

Cherries played vital role in orchards

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Cherries once were one of the important crops in the Vacaville and Suisun area. While apricots, peaches and pears were secure crops that could be dried and stored, cherries were - and still are - a highly speculative crop, as late spring rains easily can ruin a whole harvest.

Of the major fruit crops grown in the area, cherries were the most particular ones as to their environment. To prosper, they needed deep, loamy soil, preferably near a stream of running water. The alluvial floors of the lower Vaca Valley, Laguna Valley and Suisun and Green valleys proved ideal and became centers of cherry cultivation. In particularly favored hill areas, such as the entrance to Bassford Canyon and in Green Valley, the fruit ripened earlier than anywhere else in the country.

In Green Valley, it was vintner Fred Sidney Jones who saw the possibilities in the fruit. A business partner in San Francisco owed him money, but was unable to pay. The partner also owned a trunkful of rooted cherry trees which he had imported from Germany. Instead of the money, Jones accepted the cherry saplings, each one no bigger than his finger.

He planted 83 trees along both sides of his driveway, mostly for ornamental reasons. By the 1890s, after phylloxera had destroyed the Joneses' vineyards, the prospering cherry trees provided their first crop.

Jones sold the fruit in San Francisco and got so much money for it that he decided to reconsider his orchard plantings. He ripped up all his orchards and replanted them with cherries. Eventually, he owned the world's largest cherry orchard, more than 125 acres in all.

Each year, the first shipment of cherries was eagerly awaited and reported. Being the first in California to ship cherries to the East Coast was a matter of fierce pride to the growers of this region. While cherries normally were ready for shipment in late April or in May, the occasional early date occurred. One of the earliest seasons took place in 1895, and The Reporter wrote on March 9: "That the coming season will be an early one is demonstrated by the fact that already ripe cherries are to be found in some localities in the valley. Last week one ripe cherry was found on one of J.M. Bassford's trees; and unfortunately, and much to the disgust of the foreman, it was plucked and eaten by one of the workmen. Since that, however, several others have ripened and

now we can boast of having ripe fruit ready for the market although the amount is small. On Monday a box was sent to Assemblyman Bassford in Sacramento, where they will tempt the lawmakers. ...

“Ripe deciduous fruit on the first of March has once again demonstrated the earliness of fruit in this section. But notwithstanding that thesis facts are patent and can be proved to the satisfaction of any man, you will read next August or September about some place in Riverside, Yuma or half a dozen other places in California that they have the earliest fruit section in the state.

“Now is a good time to prove up or shut up.”

Five years earlier, the season did not truly start until late April, and it was not until the first week of May that enough cherries were harvested to fill the large number of 10-pound boxes needed for shipments. “Monday afternoon there rolled out from the Vacaville depot the first carload of cherries shipped from California for the season of 1890.

“The California Fruit Association has the honor of this stroke of enterprise. The car was loaded from the orchards of Robinson Bros., O. Garlichs, H.A. Bassford, Mrs. E.P. Buckingham and J.A. Webster. The car was consigned to Barnett Bros., Chicago.

“There is no doubt but what this car, as it rolls to the East, will attract a great deal of attention, as it bears upon its sides huge banners telling them from whence it hails and its destination.”

Once the cherries had arrived at their destination, prices were eagerly watched. On May 26, The Reporter posted some of the results: “Chicago, May 13 - The Earl Fruit Company sold to-day White Cherries, mostly bird-pecked or rain-cracked at \$2; Tartarian Cherries \$3.50 to \$ 3.75.

“Minneapolis, May 13 - The Earl Fruit Company sold to-day White Cherries at \$1.25 to \$1.75; Tartarians \$3 to \$4. No demand in the market for White Cherries, Black preferred.”

It is difficult to imagine nowadays how eagerly people awaited the first fresh fruit of each season. Vacaville’s JUDICION printed this amusing fan letter on June 5, 1886: “Philadelphia, Pa., May 26, 1886. Dear JUDICION: - We have just opened a box of your cherries and I have sold three pounds to one party for seventy-five cents a pound. They were in very fair order, and are perfectly delicious. I eat up all the profit in them, however. I have read the JUDICION circular through, and I wish I could visit California. From a Young Lady With Thos. Holt & Son.”

While the first 10-pound boxes sometimes sold for as much as \$100 each on the East Coast, the highest price ever paid for one cherry occurred in 1906. J.M. Bassford donated one box of cherries to be auctioned off for the relief of the San Francisco earthquake. The first cherry brought a price of \$105, while the total for the box came to \$2,452 for the Aid Relief Fund.

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