

New avenues aiding women in fruit picking

By Kristin Delaplane

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The genuine lover of the human family rejoices greatly when a new avenue is opened for the cultivation of the best ambitions of women.

Chief among the many advantages resulting from the discovery of gold in California is that cosmopolitan principle in society which has tended to develop in women, as well as men, the power to lead and direct others in almost all industrial enterprises; especially in the important line of fruit production. In that, women have shown their fitness to a remarkable degree.

In every detail - from preparing the ground, selecting the trees and vines, pruning, cultivating, and superintending the picking, packing, shipping and marketing of the product - they have been granted no advantage over their brothers, and yet they have proved that it was exactly the calling suited to the peculiarities of their genius.

The experience of three female fruit growers will sufficiently emphasize the truth of this position, and we hope may incite others to attempt what has been generally deemed a line of labor for which man alone was adapted.

Nine years ago (1883) Mrs. Elise P. Buckingham found herself a resident of the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. (By now she was widowed.) She had plenty of money to meet reasonable wants, and scarcely any time that was not required for the round of social duties exacted of a cultured, refined and fashionable woman. Her large number of intimate friends were from the highest classes of social circles stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans.

Mrs. Buckingham was of Scotch origin and a member of one of the most noted families in the East. Her grandmother, Martha Hamilton, was a descendant of the Duke of Hamilton and she married an officer in the Revolutionary War.

Mrs. Buckingham received a thorough education at the Ingham Institute in Le Roy, N.Y. While still in her teens, she married and moved to Janesville, Wis. A short time later she moved California.

Cultured and possessing those nice charming qualities that mark a refined lady - beauty of form and face - she was sought after by the discerning. Mrs. Buckingham was a success in the favored position she occupied. From random writings, both in this country and Europe, it is obvious she would have been an equal success had she

selected a literary career or any other profession.

In looking around for an investment for her money, Mrs. Buckingham heard of a ranch near Vacaville, which might return a fair profit if divided and resold as smaller plots of land. Vacaville and all of Solano County then gave promise of being specially adapted to the profitable growth of fruit. In fact, it had become known throughout the East for sending the most luscious fruit to market earlier than any other locality in California.

Demetrio Pena sold his Lagoon Valley ranch, 200 acres principally in grain land, to Mrs. Buckingham for \$22,500. Before making the purchase, Mrs. Buckingham visited those owning adjoining lands and bargained with the ranchers to take a portion of the purchase off her hands at prices that would give her a nice profit.

The ranch was then a stubble field, a good crop of grain having just been harvested. The house on the property had been constructed in 1850 in Kennebec, Maine, and shipped around Cape Horn to Benicia. It had been constructed as four residences; one a story and a half high and the other two as one story homes.

Pena purchased all four houses, hauled them to Lagoon Valley where he made them one residence by placing them end to end, making a building 125 feet long and 18 feet wide in the widest part. A porch extended the entire length. There were no connecting doors between rooms or inside hallway. According to the prevailing fashion, the only way of going from one room to another was by passing out to the porch. Every room opened on the porch.

Pena had engaged in cattle raising and later planted his ranch to grain. He also planted a few grapevines of the old Mission variety, a few peach trees, 10 or 12 pear trees, and half a dozen fig trees.

Seeing the fruit in season, that it showed such wonderful growth and perfect health, being now 30 years old, all of Mrs. Buckingham's intentions, in regard to the disposition of the land purchase were changed. She believed they could make a greater profit with the fruit than could be obtained by selling the land. A month or so after she purchased the property, she granted H. A. Bassford the contract to set out 60 acres in fruit trees and 40 acres in grapevines.

Her son, T. Hugh Buckingham, was about ready to graduate from his scholastic studies, and Mrs. Buckingham had a business conference with her son. Though he was wholly inexperienced in farm or ranch work, he was rich in courage and hope and insisted that he and his classmate, Hamilton Boyce, could cultivate the ranch in fruit. Ranching gave Hugh congenial and much desired employment.

So that was the course determined upon, though practical people gave an outside limit of five years in which Mrs. Buckingham and her assistants would fail utterly, and, as the more brutal put it, "find a home in the poorhouse." But there was never an interval when improvements were not in progress and prosperity at high tide.

The house was remodeled for comfort and convenience. Most of the Lagunita Rancho was by then in fruit. The wheat fields were plowed so deeply they were practically subsoiled and as many acres as possible, year by year, were planted in pears, prunes, apricots, nectarines, peaches and cherries. By 1893, 20 acres were in prunes, and more were to be planted. Twenty acres were in cherries, and about the same amount in pears. There were 70 acres of choice varieties of table grapes, and in seasons of average moisture these may be picked over three times, being, really three crops. The crop of pears for that year netted clear of every expense, \$196 per acre.

Mrs. Buckingham sold 8-pound boxes of cherries in the Chicago market at a price that netted her \$6 per box. This was because they were intelligently graded, artistically packed, and reached the market ahead of any others. The pear venture was so satisfactory that an additional 45 acres were planted that last fall.

In 1890, Mrs. Buckingham was offered 930 acres of partially improved land a little over a mile from her home, and separated from the Lagoon Valley by a hill of moderate size. She could buy it on time by mortgaging her own home to secure the payment of \$100,000. Having never owed a dollar in her life, the consideration of the proposition was approached with fear.

Finally, however, the bargain was agreed to. Then county surveyor cut the acreage up into lots with wide avenues between each.

In six months, purchasers had been found to the extent of \$8,000 to \$10,000. By 1893, enough purchasers have been found to pay off her indebtedness of \$100,000, leave her \$25,000 profit and 400 acres.

There can be no question of T. Hugh Buckingham's ability. Nearly all his experience in fruit culture has been under the instruction and supervision of his gifted and energetic mother.

He was selected by the Fruit Growers Union to spend a season in the Chicago market, superintending and directing the great interests of the Union and gathering data for the Union's use.

Miss Sarah A. Bates was another woman who was invested in fruit ranching. She owned 42 acres, the most intelligently cultivated orchard and vineyard in Vaca Valley.

Miss Bates, thoroughly cultured and refined, was born and educated in New York City. After spending several years in Chicago acquiring proficiency in etching and other art matters, she migrated to California and bought 120 acres from Mrs. Buckingham. An adjoining 80 acres belonged to a relative of Miss Bates.

While the trees and vines on her own purchase were growing and required only a part of her attention, she found employment with her artwork in San Francisco. She earned enough to pay for a stylish span of horses and carriage. She later directed all the work on the ranch. She was not far past 20 years of age, but the cultivation of the fields under her control was as superior to some owned and managed by many men in the same neighborhood.

Mrs. Harriet Barrows, another fruit rancher, purchased 20 acres of land from Mrs. Buckingham. This left her no money for trees or for the tools necessary for cultivating an orchard. Being a competent housekeeper and a superior cook, she hired out her services at \$30 a month. Then, she mortgaged her land and bought the necessary trees. She was sadly disappointed to find 9/10ths of the trees she purchased were worthless. That meant a season more of servitude at the kitchen range. It was to be two more years before she could pronounce herself independent. She had a highly improved home and her orchard and vines were in bearing and her income in 1892 amounted to nearly \$3,000.

But not all females did as well as these ladies have done. Miss Bates and Mrs. Barrows had the wise advice and encouragement of Mrs. Buckingham and they bought their land from her and on her advice. She silently guaranteed to herself, saying nothing to them, that they should succeed. Failure of any of those who purchased land from her would have distressed her as profoundly.

It was a matter of principle and pride with Mrs. Buckingham that the boundaries of land she sold could be cultivated with utmost certainty. There were other well kept orchards and vineyards in Vaca and Laguna valleys, but there were none that will compare with those superintended by those three ladies. In looks and bearing, Mrs. Buckingham was still young. She was wonderfully capable of putting her experience in such form as will render it of use to members of her own sex. As the fruit interest enlarged and all the millions of people in America had had a chance to sample the glorious fruit products of California, such a work from the pen of Mrs. Buckingham would have been extremely valuable.

While work in the gold mines proved too arduous for women, the development of the finer artistic pursuits, resulting from the discovery of precious metals, had shown women to be equal, if not superior, in all the avenues for the development of the vast resources of this wonderful country.

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Suggestions and local historical information for this column are welcome. Write biographer-historian Kristin Delaplane in care of The Reporter, 916 Cotting Lane, Vacaville 95688, or e-mail her at www.ohistory@masterpiecememoirs.com.

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