

## Choice of good land bears fruit

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, April 01, 2007

In March of 1885, the Vacaville newspaper California Judicion investigated the reason for rising land values in the Vacaville area. A reporter set out to interview several prominent local orchardists.

In those days, the Vacaville fruit district was becoming known nationwide for bringing the earliest fruit to market every year as well as harvesting fruit of consistently high quality.

Attracted by a variety of marketing tools, farmers and investors from across the nation arrived in Northern California intent on purchasing land to make their fortune in the orchard industry. The demand for high-quality orchard land began to drive land prices up quickly.

The first orchardist interviewed by The Judicion on the value of orchard land was A. T. Hatch, who owned large tracts of land in Suisun Valley and who was the president of the State Horticultural Society.

Asked what he thought of local prices for fruit land, especially in the Vacaville area, he responded:

"I do not recognize any lands as fruit lands except those few favored spots where all the advantages of soil, climate and market facilities are combined. There is no great extent of country at Vacaville, or elsewhere in California, that I should regard as suitable for fruit growing. Thousands of acres of land are now being planted in trees and vines that I do not believe will ever pay expenses."

Although our local area has prime soils in abundance, less fertile soils can run through or be adjacent to productive fields. It took experience to determine what to grow successfully on each parcel.

The increased demand for orchard land, coupled with new, inexperienced farmers had many miscalculate the potential of the acreage they had purchased.

Hatch continued: "I have grown fruit on second rate soil in a first class location and I know the impossibility of an orchardist on such land competing with those having a No. 1 article of land in the proper location for winds, frost, moisture and market facilities. Of

course, at Vacaville you have great advantage in price on account of early ripening. I think the present prices of first class lands in first class locations are low in comparison with prices destined to rule in two or three years. Second rate land and inferior location will in a short time have no value at all for fruit purposes."

Hatch expected land values to increase two or three times their current value, quoting \$300 per acre for prime orchard land in Suisun Valley as the current price.

"Even then it would be better for a poor man for orchard purposes to try a portion of these favored spots on a credit than to accept second-rate land, or choice land in a second rate location as a present. It is poor crops and poor prices more than interest that prevents success. Northern California is several years behind Southern California in the price of land."

The reporter next visited the "palatial residence" of W. W. Smith near Vacaville.

"Mr. Smith is well known throughout California for his able articles upon the details of fruit culture read before the Horticultural Society, and better known in Solano County as the owner of a mammoth orchard, from which he has realized a handsome fortune," the Judicion explained.

Like Hatch, Smith mentioned three major components of a successful orchard business: "To grow fruit profitably you must have choice land, in a first class location and be close to market. When these conditions are all fulfilled no reasonable price for land is too high. If they are not all present the man who plants an orchard will regret it no matter how small his first outlay for land may be. There are great differences in lands immediately adjoining that none but orchardists who are experienced in that particular locality can detect. There are differences in climate at short distances vital to the growth and bearing qualities of orchards of which only local experience can know."

He, too, quoted \$300 as the current price for an acre of land.

"But I should consider that the quality of land, location, nearness to market etc., would make it the cheapest land I could find in the State for the purpose. I have had experience in fruit growing in other parts of the State, particularly in Napa County. I consider Vacaville a long way ahead of my other place for profitable fruit growing. There are many people in California planting vines and trees in locations and upon soil where they will never realize any return; and where four or five years time besides labor and money will be expended before they find out that a profitable crop of fruit does not necessarily follow even when you succeed in growing the trees."

The reporter then moved on to interview one of Vacaville's most prominent orchardists.

“Senator Buck, well known in political circles and still better known for his brilliant success as an orchardist, was found at the depot en route to Washington to assist at the inauguration of President Cleveland. He said: ‘I have no time to go into details in regard to fruit lands. Good locations are high but will, I have no doubt, be a great deal higher. I have recently given expression to my views of the price of fruit lands at Vacaville by purchasing some land. Relatives of mine also recently purchased lands with my advice. We paid from \$400 to \$500 per acre. I think they were the cheapest lands all things considered that I could find. I want no fruit land except that at Vacaville.’ ”

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