

By 1880s, Solano crops went against the grain

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Certain periods in the history of Solano County have been harbingers of great change, offering residents the opportunity to take new directions. In our time, growth pressures bring challenges, including how we will protect and promote Solano County's rich agriculture.

Promoting agriculture occupied earlier generations. By the 1880s, the county actively sought new residents to settle here and farm the rich soils. Until then, the main agricultural focus had been cattle ranching, especially on the large tracts of the original land grants. Hay and wheat, as well as small pockets of vineyards, were also major parts of agriculture.

The collapse of the wheat markets forced farmers into new crops, eventually creating "One Of The Finest Fruit-Raising Regions in the State."

Thus ran the headline given by the Solano Republican on April 29, 1887, to an article attributed to the San Francisco Examiner. This type of article was then popular with the hope that it would reach East Coast readers and entice them to California.

Interestingly, the article did not mention the publication of William Nutting's California Illustrated No. 1, an elaborate chronicle of the Vacaville Fruit District, published the previous year.

"It is often said that the residents of Solano county are entirely too backward, as compared with other sections of California, in informing Eastern visitors who are seeking business locations and homes in our State of the many advantages our county holds forth in its prolific and valuable lands, its even and healthful - and it might truthfully be added - incomparable climate, and its early and valuable products. No extended effort has ever been made to advertise the resources of the beautiful valley of Suisun. Newcomers have never been told of the fertility of the soil, the quantity and quality of the long list of superior products which this section annually throws into the market. And this is the more singular when the fact is considered that the principal town is situated on the great overland highway, midway between Sacramento and San Francisco."

The leading regional center was Suisun City with access to the water and the adjacent railroad. Examiner's correspondent extolled the healthy climate, an important sales

pitch at the time. Many settlers during these years relocated to California based on the perception of a healthy climate.

“The town of Suisun stands upon an island, so to speak, in the tules. The tidewater from Suisun bay surrounds it daily, and to this fact is attributable the unfavorable impression formed from its location by strangers passing by on the (rail) cars, but while the site is unfavorable to the eye, and creates an almost ineradicable repugnance to the town in the mind of the beholder, yet the very circumstances of tidewater surroundings is one of the chief points of the remarkable healthfulness of the place, and to this may be added another agent which cuts no mean figure in aiding in the same result, and that is that the town stands directly in the track of the inland trade winds, which, for nearly nine months of the year, blow gently inland and northward, supplying the vacuum created by the uprising of the heated air of the great Sacramento plains.

“At this distance from the sea these winds are strong enough to beat back the hot breezes of the Sacramento valley, and the result is that the climate is one of great evenness, with no extremes of severe cold or enervating heat. Such a climatic condition is a sure harbinger of health, and it may be safely asserted that Suisun and its surrounding valleys are reckoned in the front rank of the healthy localities of the State, and the assertion is borne out by the records of the State Board of Health. These records show that Solano county is one of the healthiest counties, and Suisun and its environs stand at the head of the health list of the county.”

The article continues with a description of the surrounding landscape, focusing on the burgeoning wine industry. The Suscol Rancho, commonly called the “Suscol Hills,” included the townships of Benicia and Vallejo, as well as Green Valley. Its “fine, alluvial, productive soil ... is largely set to grapes, embracing almost every known variety. Here the vine flourishes in luxuriance, producing in abundance and excellence the very best of both table and wine grapes, and it is only fair to say that this tributary valley takes the lead of the wine-producing sections of the county.

Here can be seen the splendid bearing vineyards of S. F. Jones, A. I. Sweetzer, T. J. Durbin, John Votypka, Meister, Brown, Schultz and many others. Almost all of these vineyards have large wine cellars attached, and at Cordelia, the port town of the valley, is located the winery of Shillaber & Co., which is doing a large and growing business in the home market and abroad.”

Next the article describes the Suisun Rancho, which includes Suisun Valley, and the towns of Suisun and Fairfield. “This tract is one of the finest bodies of choice agricultural and fruit lands to be found within the borders of the State, and for years past so satisfied and contented have its owners been with it, that but little of it has been publicly offered for sale. A very large percentage of the choice fruits and produce of the

earth can be grown here in the greatest perfection.”

To those East Coast residents dreaming of settling in California in 1887, the landscape must have sounded like paradise.

“... To give a reliable example of the great adaptability of the soil of the valley, and its necessary adjunct - the climate, it can be demonstrated truthfully that a visitor can be shown, upon an area of say 1,500 acres, in the heart of the valley, on and adjacent to the Hatch fruit orchard, at the proper seasons, oranges, lemons, apples, pears, plums, figs, olives, cherries, apricots, nectarines, peaches, persimmons, walnuts, almonds, grapes, currants, blackberries, raspberries, gooseberries, to say nothing of almost every variety of grain and the usual garden vegetables, growing, as it were, side by side in astonishing thriftiness and profusion.

“The pears, peaches and apricots grown in this region stand at the head of California fruits in the Chicago and New York markets by reason of their solidity, sweetness and endurance of long freighting, which is probably owing to the fact that they are raised wholly without irrigation.”

Articles like these, as well as a number of promotional brochures and elaborate publications like Nutting’s California Illustrated No. 1, drew people interested in purchasing land.

It was estimated that a farmer could make an excellent living with as little as 30 acres of producing orchards.

For many, the shift from grain farming to orchards did not come easy. Some farmers may not have had the financial resources to switch to orchards, or lacked the knowledge.

“At the present writing it is said there are now about five thousand acres of land for sale in the valley, and this is accounted for by the transition state we are in from a cereal to a fruit-raising community. The old time farmers find it hard to abandon the ways of the past generation and enter cheerfully upon the requirements of the new, so they are offering their lands for sale rather than enter the race again handicapped by unacquired experience. The prices asked are from \$50 to \$300 per acre, and in some rare cases, where stocked with a fine variety of bearing fruit trees, as high as \$1,000 per acre will be demanded.”

Land sales most often occurred directly from owner to new owner. “In concluding this article it is but proper to say that scarcely any of these lands are in the hands of real estate brokers to sell, but they can be purchased generally in tracts to suit by personal

application to the owners upon the premises. And it will repay any one seeking a location and a home to visit this section and judge for himself.”

Beginning with the 1880s until well into the 1930s, Solano was recognized as one of the premier orchard growing areas in California.

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