

Area turned to eucalyptus tree

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My last two columns explored how eucalyptus came to California around 1853, with Fairfield founder Captain Robert Waterman seemingly among the first pioneers to import seeds.

The need for a steady supply of firewood and the scarcity of large forests in the coastal areas and inland valleys had many early settlers try their hand in growing eucalyptus as a crop.

With the prediction that oaks and other hardwoods would vanish by 1910, a veritable boom in eucalyptus began around 1905.

Locally, Vacaville grower Luther Harbison experimented with eucalyptus plantings on a large scale, trying to establish which trees were suited best for a specific use.

Eucalyptus trees prefer deep, loamy soils. They absorb large amounts of groundwater, which made them suitable for planting in swampy areas. That much water also spurred rapid growth, resulting in trees with a dense wood texture and few wood grains.

Once cut, the high water content of the trunks results in shrinkage from 13 percent up to 35 percent, based on the species. As growers found out, the wood warped and cracked easily, unless treated just right.

That meant splitting eucalyptus trees soon after cutting. The longer one waits with that, the tougher the wood gets.

Some varieties will also rot if left lying on the ground.

On the other hand, treated right, eucalyptus wood is a hardwood and can be used similarly to hickory, oak and ash woods.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a cutting industry developed in California. Groups of cutters traveled from plantation to plantation to split wood. During the eucalyptus boom years, the cords sold to household for prices ranging from \$3 to \$8.

In 1908, one source claimed "The returns of investments in Eucalyptus plantations have been generous, in many cases exceeding those received from equal areas under

cultivation in orchards or agricultural crops. Groves set out in fertile Los Angeles Valley have yielded from 50 to 80 cords per acre at every cutting. Yields of 75 cords per acre every seven or eight years have been frequent."

While eucalyptus became a valuable crop for use as firewood, its use as timber proved more difficult. The exultant reports on its qualities as a hardwood were indeed correct, but they were based on Australian uses.

There, virgin eucalyptus groves were hundreds of years old, whereas the California industry expected similar results from young trees often less than 25 years old.

Besides the importance of the age of the trees, the secret lay in the fact that eucalyptus wood needed to be seasoned to avoid the cracking and warping that occurred otherwise. The trees had to be cut during the winter months, followed by splitting the wood at the mill into large planks. The planks were stacked high so that their own weight pressed the stack down to avoid splitting. The stacks needed to dry in the air for one, or better, two years.

This process was costly and took time, but produced a hard wood with a fine grain structure.

Surprisingly, many growers at the time disregarded that knowledge, trying to use the wood of young trees unseasoned. The results were dismal.

The most famous attempt at the beginning of the 20th century was that of the Santa Fe Railroad. The company needed three million ties per year on average and decided to plant 10,000 acres in rapid-growing eucalyptus. Like other companies before them, they quickly discovered that without proper seasoning, the wood couldn't hold spikes, split and warped.

On the other hand, mills and woodshops that used well-seasoned wood were more successful.

Hughes Manufacturing & Lumber Company of Los Angeles commented on its seasoning methods in a letter on April 26, 1910, saying: "We have used this wood for the manufacture of bank and office fixtures, furniture, interior home finishing, decoration work, flooring, and for various other uses where a high polish is needed . . . The wood is fully as strong as oak or hickory. When properly cured, it is as free from warping or checking as any hardwood we have. In fact, in view of the scarcity of oak, the many uses to which eucalyptus is adaptable, it will doubtless become the hardwood of the future."

The John Breuner Furniture Company of Sacramento and San Francisco also used eucalyptus to manufacture their furniture: "It works up very nicely, does not check, is very close-grain and takes a very beautiful finish, dainty, rich and attractive, equal to natural finished mahogany."

Most growers, though, were looking for a quick solution. Locally, one such attempt occurred in 1913. A new, planned city of 75,000 residents, to be named Solano City, was to be built in area occupied today by Jepson Prairie.

Every residential street would be watered down in the middle and would be lined with shade trees. "For this purpose 1,000,000 seedlings are to be set out at once in the company's nursery."

The grand scheme failed, but to this day, Jepson Prairie management is struggling to eradicate the many eucalyptus trees on the property.

Ultimately, the eucalyptus boom that began in 1905 lasted only until 1912. By then, homes used coal and oil instead of firewood, wooden carriages made way to automobiles, and modern buildings used concrete and steel instead of timber.

Many of the eucalyptus trees seen in our landscape today go back to those boom days. Notably the trees around the Nut Tree Airport are a reminder of Luther Harbison's experimental plantings to see whether eucalyptus would be the wood of the future.

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