due, he was to forfeit the property and all the improvements.

The beginning of the end occurred when he bought property in the Hayward area and evidently failed to read the agreement. When he failed to pay the debt when it was due, the owners filed suit and obtained a judgment of \$50,000 against Hatch. He also lost the property and improvements under the terms of the contract he signed.

Fruit prices began to decline, and the country was falling into hard times in the early 1890s. Clues to financial problems began to arise when A.T.'s employees weren't being paid their wages and vendors' bills went unpaid.

Finally, Suisun banker, R.D. Robbins filed and won a suit against Hatch for approximately \$200,000. He couldn't pay the judgment because he was so overextended and deeply in debt. So Robbins filed to attach his Suisun property and the Hatch Ranch was sold in November 1897.

Without his main source of income, he lost all the rest of his holdings as well.

Hatch knew what the inevitable legal outcome would be and abandoned his property at the beginning of 1897. He had been successful in mining before, so he decided to try to recoup his fortune by joining the latest mining excitement in Randsburg near Mojave, in February 1897. Newspaper accounts reported, "A.T. Hatch is at the head of a mining syndicate, and he too is prospecting with good results. The well-known fruit grower thinks he has glowing prospects of recovering his fortune he lost in the fruit business."

Then, in July 1897, news that gold had been discovered in Alaska hit the streets and the Klondike gold rush began. Evidently Hatch's prospects in Randsburg turned out to be less than glowing and so at the age of 60, he joined the throngs heading for the cold and dangerous wilderness in the Klondike.

A San Francisco friend received a letter from Hatch in November 1897. He wrote, "I intend to prospect this fall on the Porcupine River, which empties into the Yukon (near the Arctic Circle). I am in first-class health, and tip the beam at 192 pounds. I am greatly encouraged over present prospects and am hopeful of retrieving my past financial standing."

But it was not to be. Little more is known about A.T. Hatch's adventures in the Klondike but it is evident that he never was able to rekindle his dream. He lived to the age of 73 and was found dead somewhere near the village of Decoto in Alameda County on June 19, 1910. The obituary noted that he "was once the wealthiest fruit grower in Suisun Valley, now poor."

Whatever may be said about A.T. Hatch's financial dealings, he can never be faulted for at least trying and having a strong work ethic.

His wife Mary died in 1915 at age 76. Both were returned to their family plot at Rockville Cemetery where they rest with many other notable Solano County citizens from our historic past.

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