

## **Solano agriculture was fruitful in early 1900s**

**By Sabine Goerke-Shrode**

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Solano County has undergone vast changes over the last 100 years. At the turn of the 20th century, its economy centered on agriculture, with a focus on fresh fruit in the valleys around Vacaville and Suisun.

Residents took pride in the county's role as one of the premier agricultural centers of California. Local newspapers continued to publish long articles describing the various areas and their attractions.

On July 12, 1902, The Reporter included a lengthy article, titled "The Banner County, ... A Representative County of California From Whose Soil Can Be Drawn Every Product That Has Made the State Famous. Fruit, Grain and Vegetables Alike Flourish."

It introduced readers to Solano as being situated "between San Francisco and Sacramento, on the line of the Southern Pacific." During these last decades of horse-drawn wagons, the railroad still was the main long-distance transportation method.

"To the traveler it [Solano County] is best known by its miles of green tule land, spotted by herds of cattle, if it be spring, and the home of seemingly countless thousands of ducks and geese if it be late Fall or Winter, ..." The Reporter continued.

"The tule land itself is but the richest soil in the process of slow formation, and throughout its broad area, particularly along its borders, may be found some of the best dairying sections of the state."

From the marsh, the narrative moves to the drier upland area, then as now used to grow wheat and run cattle.

"But in the wheat ranches of the Montezuma Hills may be found a part of the 45,000 acres which go to make up Eastern Solano, and which are evenly divided into lowland and upland. Here the yield is large and the production certain. Land is low in price, compared with its productive capacity, and offers the certainty of an annual production of fifty-six bushels of wheat to the acre, seventy-six bushels of beans, and potatoes running from seventy-five sacks to 200."

And, location, location: "All of this section, adjacent to the river, has a freight rate of 70

cents ton.”

From there, the narrative moves to the Carquinez Strait, where “the voyager will see evidence of the fisheries which add to the wealth of the county. As the train leaves the straits by Army Points, back of which is situated the Benicia United States Arsenal and a four-company post, the triangle sails of the fishing fleet may be observed and their course followed until the county boundary is traversed. Salmon canneries dot the bay and swell the wealth drawn from the soil.”

Benicia and Rio Vista both were known for their fishing fleets and canneries where the fresh catch was preserved. Salmon still ran plenty, providing a valuable source of income for many residents.

The area surrounding Benicia also proved fertile for various grain products.

“The growing of grain is supplemented by the successful cultivation of hemp and flax, while fruits, particularly grapes, do well. The soil is rich and practically inexhaustible. A good deal of it is ‘doby,’ which can be cropped with no apparent lessening of fertility.”

This is the first time that I have seen lax and hemp mentioned as crops grown in Solano County. Both are extremely versatile plants with a long history. Their highly nutritious seeds can be processed into a variety of foods, while the fibers (think linen) are used to create textiles and for other industrial uses. Interestingly, both plants are making a comeback. While hemp is grown throughout Europe and in Canada, it is still outlawed in the United States. An Assembly bill is currently on debate that would once again allow California farmers the right to grow industrial hemp.

Around 1900, “the center of this region of fertility is Rio Vista, an enterprising town of almost 1,000 inhabitants. It has a large trade with the adjacent islands, and is backed by a rich area of profitable land.”

The town was also known for its excellent education system, which included St. Gertrude’s Academy, “where the young of both sexes secure a thorough and beneficial training.”

From Rio Vista, the focus of the article turned to “Green Valley and the portion of Suisun Township devoted to fruit.”

Green Valley was planted in vineyards by early settlers. By 1900, grapes still dominated, although row crops, such as new and successful plantings of sugar beets, began to show up. “It has several wineries and enjoys an excellent reputation for their products. It has a large acreage in fruit, though usually not of the early varieties.”

The area had one other commodity that made it famous. "Cordelia is the metropolis of Green Valley Township," continued The Reporter, "and is supported by extensive quarries, where the basalt blocks for neighboring cities are fashioned."

The intent of this article, namely to inform readers unfamiliar with the county of its visual and economical merits, is once again stressed when The Reporter laments that "Solano is unfortunate in that like the Union Pacific, its railroad lines traverse in great part the most uninviting portion of its territory. Looking towards the hills which divide Suisun Township from Napa County, there is hardly a suggestion of the area devoted to fruit or the matchless character of its orchards. Large fruit houses are seen, however, which are engaged in the shipment of green fruits, and the handling of the dried products of the ranch by the hundreds of tons. Necessarily all of these great packing and exporting houses employ a large number of men and women to handle the fruit in the various stages of its preparation for the East or for Europe, where a large part of it is shipped."

All the major packing houses and canneries were located along the railroad tracks, allowing orchardists to have their produce packed and shipped as fast as possible.

Suisun Valley was one of the major fruit producing areas in the county. "It does not boast of its early fruits," said The Reporter, comparing it with Vacaville's famous Early Fruit District, "but it has one of the largest orchards in California, and through every acre of its orchards it gives evidence of the careful character of husbandry practiced in the locality in the trimness of its orchards, and its generally attractive appearance.

"From this portion of the county there are shipped nearly 500 carloads of fruit, comprising cherries and other varieties, but composed in the largest degree of pears; for which the valley is particularly known."

Such fertile soil always has its price. "Land in Suisun Valley is high when purchasable but it is low in proportion to income returned and will pay dividends on any price which it has ever yet been quoted."

From here, The Reporter moved on to the Denverton area, where wheat, cattle and especially sheep pasture formed the main agricultural operations, much as they do today. Sheep pastures "have been profitable and have been the means of building up several large fortunes for those engaged in it."

Part of that is attributed to the location along Suisun Slough, which allowed farmers to ship straight to San Francisco, cutting out more expensive railway cost.

Suisun was still the center for distributing much of the commerce, be it by railway or by

ship. "Suisun is the point from which freight is scattered throughout the entire northern portion of Solano County, and does a business vastly disproportionate to its size."

My next column will move on to Vacaville and its famous orchards.

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