A NORTH VALLEY THRIVE HISTORY PROJECT

A Landscape of Diaspora

A Historical Overview of the Economy, Culture, and Peoples of the North San Joaquin Valley

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PROLOGUE

Thesis & Introduction

Thesis & Introduction

The economic and cultural landscape of the North San Joaquin Valley—comprising San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties—has been shaped by its role as a hub for diaspora and immigration. The success of industrial agricultural capitalism in the region has largely depended on the labor and contributions of migrant communities. Specifically, diasporic labor built the foundations of the North Central Valley's water and transportation infrastructure and is the primary engine of regional agricultural and logistics industries. Despite their crucial role, migrant communities have traditionally faced significant challenges in accessing and building wealth due to systemic racial segregation and violence. From the 1860s through the 2000s, wave upon wave of migrants and refugees from across the world settled in the North San Joaquin Valley. New communities looked to pursue economic opportunities, only to confront a deeply unequal and challenging landscape. Despite those challenges, migrants and their descendants have built thriving societies here and continue to do so. Today, the North San Joaquin Valley stands at a crossroads. Over the past thirty years the expansion of the Bay Area's housing market into the region and rapidly growing demand for warehousing in the region have reshaped local economic architecture. Furthermore, price fluctuations, trade conflict, rising labor costs, and environmental concerns over dwindling water supplies have greatly influenced the viability of industrial agriculture. These developments are happening in real time. As the region changes, the political, economic, cultural, and civil society leadership of the three counties will need to collaborate in unison to achieve best-case outcomes for residents and communities. This essay is intended to provide a concise but rigorous introduction to the history of the North San Joaquin Valley. The essay explicitly showcases the regional unity of San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties, and highlights historical characteristics that are unique to the region. Despite that focus, the essay takes care to differentiate the various cities and communities within the region and attempts to portray life in the region holistically. Given the sheer scale of the lands and communities in the North San Joaquin Valley, the essay does not attempt to provide a complete historical account of every single town and community in the region. Such an encyclopedic project would likely run hundreds of pages long, and would require teams of researchers scouring government archives. Instead, the essay is formatted as a white paper, and is designed to help policymakers, community organizers, regional business leaders, and civically engaged residents think clearly and cohesively about the region. Readers are introduced to the settlement geography of the region, its early industries, the role of Chinese labor and irrigation district development in the development of its

economic foundations, the impact of diaspora in the region's growth in the early twentieth century, the predominance of Filipino and Mexican farm labor in the mid-twentieth century, the decline of farm labor as a dominant industrial model, the region's role as a major refugee resettlement zone in the wake of neocolonial wars in Southeast Asia, and the region's ongoing transition into a logistics center as a result of the relative growth of the Bay Area.

CHAPTER 01

Indigenous Histories and Californio Regional Presence

Indigenous Histories and Californio Regional Presence

Prior to Anglophone settlement, indigenous communities had lived in the North San Joaquin Valley for at least 14,000 years.[1] As there is a separate section of the North Valley Thrive History Project dedicated to indigenous history, this essay is not primarily concerned with indigenous communities. That said it is impossible to discuss the modern settlement geography or economy of the region without understanding the historical interactions between indigenous peoples and Spanish Californio communities. It is also critical to discuss the lack of significant Californio built infrastructure in the region, which is a crucial differentiator in the historical trajectory of the North San Joaquin Valley from similar regions on the coast. To that end, it is worth briefly considering the history of the North San Joaquin Valley between Spanish arrival in Northern California in the 1770s and the arrival of Charles Weber in the 1840s.

Spanish explorers first reached Alta California in 1542 during Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo's expedition along the California coast. While Cabrillo claimed the lands he discovered

for the Spanish crown, Spanish settlement of Alta California did not begin until 1769, at which point parties of missionaries and soldiers established a presidio and mission church at San Diego. In July of that year, Gaspar de Portola, the newly appointed governor of Las Californias, led five groups of missionaries and soldiers to modern-day San Diego. After leaving missionary leader Junipero Serra to establish mission San Diego, the Portola expedition continued to move north, eventually discovering San Francisco Bay. Subsequent expeditions, in 1770, 1772, and 1774 by Portola, officer and eventual lieutenant governor of California Pedro Fages, and political leader Juan Bautista de Anza led to the establishment of the Camino Real, or the first overland road between modern-day Southern California and the San Francisco Bay. One of Pedro Fages missions in 1772 explored the San Ramon Valley, summited Mount Diablo, and became the first European expedition to see the Sacramento San Joaquin River Delta and the Central Valley.[2]

By 1780, twenty-one Spanish Catholic missions existed along the coast of Alta California from San Diego to modern-day San Francisco. To reduce inland travel time between Los Angeles

[1]For more detailed accounts of indigenous history and anthropology in the region, see David Stuart, "The Native Peoples of San Joaquin County: Indian Pioneers, Immigrants, Innovators, Freedom Fighters, and Survivors, Part II," The San Joaquin Historian. Lodi, California: The San Joaquin County Historical Society, Winter 2016, or Frank F. Latta, Handbook of Yokuts Indians, 2nd Edition. Fresno, California: Bear State Books, 1977.
[2]Ibid.

and San Francisco, Californio farmers and businesspeople developed el Camino Viejo, a land route along the eastern slopes of the coastal ranges between aguaje (watering places) and arroyos (creek beds). Archaeological evidence shows that the route was in use by 1780.[3] By the time Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, the road was heavily trafficked. Californios using el Camino Viejo were the first Europeans to interact with the Northern San Joaquin Valley, crossing through Merced, Stanislaus, and southwestern San Joaquin County. El Camino Viejo largely facilitated the recruitment and enslavement of indigenous Yokuts and Miwok peoples of the North San Joaquin Valley. Mission records from the 1820s from Mission San Jose, Mission San Francisco de Assis, and Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo (in Carmel) clearly describe large communities of unfree indigenous Yokuts and Miwok peoples listed as having originated from rivers and arroyos in the Northern San Joaquin Valley.[4]

One instance of Spanish/Mexican recruitment of indigenous peoples in the Northern San Joaquin Valley would eventually have great bearing on the history and settlement of the region. In 1820 and 1821, Franciscan friars from the Mission de San Jose reached the lands along the Rio Lacquisimas, known today as the Stanislaus River. In 1821, they

recruited an indigenous man and his wife, daughter, and mother to the Mission in order for them to receive a Christian education. The man's name was Cucunuchi, and he was baptized with the name Estanislao, Spanish for Stanislaus. By 1827, Estanislao was the alcalde, or headman, of the Mission. That year he left the Mission with 400 followers and raided the missions in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz, along with travelers along the Camino Viejo. Over the next two years, Estanislao's force of indigenous freedom fighters grew to over 4,000 strong and was able to defeat expeditions of Mexican forces from the Presidios of San Francisco and Monterey.[5] In 1829 the Governor of California, Jose Maria de Echeandia, was required to request support from the Mexican government, and General Mariano Gaudalupe Vallejo was recruited to wage war with Estanislao's rebellion. A climactic battle took place along the Rio Lacquisimas in 1829, and Estanislao was forced to sue for peace. The Lacquisimas River was renamed in Estanislao's honor, and he eventually retired to Mission San Jose in 1834.[6]

[3]See Frank Latta, The Saga of Rancho El Tejon. Fresno, CA: Bear State Books, 1976.

[4]David Stuart, "The Native Peoples of San Joaquin County: Indian Pioneers, Immigrants, Innovators, Freedom Fighters, and Survivors, Part II," The San Joaquin Historian. Lodi, California: The San Joaquin County Historical Society, Winter 2016.

[5]George H. Phillips. Indians and Intruders in Central California. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, pages 65-83. Also see Randall Miliken, Native Americans at Mission San Jose. Banning, California: Malki-Ballena, 2008. 28-30.

[6]Stuart, "The Native Peoples of San Joaquin County: Indian Pioneers, Immigrants, Innovators, Freedom Fighters, and Survivors, Part II," pages 33-34.

In the years after Estanislao's Rebellion, the indigenous population of the North San Joaquin Valley, and indeed of the entire Central Valley, plummeted precipitously due to a malaria pandemic. In 1833, French fur trappers visiting the area noted that they found the "the valleys depopulated…we did not see more than six or eight Indians."[7] One survivor of Estanislao's Rebellion and the malaria pandemic, the alcalde Jose Jesus of Mission San Jose, would go on to establish an indigenous camp near the mouth of the Calaveras River, and would play a key role in the historical events of the region in the 1840s.[8]

[7]Sherburne F. Cook, "The Epidemic of 1830-1833 in California and Oregon," University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 43, no. 3 (1955): 318.

[8]See David Stuart, "The Native Peoples of San Joaquin County: Indian Pioneers, Immigrants, Innovators, Freedom Fighters, and Survivors, Part II," pages 22-25.

CHAPTER 02

The Anglophone Settlement Geography of the North San Joaquin Valley

The Anglophone Settlement Geography of the North San Joaquin Valley

Before the Gold Rush, the North San Joaquin Valley was a land of oak groves, savannahs, tule marshes, and flood plains. The region became progressively marshy as the San Joaquin River meandered ever closer to the Carquinez Straits. The region is characterized by the flow of river from the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range into the San

Joaquin River – the Cosumnes, Mokelumne, Calaveras, Stanislaus, Tuolumne, and Merced Rivers being the dominant streams with the largest annual flow. On the western shore of the San Joaquin River, the landscape is characteristically barren, dominated by alkaline flats. On the eastern shore, the soil is considered by agriculturalists and soil scientists to be among the most fertile in the world.[9]

The region's first Anglo settlement was Stockton, founded in 1848 by Charles Weber, a German immigrant from Steinwenden, Germany. In 1843 Weber had received an enormous baronial land grant, El Rancho del Campo de Los Franceses, from the Mexican Governor Micheltorena, with a business partner, Guillermo Gulnac (who was later bought out). El Rancho del Campo de Los Franceses was centered on the lands bound by the Calaveras River to the north, and French Camp Creek to the South – in the heart of the California Delta. Weber established an alliance with the indigenous leader Jose Jesus, who occupied the lands of the rancho, In exchange for protection from Mexican and anglophone settlers, Jose Jesus offered Weber guidance on the geography of the region. With Jose Jesus help, Weber was able to guide the City of Stockton and County of San Joaquin to incorporation in 1850 and was crucial to the entire region's development.[10] Weber was extremely interested in taking advantage of the region's geographical position between the Bay Area and the Mother Lode of the gold rush and operated a general store that sold goods to miners on their way to the gold fields. Weber also operated his own gold mining company that opened the Southern Mines of modern-day Tuolumne County and was an avid development booster for the entire North San Joaquin Valley. For the purposes of stimulating regional economic growth and attracting

[9]The premier text concerning the physical landscape of the North San Joaquin Valley is Philip Garone's The Fall and Rise of the Wetlands of California's Great Central Valley. Berkeley: UC Press, 2011.

[10]See David Stuart, "The Native Peoples of San Joaquin County: Indian Pioneers, Immigrants, Innovators, Freedom Fighters, and Survivors, Part II," pages 24.

immigrants to the region, Weber is known to have donated much land and money to anyone interested in building churches or schools in the vicinity of Stockton.[11]

As miners left the gold fields, many turned to agriculture – their economic mode of life in their places of origin - as a means of making a living. The accession of California as a state allowed established US legal practices of claiming land to become the rule of law in the state. Thousands of individuals would look to make claims along the many rivers

and streams flowing from the mountains to the San Joaquin River, and as early as 1853, small villages and towns would begin to form at river crossings across the region. As these towns grew and stature, Stanislaus County and Merced County would quickly be carved out of pre-existing counties (Tuolumne in 1854 and Mariposa in 1855).[12]

The initial settlement geography of the region was predicated on towns such as Woodbridge, San Joaquin City, Knights Ferry, Tuolumne City, Phillip's Ferry, and Chester, which were major river crossings along roads that eventually connected in Stockton. This original settlement geography was practical and followed basic principles of pre-industrial logistics: goods and people had to cross the rivers to get to their destination, and the best crossings would become major trading hubs.[13] The construction of the Central Pacific Railroad between Sacramento and Los Angeles, which took place between 1868 and 1875, greatly scrambled this pre-existing settlement geography. Almost immediately, railroad stops such as Lodi, Modesto, Turlock, and Merced came to utterly dominate the economies of their vicinities, and would become the central logistics centers and processing spaces for agricultural and manufacturing goods grown, produced, and/or sold in the region.[14] In an era dominated by the automobile and the smart phone, it is actively challenging to describe how revolutionary rail transportation was to global life in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1860, a carriage-based trip from Stockton to Phillip's Ferry in Merced County might take five days. After the Central Pacific made it to Merced County in 1872, the same trip might take half a day or less. The speed at which people, goods, and ideas could travel greatly expanded economic and cultural opportunities in the region. The railroad stops would become the primary destinations for new immigrants to the region. Resultantly, the towns that popped up along the railroads,

[11]See Ron Isetti, Competing Voices: A Critical History of Stockton, California, Outskirts Press: 2021, pages 1-121 for more information concerning Charles Weber and his role in the development of the North San Joaquin Valley.

[12]For a substantial treatment on the history of the settlement geography of the region, see the late John Thompson's magisterial dissertation, The Settlement Geography of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, California. Dissertation at Stanford University, 1957. The text focuses on San Joaquin, Sacramento, and Stanislaus Counties.

[13]Ibid., 30-40

[14]Central Pacific Railroad Company, The Lands of the Central Pacific Railroad Company. Sacramento, California: Creative Media Partners, 2022.

along with Stockton, swiftly replaced the river crossings as the centers of economic, cultural, and social life in their counties, with distinct cultural identities. While the construction of the state and interstate freeways in the mid-twentieth century would lead to differential growth in the towns and cities of

the North San Joaquin Valley, the essential urban geography of the region would be defined by the development of the railroad.[15]

[15]See John Thompson, The Settlement Geography of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, California. Dissertation at Stanford University, 1957, pages 10-98.

CHAPTER 03

The Domination of Wheat & Cattle in the Early Regional Economy

The Domination of Wheat & Cattle in the Early Regional Economy

Along with transportation logistics, agriculture was the economic engine of the North San Joaquin Valley from its inception as a settled anglophone landscape. As miners left the goldfields in the 1850s, they found that the North San Joaquin Valley provided ideal conditions for raising wheat: the alluvial plains of the Mokelumne, Calaveras, Stanislaus, Tuolumne, and Merced rivers, as well as the many smaller streams in between, gave rise to vast expanses of flat, fertile soil. The region's rainy winters and hot, dry summers were also reminiscent of the vast wheat producing regions of Europe, where many immigrants ultimately hailed from. The available statistical evidence shows that plantation wheat agriculture was the dominant agricultural endeavor in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties, and production far outstripped demand. Historians have referred to this era of California's history as "the wheat bonanza," and with good reason.[16] California grain operations, centered in the Central Valley but with Stockton as a crucial epicenter for mill processing, were large in comparison with competitors on the East Coast, and due to early shortages of labor, were reliant on labor-saving gang plows, large headers, and by the late 19th century, combined harvesters. The grain industry of the region of the North San Joaquin Valley contributed greatly to the long-term development of local economies and settlements. Investors and land speculators in the region were attracted by the rich alluvial soils of the San Joaquin River and its tributaries, and were able to acquire significant landholdings. Some grain ranchers, such as the Sargent Brothers Ranch in Lodi, or the Smith Ranch along the Calaveras River, would grow to monstrous proportions – the Sargent Family, for instance controlled 10,000 acres of land between the Mokelumne and Calaveras Rivers. James C. Smith, who arrived in Stockton in 1852, controlled over 2,200 acres of grain-producing farmland on the south bank of the Calaveras River by 1866. The scale of the landholdings required significant investments in labor, mechanization, and operational efficiency. In the case of James C. Smith, the riparian nature his landholdings along the

Calaveras and San Joaquin Rivers required him to purchase and operate his own dredge from the Stockton Iron Works. In the 1890s, Smith was also known to have acquired his own fleet of combined harvesters from Holt Brothers Manufacturing.[17]

[16]Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode. "An Overview of California Agricultural Mechanization, 1870 1930." Agricultural History 62(3), 1988. See sections 1-3.

[17]For detailed financial data concerning the Sargent Brothers or James C. Smith Ranches, see See San Joaquin County, "Book I of Mortgages" of San Joaquin County for the years 1880-1900.

The industrial needs of companies like the Smith Ranch played a substantial role in the development of regional economies. Nascent mechanical engineering firms operating in Stockton and Modesto in the late nineteenth century, such as Holt Brothers Manufacturing, Samson Iron Works, Harris Manufacturing, and the Higginbotham Company received critical financing and market-growth because of the need for farm technology. Benjamin Holt was able to finance experimentation with developing and improving traction technology due to his company's robust business in combine harvesters for wheat and barley.[18] Similarly, the John M. Kroyer's Samson Ironworks was able to grow into a national company through the construction of industrial-scale irrigation pumps for grain growing farms along the east bank of the San Joaquin River.[19]

Large-scale operations, mechanization, and a reliance on hired diasporic labor would become hallmarks of the regional, and indeed statewide, farm sector.[20]

In addition to grain production, grain processing also played a significant role in the development of the North San Joaquin Valley. Regional flour production was a transnational enterprise. For most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that enterprise was dominated by one firm: Sperry Flour Products. Austin Sperry, a gold rush immigrant to California, established the Sperry Flour Company in 1852, in partnership with Samuel Baldwin. The company built an original mill in Stockton that produced at most 100 barrels of flour a day. As newcomers to the region acquired land

in the 1850s through the 1870s, the lack of irrigation infrastructure forced landholders without access to riparian waterways into pursuing dryland farm operations of grain or cattle. The Sperry firm incorporated in 1884, and by 1892 had a capitalization of $10,000,000.[21] The firm proved a cutthroat competitor, and by 1900 the company had acquired all competitors in San Joaquin County, as well as milling operations in Merced, Vallejo, Marysville, Chico, Sacramento, Fresno, San Jose, Paso Robles, King City, Hollister, Salinas, San

[18]See James Miller Guinn, Yellow Steel: The Story of the Earthmoving Equipment Industry, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, page 58; Reynold Wik, "Benjamin Holt and the Invention of the Track-Type Tractor." Technology and Culture. Edition 20 (1): 99; and "Account Book: 1890-1894," Holt Brothers Manufacturing, accessed at the Haggin Museum.

[19]The Samson Iron Works company has been remembered in popular contexts for its sieve-grip tractors and for its brand of trucks and cars. The firm was eventually acquired by General Motors in 1917-1918. The available historical data in Stockton area newspapers and in the archives of the San Joaquin Cunty Historical Society suggest that while tractors were a major business line, Samson instead generated much of its early revenue producing gas-engine powered irrigation pumps, which were sold locally between Merced and Sacramento to support irrigation districts. See

[20]For statistical evidence concerning the role of wheat in early regional economies, George Tinkham's works – A History of San Joaquin County from its Organization Up to the Present Time, with Biographical Sketches, and A History of Stanislaus County, from 1923 and 1924, both originally with W.M. Hinton & Co, in San Francisco, are definitive. One can also read Richard Walker, The Conquest of Bread: 150 Years of Agribusiness in California, Berkeley: UC Press, 2004, for a more modern approach to the topic.

[21]See "The Sperry Flour Company," The Stockton Daily Evening Mail, January 1 1901, page 16.

Luis Obispo, and Los Angeles. By the end of the 19th century, Sperry Flour Products dominated California's flour industry. In 1900, the company's total production capacity was 8,500 barrels per day, in comparison to 3,500 barrels per day of all other statewide producers combined. The output of the Stockton and Merced milling operations was approximately 4,000 barrels per day – or half of the company's total output.[22] The company's Union and Stockton City Mills in Stockton, and the El Capitan Mill in Merced were the three largest mills in the North San Joaquin Valley and accounted for the lion's share of regional production.[23] The company used its advantageous position on the Stockton waterfront to transport milled flour to San Francisco, from where it could be shipped internationally. By 1900, the three Sperry-owned mills processed almost all grain from San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties, and shipped to Hong Kong, Tianjin, Shanghai, Shandong, Singapore, Manila, London, Antwerp, and St. Petersburg.[24] Through savvy business deals and with support from the federal government, the company was able to establish near monopolies on flour sales in the Spanish Philippines and in British Malaysia.[25] As the grain industry declined in the 1910s and 1920s, the firm eventually

reduced operations, before merging with General Mills in 1929. The company's regional influence is hard to overstate. In addition to serving as the primary food-processing company of the region, the firm initiated an innovative pattern of world integration in local markets that characterizes regional agriculture to the present. Former Sperry employees would be hired by future food-processing firms operating in the region for marketing and operations roles, helping to build the North San Joaquin Valley's world-class food industry.[26]

[22]"Immense Output of Sperry Flour Co." The Stockton Daily Evening Mail. December 19, 1908, page 10.

[23]While other four mills existed in the North San Joaquin Valley, they were either prone to acquisition from Sperry, or relatively small. Th Union Mill of Stockton had been a cooperative the Sperry bought out in the late 1890s. Similarly, the El Capitan Mill in Merced was leased by the Sperry Flour Company in 1893, and acquired 1895. The Lodi Flouring Mill, which existed from 1876 to 1882, never produced more than 200 barrels of flour a day. Other mills, such as Spring Valley Flour, maintained negligible output during their operating lives. See "El Capitan Flouring Mill," The Merced Express, December 2, 1893, page 3 for information about the El Capitan Flouring Mill and its transition to Sperry ownership. See "The Sperry Flour Company," The Stockton Daily Evening Mail, January 1 1901, page 16 for more historical information about the Sperry company.

[24]For a history of the Sperry Flour Company's global operations, see Phillip Merlo, "Stockton's China Trade and Sperry's Global Empire." Soundings Magazine. April 17, 2020; "The Sperry Flour Company." The Stockton Daily Evening Mail, January 1 1901, page 16 https://soundingsmag.net/2020/04/17/stocktons-china-trade-and-sperrys-global-empire/.

[25]See Daniel F. Doeppers. Feeding Manila In Peace And War, 1850-1945. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. See pages 279-287 for detailed information on Sperry Flour Products imports in the Philippines. See Daniel Meissner, "Bridging the Pacific: California and the China Flour Trade." California History 76, no. 4 (1997): 82-93 for a deeper dive into the North San Joaquin Valley's grain economy and its monopolistic role in Asian flour markets.

[26]For insight into the Sperry Flour Products Company's influence on future food production companies in Stockton and Modesto, one can view editions of the Sperry Flour Company corporate newspaper, The Sperry in the archives of the Haggin Museum, in Stockton, California. Editions from the last ten years of the company's existence show how several key employees at the Stockton Mills were hired by canneries and packing companies in executive roles.

While the majority of the North San Joaquin Valley is incredibly well-suited for intensive agriculture, some sections of the region possess geographical realities that limited agricultural growth. In the southwestern areas of the region in particular, agriculture was not always economically viable. Alkaline soils, strong winds, and seasonal floods indeed made most of the west bank of the San Joaquin River unsuitable for intensive agricultural production. The lands along the west side of the river were also not entirely connected to the rest of the state by rail until the relatively late date of 1889, further posing a challenge to development.[27] The relative challenges to development in this area led to the emergence of one of the larger land monopolies in the history of California – the Miller & Lux Corporation, which became the dominant cattle company in both the Northern San Joaquin Valley and California writ large.[28]

The emergence of Miller & Lux as a powerful agrarian enterprise in nineteenth-century California illustrates how corporate landownership, water control, and legal authority reshaped the state. Founded by German immigrants Henry Miller and Charles Lux in 1858, the firm expanded rapidly after the Civil War, evolving from a regional meatpacking operation into a vertically integrated ranching and landholding empire. By the 1880s, Miller & Lux controlled more than one million acres across California and neighboring states, making it among the largest private landholders in the country. The company's growth coincided with California's transition from Gold Rush extraction to

an agricultural economy oriented toward national markets. Federal land policies, including the preemption laws and railroad land grants, enabled large-scale acquisition by well-capitalized firms.[29] Miller & Lux exploited these mechanisms through direct purchase, strategic use of dummy entry-men, foreclosure of indebted settlers, and consolidation of former Mexican land grants. The firm concentrated heavily on lands along the west side of the San Joaquin River, dominating landownership in western Merced, Fresno, and Kern Counties. In Merced County, Miller & Lux exercised extraordinary influence over land use and settlement. The company acquired vast tracts of riparian and overflow lands bordering the San Joaquin River and its sloughs, securing control over critical water access.[30] This dominance allowed Miller & Lux to graze tens of thousands of cattle while excluding

[27]Richard O'Connor, Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 3–25.
[28]Ibid., 67–94; Paul W. Gates, History of Public Land Law Development (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1968), 493–520.
[29]O'Connor, Industrial Cowboys, 121–148.
[30]William L. Kahrl, Water and Power: The Conflict over Los Angeles' Water Supply in the Owens Valley. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, 34–36; O'Connor, Industrial Cowboys, 156–162.

competing ranchers and discouraging homesteading on adjacent lands. The firm's fencing of former open range and its aggressive defense of riparian rights effectively privatized landscapes, shaping a west-side geography distinctively defined by large holdings rather than dispersed family farms.[31]

Miller & Lux's power extended beyond landownership into the legal and political realms. From corporate headquarters in Los Banos, the firm maintained a formidable legal apparatus to defend its claims, litigating disputes over fencing, trespass, and water rights while lobbying state and local officials to protect its interests.[32] In Merced County, these practices influenced the development of infrastructure, as roads, irrigation proposals, and town sites were frequently constrained by the company's holdings. The resulting pattern delayed agricultural diversification and reinforced economic inequality between west-side ranch lands and more intensively farmed areas east of the river.[33] At the same time, the company pioneered managerial and organizational practices that foreshadowed twentieth-century agribusiness. The company employed salaried managers, centralized accounting systems, and coordinated transportation networks linking ranches to urban meat markets.[34] In much the same way as the Sperry Flour Products Company in San Joaquin County, these innovations integrated the

Merced area into regional and national food systems, even as they concentrated wealth and control in corporate hands. By the early twentieth century, irrigation districts, progressive reformers, and growing pressure for land subdivision challenged Miller & Lux's dominance. Nonetheless, the firm's nineteenth-century monopolization of land and water left a lasting imprint on the west side of the San Joaquin River. Patterns of land concentration, contested water rights, and uneven development can be traced directly to the company's rise, underscoring the central role of corporate power in shaping California's agricultural landscape.[35] The settlement geography of the west side of the North San Joaquin Valley is also indelibly linked to the history of the company – the Merced County towns of Los Banos, Dos Palos, Gustine were largely company towns. Settlements to the north in Stanislaus and San Joaquin Counties – Newman, Patterson, and Tracy would grow in large part as logistics centers for Miller & Lux-produced cattle products, orienting their development along the San

[31]O'Connor, Industrial Cowboys, 173–199.
[32]Ibid., 201–224.
[33]David Igler, Industrial Cowboys and the American West, review essay, Western Historical Quarterly 13, no. 2 (1982): 215–218.
[34]O'Connor, Industrial Cowboys, 235–262.
[35]Norris Hundley Jr., The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s–1990s. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 109–118.

Francisco & San Joaquin Railroad, and later Highway 33, and Interstate-5. Even after the demise of the Miller & Lux empire in the early 20th

century, the company left an indelible imprint on economic and physical infrastructure of the west side that lingers to this day.

CHAPTER 04

Transitions to Intensive Specialty Crop Agriculture

Transitions to Intensive Specialty Crop Agriculture

Between the 1880s and 1920, the North San Joaquin Valley's agricultural economy shifted from large scale ranching and grain operations to smaller-scale, intensive fruit and vegetable cultivation. Across the region, vast plantation-style agricultural landholdings were subdivided into smaller parcels and sold to recently arrived immigrant settlers, who planted new cash crops operating on nimble, low-overhead business models. This transition was facilitated by both the rise of irrigation districts across the region, and the ready availability of and inexpensive, marginalized, and largely immigrant labor market. Resultantly, by 1910, the value of intensive crops in the region equaled that of extensive crops, and the North San Joaquin Valley emerged as one of the world's principal growing regions of grapes and various deciduous fruits.[36]

The dramatic transformation of the region's agriculture was paralleled by immense growth in adjacent industries: canning, packing, food machinery, and logistics.[37]

Statistical data available from the US Census of Agriculture and pre-existing historical research illustrates the marked change in the region's agricultural economy. In 1879, wheat and barley accounted for over 75 percent of the regional cropland in production. Intensive crops, such as fruits, nuts, or vegetables, accounted for merely 11 percent. By 1929, that picture had changed dramatically. By that year, grains accounted for approximately 25 percent of the regional cropland base, while intensive crops had grown to 35 percent.[38] Data from the agricultural census and other reports from the era is corroborated by newspaper articles and other popular literature from the era. For example, in the 1900s and 1910s the Sperry Flour Products company, the Stockton grain processing firm with global market share, repeatedly worked with newspapers in Stockton, Modesto, and Merced to advertise the need for farmers to grow wheat.[39] The dwindling supply of grain in the region challenged the ability of the flour companies to operate efficiently, and there was great concern among civic elites in Stockton as to whether the firm would be able to survive.[40] In parallel, the booster literature

[36]Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, "A History of California Agriculture," December 2017. University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources.
[37]Ibid.
[38]See the "Agriculture" sections of the Census of the United States for the years 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 for compiled data concerning agricultural data in the region.
[39]See "Sperry Flour Company Embarks on Coast-Wide "Plant More Wheat Campaign," The Stockton Daily Evening Record. July 27, 1918 for insight into one such campaign to encourage farmers to grow more wheat.
[40]See Tinkham, A History of San Joaquin County concerning Sperry Flour Products.

of the time shows a marked increase in the promotion of specialty crops. For example, in Lodi, a town north of Stockton along the Mokelumne River, newspaper advertisements published as far away as Chicago and St. Louis can be found showcasing the availability of land suitable for growing Tokay grapes.[41] Similarly, in the railroad and farming town of Turlock, in Stanislaus County, newspaper articles promoting the availability of irrigation water for specialty crops were instrumental in drawing waves of migrants from the Midwest between 1903 and 1910.[42]

Economic historians have vigorously debated the causes of this shift, referencing the growth of irrigation districts, declining grain yields, the growing cost of capital, and an

increase in biological knowledge of horticulture in California climates. Scholars of immigration have also pointed to the role migrant labor populations, in particular the Chinese diaspora of the Central Valley, as having introduced new agricultural techniques and built crucial infrastructure upon arrival.[43] A transition as complete and enormous in scale as the turn-of-the-century production shift from grain to specialty crops in the North San Joaquin Valley is bound to be a multi-variable process, and historians are right to debate the biological and economic vectors of the shift. It is indisputable, however, that the physical and economic infrastructure required for this production shift to take place was built by Chinese laborers: the Central Pacific Railroad, the levees of the California Delta and San Joaquin River systems, and the irrigation districts of the North San Joaquin Valley were in large part built out by brigades of marginalized Chinese immigrants who had been forced out of the gold rush by discriminatory legal regimes. To truly understand the economic history of the North San Joaquin Valley, one must investigate the nineteenth century labors of Chinese immigrants in the region. In addition to the role of marginalized immigrant labor in building physical infrastructure, the regional transition from large-scale grain and cattle industrial firms to small-business agriculture was also greatly facilitated by the legal creation and rise of water and irrigation districts that took place in the nineteenth century. Given the outsized

[41]For a particularly flagrant example of boosterism literature, see the California Land Syndicate's advert in the Chicago Tribune for Lodi, California in the June 25, 1922 edition, advertising "immense profits."

[42]From 1903, Turlock boosters advertised intermittently in Midwest newspapers. In 1906 the campaign turned especially aggressive. For relatively available example of this advertising, see the Central California Land Agency's advertisements in the Bureau County Tribune: "A Message to Homeseekers," Bureau County Tribune, Princeville, Illinois, March 2 – July 10, 1906, page 3.

[43]Olmstead and Rhode.

significance of diasporic labor and subsidized water access, both topics are treated with special depth.[44]

[44]The special emphasis given to the study of the Chinese diaspora in the nineteenth century North San Joaquin Valley is not intended to diminish the import of future diasporic communities in the region. Rather, we hope to provide contemporary readers with critical context about who built local infrastructure in the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 05

The Central Role of Chinese Labor in the Development of the Regional Economy

The Central Role of Chinese Labor in the Development of the Regional Economy

Chinese laborers and truck gardeners provided the blueprint for labor-intensive industrial agriculture in the North San Joaquin Valley. Chinese communities existed in the North San Joaquin Valley, primarily in Stockton and San Joaquin County, as early as 1849. Chinese communities were present in the census for the area in 1850, and the special state census in 1852. While a full discussion of Chinese history in Northern California would be inappropriate for this essay, a primer on the history of Chinese immigration to California during the Gold Rush is necessary to understand how Chinese communities came to dominate local agricultural labor markets. The marketing of the discovery of gold in California reached Guangdong Province in Southern China

by late 1848, and large numbers of single Chinese men began to reach San Francisco by the spring of 1849, with most immediately heading to the gold fields of the Mother Lode. Racial animosities and violence were common in the mining districts, and within a year, the State Legislature passed the Foreign Miners' Tax Act of 1850, charging $20 a month in taxes to foreign citizens engaged in mining activities.[45] In addition to the Foreign Miners' Tax Act, Chinese miners also bore the brunt of horrific racialized violence in the form of lynchings and beatings. This law and the accompanying violence would, over the course of the 1850s, lead large numbers of Chinese miners to leave the Mother Lode and flock to San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton, and smaller cities in the Central Valley. This law was expressly exclusionary and intended to prevent Mexican and Chinese miners from gaining wealth. The law would be quickly repealed in 1851 before being replaced with a second, similar law with a lower tax burden in 1852.[46]

The many Chinese laborers who were systematically driven out of the mines would go on to find work in other labor regimes. In the 1860s, tens of thousands of Chinese immigrant men were employed across the Western United States in the construction of the transcontinental railroad. The Southern Pacific and its subsidiary the Central Pacific connected thousands of miles of territory across the continent, radically altering the geography of economic possibility. However, by the end of the decade the major railroad projects had ceased, and

[45]See Beth Lew-Williams, The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018, pages 21-23, 26.

[46]See Sucheng Chan, This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910. Berkeley: UC Press, 1986, for the definitive history of the Chinese of the North San Joaquin Valley.

thousands of Chinese immigrants were available for recruitment to work. The last major documented sites of Chinese labor in railroad construction were in modern-day Lathrop, California, at the rail bridge over the San Joaquin River (1868-1869), and along the Central Pacific Railroad in modern day Modesto and Merced in 1870 and 1871.[47]

Simultaneous to the flows of Chinese immigrants out of the mines and into the Central Valley, Federal and State laws enabled the reclamation of large tracts of swamp land in the California Delta and on the floodplains of the San Joaquin River. The Second Swampland Act of 1850 transferred 2,192,975 acres of swampland from federal ownership to the state, which would be put for sale and reclamation. Much of this land was tule marsh land in the North San Joaquin Valley and the Sacramento Valley. The ancestral delta of the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers was designated a swamp by

the state legislature, and over the course of the 1860s the State would go on to deregulate the amount of land that a single entity could purchase to reclaim. Prior to 1868, a business could purchase up to 640 acres of land from the state for reclamation and was obliged to reclaim the land within five years. In 1868, the acreage limit was done away with.[48]

Over the next three years, capitalized enterprises, led by capitalists such as George D. Roberts and JP Whitney in San Francisco, would purchase upwards of 300,000 acres of swampland in San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties. At the time, reclamation work had to be done by hand (mechanical dredges would not be mass-produced until the 1880s), and there was an enormous demand for labor.[49] The only labor pool large enough for the projects being considered was the Chinese labor market. By the early 1870s, County records in San Joaquin County suggest that at least 10,000 Chinese men were employed working for reclamation companies.[50] Chinese workers would damn sloughs, cut drainage ditches, build floodgates, and piled levees between three and five feet wide and ten-to-fifteen feet high at their crest. After the passage of the Wright Act of 1887, which permitted the diversion of water from the Merced, San Joaquin, and King Rivers in the Central Valley, Chinese workers would also be crucial in the digging of irrigation canals across the region, leading to the development of

[47]Gordan Chang, The Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad. Boston: Mariner, 2020.

[48]Ibid. Also see John Thompson, "Reclamation Sequence in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta," California Geographer 6 (1965): 29-35 and Richard H. Peterson, "The Failure to Reclaim: California Swampland Policy and the Sacramento Valley, 1850-1866," Southern California Quarterly 56 (April 1974): 45-60. The Peterson article focuses largely on the Sacramento Valley, but provides an excellent legal timeline.

[49]John Thompson and Edward Dutra, The Tule Breakers: The Story of the California Dredge. Stockton, California: The Stockton Corral of Westerners International, 1983. Pages 23-29 discuss the growth of the dredging market and industry in the 1870s into the 1880s.

[50]See San Joaquin County, "Book I of Miscellaneous" of San Joaquin County for the years 1880-1900.

irrigation districts that further built out the economic infrastructure of the region.[51] The work of reclaiming land and building levees and canals was grueling, and most laborers could expect to earn $1 a day. The work was extremely unpleasant. Malaria, the constant threat of flooding, and industrial accidents were likely common, though the scant documentary evidence makes it impossible to speculate with historical certainty.[52]

The large, capitalized enterprises that purchased agricultural land in the Delta and along the eastern shore of the San Joaquin River were typically not owned by agricultural operators – they were land speculation companies that intended to subdivide properties for sale and lease. By the mid-1880s, considerable tracts of land in the region had been reclaimed and subdivided, and the historical evidence available in County Assessor Records shows that in some areas of the region, Chinese laborers were the very first to sign leases with landowners. For example on Brack Tract, reclaimed by the pioneer settler Jacob Brack in the 1870s, over 90% of the land on the tract was leased by Chinese farm operators between 1890 and 1900. Chinese growers were able to introduce several specialty crops to the region, and were among the first in the area to grow grapes, watermelons, pears, and many vegetable and row crops.[53]

In addition to operating their own farms, by the 1880s the Chinese labor community had come to fulfill an incredibly important, if not central role, in the intensification of agriculture in the North San Joaquin Valley, and California more broadly. As California agriculture shifted from grains to fruits and produce, there were several important ramifications for California industry: growers required considerable capitalization to pay for irrigation, crop diversification became a major asset, the average size of farms decreased, and labor requirements increased sharply. Because so much hand labor was needed for the growing of vineyard, orchard, and row crops, inexpensive labor was the only path forward for profitability. The labor not only needed to be cheap, but it also had to be skilled: if fruits and vegetables were not picked and packed properly, they were not saleable. Chinese farmworkers became incredibly crucial at this juncture due to the low wages they could be paid, but also due to their incredible skillfulness. An 1886 Bureau of Labor Statistics Report quoted a prominent

[51] Ibid.

[52] For the best extant historical documentation concerning the conditions of swamplands in the North San Joaquin Valley, see Linda Nash. Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2006. While not specifically focused on Chinese experiences, Chapter 1 gives excellent historical context and data concerning the experiences of laborers in swampland conditions in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties.

[53] See Chan, This Bittersweet Soil, pages 194-223.

farm labor contractor with operations in San Francisco, Stockton, and Modesto that "about seven eighths of the help on farms is Chinese."[54]

It is no overstatement to claim that Chinese labor built the foundations of the North San Joaquin Valley economy: the railroads, levees, and farms of the region were all built by inexpensive but skilled labor provided by Chinese immigrants to the region between 1860 and 1900. The California agricultural industrial model that came to dominate the region from the 1880s on was predicated on access to inexpensive labor, subsidized water projects, and logistical transportation systems that facilitated crop yields being shipped to far-away markets via rail. The Chinese diaspora was a central component in

the creation of much of that infrastructure. Tragically, the Chinese diaspora, largely composed of bachelor men, faced horrific racially motivated mob-violence throughout the whole era, with particularly violent uprisings taking place in Stockton and Merced in the 1870s.[55] Partially in response to the racist sentiment that fueled 1870s mob violence in California, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Act essentially shut off immigration from China to the United States and California, and new generations of Chinese citizens in California would slowly transition out of agriculture in the 1900s.[56] Their places would be taken by new waves of immigrants to the region.

[54]Wages of Farm Labor in the United States, Results of Eleven Statistical Investigations, 1866-1899. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901, page 10.

[55]Sylvia Sun Minnick's Samfow = Chin-shan San-pu: The San Joaquin Chinese Legacy. Fresno: Panorama West Pub, 1988, pages 125-165.

[56]See Beth Lew-Williams. The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018 for a contemporary history of this region. For a Stockton-centric account of this era, see Sylvia Sun Minnick's Samfow = Chin-shan San-pu: The San Joaquin Chinese Legacy. Fresno: Panorama West Pub, 1988.

CHAPTER 06

Irrigation Districts & Water Accessibility

Irrigation Districts & Water Accessibility

By the late nineteenth century, the future of agriculture and urban development in the North San Joaquin Valley was only constrained by law. The state's interior valleys possessed fertile alluvial land, and the region was home to a large, marginalized, immigrant labor force. However, reliable access to surface water was uneven and legally restricted, and without stable water access many different types of investment remained impossible. Under the prevailing doctrine of riparian rights—derived from English common law—only landowners whose property directly bordered a river, creek, or stream held a presumptive claim to its water. In regions like the North San Joaquin Valley, where many parcels lay miles from natural waterways, this legal framework favored large riparian landholders and left thousands of smaller farmers dependent on rainfall or precarious private canals.[57] The emergence of irrigation districts after 1887 fundamentally altered this landscape, enabling collective access to water and reshaping both agriculture and settlement patterns in the North San Joaquin Valley.[58]

The legal foundation for this transformation was the Wright Act of 1887, a state law which authorized the formation of public irrigation districts governed by local voters. These districts were empowered to construct canals and reservoirs, levy assessments, issue bonds, and exercise eminent domain in pursuit of irrigation infrastructure. Crucially, the act allowed landowners without riparian frontage to obtain a stable, legally protected water supply through collective action. In doing so, the law marked a departure from individualized water appropriation toward a quasi-municipal model of resource management, treating irrigation as a public good essential to regional development.[59] Early irrigation districts faced skepticism and legal resistance, particularly from large riparian landholders who viewed them as a threat to established water privileges. These tensions culminated in a series of court challenges during the 1890s. The most significant was Tregea v. Modesto Irrigation District (1896), in which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of irrigation districts and their authority to issue bonds. The decision affirmed that irrigation served a public purpose and that districts could exercise governmental powers to achieve it. This

[57]The textbook examples of riparian rights control in the region include the previously discussed land monopoly of Miller & Lux, and the large landed investors of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. See O'Connor, Industrial Cowboys for an extended treatment of the topic.

[58]Donald J. Pisani, From the Family Farm to Agribusiness: The Irrigation Crusade in California, 1850–1931 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 45–52.

[59]California Legislature, Wright Act, Statutes of California, 1887, ch. 34.

ruling stabilized district financing and cleared the way for widespread adoption of the model across California's interior.[60]

The legal framework of the irrigation district was extremely consequential for North San Joaquin Valley, where irrigation districts became the backbone of agricultural and urban expansion. This importance is perhaps best represented by the speed with which local farmers formed new districts. The Turlock Irrigation District (TID), organized in 1887, was the first district under the Wright Act. The District drew water from the Tuolumne River to serve lands in Stanislaus and Merced counties. Although construction delays meant that water deliveries did not begin until 1901, TID demonstrated the viability of large-scale, gravity-fed irrigation operated by a public entity. Its success spurred the formation of neighboring districts and anchored the transformation of dry pastureland into irrigated farms.[61] North of Turlock, the Modesto Irrigation District (MID) was organized the same year to serve lands on the north side of the Tuolumne River. MID became a testing ground for the irrigation district concept, both legally and administratively. Beyond irrigation, the district eventually expanded into hydroelectric generation and municipal water supply, underscoring how irrigation infrastructure underwrote broader economic modernization. The city of Modesto's growth as a regional agricultural, industrial processing, and commercial center was

inseparable from the district's ability to deliver reliable water to surrounding farms and communities.[62]

Further north and east, later districts extended this model into areas previously dominated by private canal companies. The South San Joaquin Irrigation District (SSJID) and Oakdale Irrigation District (OID), both formed in 1909, consolidated earlier private efforts along the Stanislaus River that had proven financially unstable. Public ownership allowed SSJID to secure water rights, finance durable infrastructure, and protect irrigators from the volatility of speculative water ventures. Similarly, the Woodbridge Irrigation District (WID), established in 1924 along the Mokelumne River, brought coherence and permanence to a patchwork of earlier diversion works, stabilizing agriculture in central San Joaquin County as upstream competition for water intensified.[63]

[60]Tregea v. Modesto Irrigation District, 164 U.S. 179 (1896).

[61]Turlock Irrigation District, A Brief History of the Turlock Irrigation District (Turlock, CA: TID, not dated).

[62]Modesto Irrigation District, MID History and Development (Modesto, CA: MID, not dated).

[63]"History of SSJID," South San Joaquin Irrigation District. Accessed at https://www.ssjid.gov/about-us/history-of-ssjid/; Woodbridge Irrigation District, District History (San Joaquin County, CA); Pisani, From the Family Farm to Agribusiness, 143-150.

The Merced Irrigation District (Merced ID), organized in 1919, reflected the maturation of the irrigation district movement. Drawing on lessons from earlier districts, Merced ID integrated irrigation with power generation through projects such as Exchequer Dam. This dual-purpose infrastructure supported both agricultural production and regional electrification, reinforcing Merced County's transition from extensive grain and grazing operations to more intensive, diversified farming. The district's formation also weakened the dominance of large landholders in local political economy by enabling smaller farmers to secure dependable water on equal legal footing.[64]

Collectively, these districts reshaped agriculture and political life in the North San Joaquin Valley. Reliable irrigation allowed farmers to shift from dry farming and seasonal grazing to permanent crops, dairying, and higher-value orchard agriculture. Yields increased, crop failures declined, and land values rose accordingly. Irrigation districts also reduced the economic risks associated with drought, making farming more attractive to settlers and investors alike. In this sense, the districts functioned not merely as water providers but as engines of rural development, structuring patterns of land use, labor, and capital investment.[65] By granting non-riparian landowners access to stable water supplies, irrigation districts democratized agricultural opportunity while

embedding water management within public institutions. Though conflicts over allocation and environmental impact would intensify in later decades, the rise of irrigation districts after 1887 marked a decisive break from California's earlier water regime. In the North San Joaquin Valley, irrigation districts laid the infrastructural and legal foundations for the region's economic backbone.

[64]Kenneth R, McSwain. History of the Merced Irrigation District. Merced, CA: Merced Irrigation District, 1978.
[65]Pisani, From the Family Farm to Agribusiness, 173–190.

CHAPTER 07

The Era of Ethnic & Social Diversification: 1890-1924

The Era of Ethnic & Social Diversification: 1890-1924

The intensification of regional agricultural industries in the late nineteenth century in the North San Joaquin Valley coincided with an enormous wave of immigration to the United States that dominated American life between 1870 and 1920. Between 1870 and 1900, federal records show that nearly 12,000,000 people immigrated to the United States. The United States only had approximately 39,000,000 residents in 1870. To put this in perspective, that would equate to 102,000,000 people moving to the United States between 2020 and 2050.[66] It should thus not be surprising that during this period, the demography of any region, let alone the North San Joaquin Valley, would become dramatically more diverse. That said, the roots of the North San Joaquin Valley's demographic diversity today lie in the diversification of its communities at the turn of the 20th century. As immigrants arrived in New York and to a much lesser extent, San Francisco, they would typically move immediately into tenement districts comprised of dense, unsafe, low-grade housing. These neighborhoods became famous immigrant districts that remain part of the national consciousness today. Economic opportunities in these districts were low, and many immigrants would look to find work in other cities and towns. To take advantage of these forward-looking immigrants, a thriving booster press grew in the late nineteenth century, where land speculators would post advertisements in newspapers in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other major cities, spreading rumors of the wonderful quality of life in less-settled regions of the Country.[67] The North San Joaquin Valley's agricultural real estate speculators were among the most flagrant and successful real estate in the country. Between 1890 and

1910, newspaper advertisers across the United States, and even in some cases abroad, loudly publicized the economic opportunities that existed in places like Lodi, Escalon, Ripon, Oakdale, Atwater, Turlock, Los Banos, and Patterson. The major urban agglomerations of Stockton, Modesto, and Merced would go further to commission booklets to be printed and distributed in the migrant districts of the major immigrant cities.[68]

[66]See the US Census at census.gov for relevant data.

[67]The best contemporary history of boosterism in California is J.P. Paul Sandul's California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory, and Rural Suburbs In the Golden State. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2014. Focused on the Sacramento Valley and the Inland Empire, the historical processes of boosterism are well outlined in the first three chapters. No extant historical monograph analyzes boosterism in the San Joaquin Valley.

[68]A full list of boosterist literature promoting the North San Joaquin Valley would be several hundred pages long. For a snapshot of literature concerning San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties, see the Weber Family Papers, available for viewing at the San Joaquin County Historical Museum. For individual articles in the Decatur and Topeka newspapers, see The Herald & Review, Decatur, Illinois and Cappers Weekly, Topeka, Kansas for the month of April 1907.

An example concerning Modesto proves most instructive: in 1913, adverts published by Stanislaus County development firm Maze & Wren began to blanket the pages of the Decatur, Illinois-based Herald & Review. In April of 1907 they had similarly advertised throughout the popular Capper's Weekly, in Topeka, Kansas, promoting California Homes in "Sunny Stanislaus." Interested parties were encouraged to write letters to the developers in exchange for descriptive literature of the region. Maze & Wren was almost undoubtedly targeting Italian American immigrants, who were known to exist in those cities at the time and would eventually purchase many of the Maze & Wren homes for sale in west Modesto. Similar ads from other companies would blanket newspapers in Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, New York, Buffalo, Boston, and Washington D.C. throughout the 1900-1910 period. In San Francisco, such advertisements blanked the classified sections of the newspapers. For instance, in March 1909 the Co-Operative Land Trust, a real estate speculation firm based in Palo Alto with operations in Merced, ran weeks of advertising promoting the Jordan-Atwater Tract, in modern day Atwater. Ads were quick to underscore "an abundance of irrigation water and the best of well water," and outlined all of the various cash crops that could be grown in the area.[69] Similar booster literature reached an even higher frequency, appearing in the major newspapers of San Francisco on a daily basis, often translated into Italian, Chinese, and Japanese. The booster literature of the era was widely successful in attracting immigrants to the region. Japanese farmers from Wakayama, Hiroshima, and Kanegawa; Italian immigrants from Genoa, Napoli, Lucca, Piemonte, and Lombardia; Portuguese immigrants from the Azores and Madeira; Sikh refugees from Punjab in the British Empire; Dutch dairy farmers from Van Groningen; various farmers and merchants from

across Scandinavia; Greek communities from Crete and Athens; Lebanese Christians from the town of Serhel on Mount Lebanon; African-Americans from Northern Mississippi and Arkansas moving out of the South to escape Jim Crow; Assyrians and Armenians fleeing persecution in the Ottoman Empire; Volga-River Germans from the Russian Empire; and the first trickles of Mexican diaspora from Michoacan and Jalisco would all move to the North San Joaquin Valley in this time, leading to an enormous population boom. Indeed, the population of the North San Joaquin Valley grew from 38,756 to 88,401 between 1880 and 1910.[70]

Demographically, the diasporic communities of the region would have profound influences on urban and rural growth It is worth noting that across the North San Joaquin Valley, ethnic

[69]The San Francisco Call & Post. March 12-29, 1909.
[70]See US Census data for a complete account of the region's demographic changes.

diasporas in this period built a landscape of both urban and rural ethnic enclaves. The modern-day settlement geography of the region still to this day reflects the broader ethnogeography of that era. By the 1910s, towns across the region became home to distinct diasporic neighborhoods. In urban contexts, the development of enclaves followed well-documented trends in immigrant communities across the Americas, with initial pioneering settlers, attracted by boosterist literature, leveraging chain migration kinship networks to bring friends and family. District boundaries were often enforced through racialized segregation and public health measures. Notable urban enclaves in the North San Joaquin Valley included Merced's Chinatown, the Portuguese and Basque neighborhoods of Los Banos, the Assyrian colony in Turlock, the Dutch and Portuguese communities of Ripon, the Japanese nihonmachi, Chinatown, Little Manila, Little Italy, el Barrio del Chivo in Stockton, Stockton's historic black district – Boggs Tract - and the Japantown and predominantly Russian-German neighborhoods in Lodi. In addition to urban enclaves, the North San Joaquin Valley is also distinct in that its houses many rural, unincorporated enclave districts that, while commercially tied to ethnic districts in urban locations, were largely separate social communities. Examples of such districts include the Swedish and Portuguese communities in Hilmar, Assyrians in the regions surrounding Turlock, the Genovese Italians of Linden, Punjabi Sikhs on Roberts Island in the Delta, and Basques in the area between Tracy and Vernalis.[71]

This turn of the century diaspora communities brought their culture and economic practices with them. For analysis, consider the cultural and economic life of Stockton in 1910. In that year, the city boasted newspapers in Italian, Portuguese, Lebanese, Punjabi, Japanese, Chinese, and Greek languages. The Catholic Churches of the City performed services in Italian, Portuguese, German, and Spanish.[72] Archival data at the San Joaquin County Historical Museum and at the City of Stockton's archives suggests that the largest community organizations in the city, outside of the Philomathean Club (the prominent suffragette-leaning women's club), were the Japanese Association of America or Ninhonjinkai, the Chinese Benevolent Association or chung wah, the Italian Gardeners

[71]No single text exists concerning the ethnic enclaves of the North San Joaquin Valley. In addition to sources previously cited, one can learn much about the ethnic geographies from the following texts and articles: Ikuko Torimoto, Okina Kyuin and the Politics of Early Japanese Immigration to the United States, 1868-1924. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2017; Fred Aprim, "The Assyrians of the San Joaquin Valley, California: From Early Settlement to the Present," Zinda Magazine, January 12, 2004; Carol Pagliarulo. (1948). Basques in Stockton : a study of assimilation. University of the Pacific, Thesis. https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/1080; Isami Arifuku Waugh, Alex Yamato, Raymond Okamura, "A History of the Japanese Americans in California: Yamato Colony, December 1988. Accessed at https://web.archive.org/web/20020222140308/http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/5views/5views4h103.htm, and many other worthy texts.

[72]See "Metropolis Lost," Presentation by Phillip Merlo, concerning the linguistic cultural wealth of the city.

Society, and the organization that managed the Portuguese community's local festa. In the 1920s, aside from Charles Neumiller (the attorney for Holt Brothers Manufacturing and founder of Neumiller & Bearsdlee), the most prominent attorneys in the city were Harry Mazzera, the son of Italian immigrants who would go on to serve as the General Counsel of the Bank of America, and Manuelita Aldecoa, the daughter of Mexican immigrants from Morelia, Michoacan.[73] One could accurately say that immigrants dominated and greatly enriched regional culture.[74]

As diaspora dominated culture, they also came to play crucial roles in the regional economy. With few exceptions, every diasporic community that arrived in the North San Joaquin Valley between 1880 and 1920 was engaged in working-class labor, as part of a regional caste system. Many migrants worked in agriculture, though some also worked in warehousing, lumber processing, manufacturing, or menial service jobs. Newspaper articles from every city in the region often discussed incoming waves of immigrants, often speculating on the types of crops different immigrant groups may be engaged in harvesting, and placing advertisements looking to hire laborers. Demographically, the Chinese, Japanese, Sikh, and Italian communities comprised the

largest of the agricultural work crews, though documentary evidence exists concerning every major immigrant community in the region.[75]

Many immigrants became titans of industry in their respective communities. To follow the Stocktonian example of 1910, the wealthiest Stocktonian, and indeed the largest taxpayer in the entire North San Joaquin Valley, was one Ushijima Kenji, known more popularly as George Shima, the Potato King, who owned or controlled 40,000 acres of land in the California Delta. Another major agricultural magnate was Jawala Singh, a Sikh immigrant from Punjab who amassed land holdings on Robert's Island in the Delta and along the southern bank of the Stanislaus River, in Stanislaus County.[76] Singh would pay for the construction of the Stockton Gurdwara – the oldest Sikh temple in the United States.[77] Most immigrants to the region were

[73]For information concerning Harry Mazzera, see his obituary "H. Mazzera, Noted Lawyer, Banker, Dies," The Stockton Daily Evening Record. February 27, 1961 page 1. For information about Manuelita Aldecoa, see "Miss Aldecoa is to Practice Law," The Stockton Daily Evening Record. March 29, 1918, page 3.

[74]See Ron Isetti's Competing Voices for more detailed information concerning the information listed.

[75]The archives at the Holt-Atherton Special Collections at the University of the Pacific, the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum, and the Merced County Courthouse Museum are particularly instructive.

[76]Don & Nadine Hata, "George Shima: The Potato King of California." Journal of the West, Special Issue on "Business Entrepreneurs in the West," 1986.

[77]Tejpaul Singh Bainiwal, Exploring the Stockton Gurdwara Archive: Connecting People, Politics, and Power to Historical Community Archives (1912-1965). UC Riverside. ProQuest ID: Bainiwal_ucr_0032D_15965. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5ph3143. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4gh023vh

less successful than these two examples, though rigorous scholarship has shown that immigrant diaspora communities of all races were wealthier in the North San Joaquin Valley than elsewhere in the United States.[78]

The relative successes of diaspora communities in the North San Joaquin Valley elicited racialized anti-immigrant violence throughout the 1880-1924 era, and indeed beyond. This violence took numerous forms: outright physical violence in the form of lynchings, mob attacks on ethnic enclaves was common. State sanctioned violence in the form of racialized ordinances, anti-immigration laws, and laws designed to prevent foreign citizens from owning land created an overarching legal landscape that worked to disenfranchise communities. American society in the early twentieth and late nineteenth century was extremely racialized and class-stratified, and the ability of differing ethnic diasporas to build financial wealth was often determined by one's nationality of origin and skin color. In the North San Joaquin Valley, the context was heightened by the great diversity of the region. Newspaper articles report numerous acts of mob violence. For instance, on July 25, 1921, newspapers from throughout the

region reported on a mob attack of white workers surrounding, beating, rounding up, and forcefully deporting Japanese farm workers from Turlock to San Joaquin County.[79]

The Japanese community of the North San Joaquin Valley was the target of much violence throughout the 1900-1920 era, perhaps in large part due to their relative successes. San Joaquin County Assessor's data from 1907-1910 suggests that the Japanese diasporas of the region, largely engaged in potato and grape agriculture, were economically dominant in comparison with white competitors.[80] At least six instances of lynchings of Japanese men are documented in local newspapers from the 1910s, and state laws, in the form of the California Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920, while impacting any Asian immigrant, were implicitly directed at the Japanese community. While it is rarely mentioned in any secondary source historical literature originating from the North San Joaquin Valley, newspaper accounts from the 1910s show very clearly that the Alien Land Laws were strongly advocated

[78]See Ron Isetti, Competing Voices.

[79]See The Stockton Daily Evening Record, "Violence Against Japanese Leads to Deportation," July 25, 1921

[80]See San Joaquin County, "Book I of Mortgages," Book 20.

for by white farmers and business people in the San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties.[81] After the 1920 law, Japanese owned acreage in the region declined by 47 percent.[82]

The persecution of the Japanese community would reach its height during the second world war, where the entirety of the region's Japanese population would be incarcerated – 12,440 people from across the region were sent to local Assembly Centers before being shipped to far-flung Incarceration Centers across the Western United States. Local agricultural and real estate interests actively advocated for the incarceration, and due to abandoned property laws, many Japanese families lost all of their belongings during the war. It would be impossible to cover the entire history of this tragic incident in the context of this essay but suffice to say the incarceration was a humanitarian catastrophe that was devastating for the economic and cultural life of the Japanese community. All immigrant communities in the urban areas of the North San Joaquin Valley dealt with explicit segregation programs designed to restrict people of color and other immigrants to certain areas of cities. Prior to 1900, this took the form of municipal ordinances that required immigrants, especially those from Asia, to live in certain neighborhoods to keep communities "sanitary." After 1900, racially restrictive housing

covenants, or clauses written into land deeds that restricted who could own or live in a house, were used to shape geographies of cities. In railroad cities across the region, immigrants and people of color were typically restricted to one side of a railroad track.[83]

In Stockton, segregation operated on a North/South axis, where communities of color were generally not allowed to live north of Main Street until the 1950s, unless they could afford to build their own house.[84]

While some diasporic communities in this era faced considerable violence, others were able to slowly build cultural community wealth. Immigrants from Europe, due to their whiteness, generally faced less violence than immigrants from Asia. That is not to say that European diasporas avoided challenges. Some portions of the North San Joaquin Valley were home to

[81]The foremost scholarship on this topic comes from Eiichiro Azuma's Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America. Oxford University Press, 2005.

[82]Masao Suzuki. "Important Or Impotent? Taking another Look at the 1920 California Alien Land Law." Journal of Economic History. 2024. 64 (1): 125

[83]Due to a lack of research infrastructure, the academic history world has never published detailed maps of historic restrictive housing covenant maps. However, strong evidence exists within the County Assessor's Offices of the region. The historical profession would greatly benefit from a broader investigation into segregation history in the Central Valley, beyond the popularly discussed, federally mandated redlining and residential security policies of the 1930s.

[84]A complete listing of restrictive housing covenants in San Joaquin County can be found at the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum.

considerable anti-Catholic sentiment, and at least in the cases of Stockton and Modesto, racially restrictive housing covenants from the 1920s clearly show that Italian and Portuguese immigrants were not welcome in the most prestigious neighborhoods. That said, these communities were able to become major players in various local agricultural and manufacturing industries and contributed greatly to the development of the local economy. As Japanese and Sikh communities became dominant in potato agriculture, Volga-River Germans came to control the Tokay Grape industry in Lodi. Dutch, Portuguese, and Scandinavian immigrants would build the dairy industries of Los Banos, Ripon, Los Banos, Hilmar, and Escalon into dominant national players. Similarly, Armenian and Assyrian communities in Turlock and Merced would become prominent in local nut agriculture, and Italians across the region would become famous for viticulture, cherry orchards, tomatoes, and other tree fruit.[85]

[85]See Richard Walker's The Conquest of Bread.

CHAPTER 08

Transitions to Filipino and Mexican Farm Labor

Transitions to Filipino and Mexican Farm Labor

In 1924, The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 (also referred to as the Asian Exclusion Act and the National Origins Act) established heavy quotas that restricted Asian immigration and greatly reduced Southern and Eastern European immigration to the United States. As with the California Alien Land Laws, the Act was designed with

racist logic in mind – to keep out foreign-born populations, namely from Asia.[86] Not all of Asia was affected, however: the Philippines, an archipelago in Asia, was colonized by the United States in the wake of the Spanish-American War and a subsequent bid by the US to crush a Philippine independence movement. One result of this colonization was that Filipinos were considered US Nationals. As nationals, they were exempt from restrictions on immigration to the United States, and so Filipinos (alongside Mexican migrant workers) rapidly filled labor gaps in the West Coast agriculture industry created by the Johnson-Reed Act. Between 1920 and 1929, approximately 14,000 Filipinos migrated from Hawai'i to the United States and another 37,600 migrated directly from the Philippines. By 1930, nearly 60,000 Filipinos were living on the West Coast. Stockton became the primary hub for these immigrants, with the Little Manila district, growing out of the historic Nihonmachi, becoming a primary center of cultural life and residency. Farmworkers would spend much of their lives in the fields of the North San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys, but would come to Little Manila to recreate and build community.[87]

The increasing number of Filipino immigrants led to fears among white Americans who perceived them to be stealing jobs away from American workers and a threat to economic security. Widespread unemployment during the Great Depression further exacerbated discrimination against Filipinos. Coincidingly, the region saw a huge public emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, which chapters in Stockton and Modesto becoming prominent political forces in the region, with an emphasis on anti-Catholic organizing.[88] These processes culminated in violence. Just after midnight on January 29, 1930, Stockton's Filipino Federation Building at 2049 South San Joaquin Street was bombed. News spread quickly throughout the state. It is

[86]The Office of the Historian of the US Department of State explicitly states that the Act's goal was to "preserve the ideal of U.S. Homogeneity." See Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian. Office of the Historian, United States Department of State. Retrieved September 18, 2024.

[87]For the best research on Filipino diaspora, see Dawn Bohulano Mabalon's Little Manila Is In The Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

[88]Warren Pulley and Savannah Ryan. Ku Klux California: A History of Klan Activities in California from 1869 Until Today. Independently published, 2022.

believed that dynamite placed under the building's front stairs caused the explosion. Parts of the building were blown across the

street and windows were shattered in nearby houses. Nearly forty Filipinos were sleeping in the building at the time of the explosion. No one was killed, but a message was sent to the Filipino community of the region. In response, the Filipino

community organized, building mutual aid groups, lobbying elected officials, and forming labor unions dedicated to demanding fair wages.[89]

In 1934, the US Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, which laid the groundwork for the Philippines to become an independent country. The act also reclassified the Filipino community as "resident aliens," which in conjunction with the 1924 Immigration Act restricted further immigration from the Philippines. The law had devastating impacts on the Filipino migrant community, leaving many families separated and isolating predominantly male immigrants in the United States from their families. As a result of this shift, the number of Filipinos immigrating to the US plummeted, and Mexican migrants began to replace them as the primary source of farm labor. Mexican immigrants would become the dominant labor pool in North San Joaquin Valley agriculture for the remainder of the 20th century. Mexican communities have existed in the North San Joaquin Valley since the 1850s and were demographically significant in Stockton and Merced by the 1900s.[90] It was not, however, until the late 1930s that the population of Mexicans in the region started to grow steadily. Due to the difficult foreign policy relationship between the presidencies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lazaro Cardenas in the US and Mexico, the agricultural heartlands of Mexico – Michoacan, Jalisco, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato – saw their economic fortunes decline dramatically during the Great Depression.[91] This led to considerable interest in immigration to the United States. This immigration was accelerated by labor shortages during WWII, which led the US government to sign the Migrant Labor Agreement of 1942, creating the so-called Bracero Program, where Mexican citizens were promised decent living conditions and a thirty cents per hour minimum wage, in exchange for farm labor jobs in the US. The program commenced in Stockton in 1942.[92] The Stockton Region of the program, which included Stanislaus and Merced Counties, would see the largest number of Braceros of

[89]See Mabalon, Manila Is In The Heart, 90-100.

[90]See U.S. Decennial Census, 1860-1920 for demographic data concerning Mexican populations in the North San Joaquin Valley in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[91]Luis G. Gueva, Forsaken Harvest: Haciendas and Agrarian Reform in Jalisco, Mexico: 1915-1940. Xlibris, 2014.

[92]Lori A. Flores, Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement. New Haven: Yale, 2016, page 47.

any regional worksite, and four of the five appointed commissioners who ran the program in California during the 1940s were from San Joaquin or Stanislaus Counties. The program would continue to 1964.[93] Many Braceros decided that they wished to remain in the North San Joaquin

Valley, and would recruit family members to move to California after the program ended.

[93]See Flores, 75-162 for a complete history of the Bracero program in California.

CHAPTER 09

Farm Labor Organizing and Changing Market Dynamics

Farm Labor Organizing and Changing Market Dynamics

The termination of the Bracero Program in 1964 coincided with a major farm labor organizing action, the Delano Grape Strike. While the Grape Strike nominally took place outside of the North San Joaquin Valley, it has roots in regional organizing efforts in the 1940s and 1950s, and had enormous impacts on the regional economy, leading to the decline of the oppressive labor regime of hiring large numbers of inexpensive workers that had existed since the 1870s. Farm labor organizing in the North San Joaquin Valley first emerged as a powerful sociopolitical force during the Great Depression. The volatile intersection of industrial agriculture, racialized labor systems, and urban working-class life gave rise to ethnic organizing networks that advocated for progress. As the Valley's agricultural economy intensified, growers increasingly relied on racially segmented workforce—Filipino, Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, Black, and white Dust Bowl migrants—whose legal status, housing precarity, and economic marginalization were used to suppress collective action. Resultantly, many of the first attempts at farm labor organizing took place within the context of ethnic enclaves. The ethnic districts of Lodi, Stockton, Modesto, Turlock, and Merced were critical sites of labor resistance and organizing.[94]

By the early 1930s, Filipinos—many of them young, single men recruited through U.S. colonial networks—had become central to agricultural and cannery labor in the region. Concentrated in boarding houses, labor camps, and the neighborhood that would become known as Little Manila, Filipino workers developed dense social and political networks that sustained organizing despite extreme repression. Labor activism was inseparable from community life: dance halls, restaurants, fraternal organizations, and pool halls doubled as spaces where political ideas circulated, and strike strategies were debated.[95] These networks proved essential during the wave of agricultural and food-processing strikes that swept California in the mid-1930s.

The 1937 Stockton Cannery Strike stands as a pivotal episode in this history. Involving thousands of multiethnic workers—Filipino, Mexican, Black, and Italian—the strike challenged not only low wages and brutal working conditions but also the racial and gender hierarchies embedded in cannery labor. The Strike had its origins in the organization of the

[94]Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California. Boston: Little, Brown, 1939; Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, Little Manila Is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.
[95]Mabalon, Little Manila Is in the Heart, chap. 3.

Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO), a subsidiary union of the Industrial Workers of the World. The AWO initiated a chapter, Local 20221 in San Joaquin County in May 1936, and began organizing workers in March 1937. The next month, the union demanded higher pay, better working conditions, and a union-only workforce. The powerful California Producers and Growers (CPG) organization, representing local canneries, refused the demands – countering that only months prior workers had received significant raises. A general strike was called, and local law enforcement officers deputized a 700-man posse to break the picket lines. On April 23, the strike devolved into an armed riot that required mediation from the Governor's Office to subside. An agreement was reached between the union and the CPG , and the canneries reopened on April 28. Both sides claimed victory, though the AWO would weaken and shrink in the aftermath of the labor action. Although growers and city officials framed the strike as the work of outside agitators, it was deeply rooted in Stockton's working-class neighborhoods and supported by local unions and mutual-aid groups. The strike revealed both the potential of interracial labor coalitions and the limits imposed by employer retaliation, police violence, and anti-communist sentiment.[96]

In the 1940s, regional farm workers deepened their organizing efforts even as wartime and postwar conditions reshaped the labor landscape. In 1948, after years of planning, four Filipino labor organizers – Chris Mensalvas, Ernesto Mangaoang, Larry Itliong, and Cipriano "Rudy" Delvo organized and executed the Stockton Asparagus Strike, where four thousand Filipino workers walked off Delta-area asparagus fields and demanded increased pay. The strikers won and received a pay raise. Despite the success of the strike, labor organizers of the era faced incredible challenges. The Red Scare of 1947-1954 created an incredibly hostile environment of leftist organizing. A government campaign known as McCarthyism (so named for US Senator Joseph McCartney, though other government actors such as the FBI were more responsible for government activities at the time) promoted anti-community propaganda that was often explicitly against labor. Government blacklists were common, and many Filipino union leaders were arrested and threatened with deportation. Simultaneously, Filipino farmworkers

in the North San Joaquin Valley were subjected to segregationist housing policies and anti-miscegenation laws that criminalized interracial marriage. The ecosystem of the North San Joaquin Valley thus made it extremely challenging for Filipino laborers to thrive.[97] In the mid-1950s, the McCarthyist Red Scare subsided, and Filipino organizers began to rebuild unions.

[96]Gerald Rose, "The March Inland: The Stockton Cannery Strike of 1937: Parts I, II, and III. The Southern California Quarterly. Edition 54, 1-3. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 155-176 and 255-275.
[97]See Mabalon, 61-100.

In 1955, Itliong and Delvo founded the the Filipino Labor Union (FLU) and related associations, such as the Filipino Association of Stockton which sought not only higher wages and better working conditions but also social and political recognition in a city that often marginalized them. Organizations mobilized around both workplace and community issues, from advocating for fair housing in Little Manila to challenging discriminatory hiring practices in canneries and farms.[98]

The FLU coordinated strikes and boycotts, sometimes in collaboration with Mexican and white workers, demonstrating the potential for interracial labor solidarity despite pervasive racial divisions. These 1940s campaigns laid critical groundwork for the postwar farmworker movement, preserving networks of leadership, negotiation experience, and collective strategy that would resurface in the 1950s and 1960s. In May of 1965, a Filipino farm labor union, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, led by the Stocktonian Larry Itliong, organized a grape strike in the Coachella Valley. That strike was successful and led to a dramatically increased wage of $1.40 per hour – equivalent to the wages of the final Braceros.[99] After the strike in Coachella, the Mexican led National Farm Workers Association, headed by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, was organized to enact similar efforts in the Central Valley. Later that year, the AWOC again initiated a strike, this time in Delano, against table grape growers. Itliong was able to convince Chavez and Huerta to join the strike, leading to a statewide strike of the grape industry and a major national boycott. In 1966, the two unions merged to form the United Farm Workers, or UFW. The organizing efforts were ultimately successful, leading to successful contracts for fair wages with many growers across the state, and actively leading to state legislative efforts to protect farm laborers. A full accounting of the labor events from the late 1960s would be inappropriate for this narrative essay but can be found in many academic and popular histories available online.[100]

The ending of the Bracero Program and the successful organization of labor for living wages in the 1960s had one primary impact on the regional economy: agricultural growers, seeing increasing labor costs and a reduced labor supply, began investing heavily in mechanization. To an extent, the North San Joaquin Valley had always invested heavily in the mechanization of agriculture. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industrial concerns such as Holt Brothers Manufacturing Company, Hickinbotham Brothers, Samson Iron Works, and

[98]Mabalon, Little Manila Is in the Heart, chap. 5.

[99]"Workers United: The Delano Strike and Boycott," National Park Service. Accessed at https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/workers-united-the-delano-grape-strike-and-boycott.htm

[100]See Miriam Pawell's The Crusades of Cesar Chavez, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014 for a complete rendition of the events leading to the grape strike.

LeTourneau Industries had taken advantage of the growing workforce of the region, large and diverse agricultural landscapes, and unique geographical challenges (concerning the swampiness of the regions river plains), to become pioneering innovators in the American agricultural economy – becoming the first companies in the US to effectively mass produce products such as tractors, bulldozers, scrapers, irrigation pumps, and combine harvesters. This spirit of mechanization was also recognizable in the packing sheds and processing plants of Lodi, Stockton, Modesto, Turlock, and Merced, where innovating companies such as Tillie Lewis Foods, Stanislaus Food Products, and M. Calosso & Son invested heavily over the early-mid twentieth century in the development of assembly line systems for canning tomatoes and vegetables and making boxes for fruit packaging. As labor costs skyrocketed in the mid-twentieth century, the regional industrial base organized to mechanize the region's agricultural industries in a bid to reduce the regional reliance on inexpensive labor. Companies like Blackwelder Harvester, OG Packing, and Agricultural Industrial Manufacturing developed the world's first mechanized tomato harvesters, cherry packing assembly lines, and grape harvesters, which greatly reduced labor requirements while also allowing for increased inefficiencies on the farm.[101] The historical evolution of tomato agriculture and production in San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties provides an instructive example concerning the rise of mid twentieth century mechanization. Prior to the 1930s, regional tomato production was limited to small business "truck farms," and commercialization was limited to local grocery stores and farmers markets. Due to the growth of tomato canning conglomerates, such as Tillie Lewis Foods in Stockton and the Del Monte Tomato plant in Modesto, demand began to grow dramatically in the 1930s. Tomatoes are an inherently labor-intensive crop, as harvesting required large teams of laborers picking fruits off vines while stooped over. Market demand and increasing labor prices

during the era of the labor movement created a strong incentive for innovation and mechanization. Botanists and agricultural engineers at UC Davis began exploring potential new mechanization methods in the 1950s, and by 1960, the Blackwelder Manufacturing Company of Rio Vista had developed an effective prototype. The new machine could harvest land dramatically more efficiently than labor crews, and by 1970 over 1,300 machines were in service in San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties.

[101]Shmuel San. "Labor Supply and Directed Technical Change: Evidence from the Termination of the Bracero Program in 1964". American Economic Journal: Applied Economics. 2023, 15 (1): 136–163

CHAPTER 10

A New Policy Climate and Refugees from Abroad: the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and Refugee Resettlement in the 1980s

A New Policy Climate and Refugees from Abroad: the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and Refugee Resettlement in the 1980s

After the Immigration Act of 1924 established a racial quota system for determining who could immigrate to the United States, immigration from Asia to California was completely banned, outside of U.S. nationals in the Philippines. Immigration from countries in southern and eastern Europe was also greatly restricted. The law was explicitly racist, and was even considered a foundational model to emulate by the government of Nazi Germany.[102] Outside of Filipino and Mexican diasporic laborers, the law effectively ended immigration to the North San Joaquin Valley from outside of the continental United States. In the period after World War II, civil rights advocates, organized labor, religious groups, and ethnic organizations increasingly criticized the quota system as incompatible with emerging norms of racial equality, while Cold War policymakers viewed it as a liability in U.S. efforts to present itself as a global leader of the "free world." Incremental reforms—such as the repeal of Asian exclusion laws and the admission of refugees under special legislation—preceded broader change, but comprehensive reform remained politically contentious until the early 1960s. Under the Johnson administration, immigration reform was folded into the wider legislative momentum of the civil rights era, culminating passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended race-based quotas and substantively repudiated explicitly racial immigration policy.[103]

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965—also known as the Hart-Celler Act—marked a decisive break with the national-origins quota system. The law phased out and abolished racially discriminatory quotas and replacing them with a preference system emphasizing family reunification and occupational skills, the Act reoriented U.S.

immigration policy toward a formally race-neutral framework, even as it introduced the first numerical caps on immigration from the Western Hemisphere. Passed in the context of the civil rights movement and Cold War liberalism, the legislation reflected a moral and diplomatic effort to align U.S. immigration law with the language of equality and democratic pluralism, while downplaying—often inaccurately—its potential demographic consequences.

102

[103]Daniel Tichenor, Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, 219–255; B. Johnson, "Remarks at the Signing of the Immigration Bill," Liberty Island, October 3, 1965.

Although lawmakers repeatedly claimed the Act would not significantly alter immigration patterns, it fundamentally reshaped the origins, scale, and social geography of immigration to the United States in the decades that followed.[104]

In the North San Joaquin Valley, the long-term effects of the 1965 Act became visible not immediately, but cumulatively, as family-based migration and revised visa categories intersected with the region's agricultural economy and established histories of migrant labor. Communities in Stockton, Modesto, Merced, and surrounding rural towns experienced growing migration from Mexico, the Philippines, South Asia, and Southeast Asia in the late twentieth century, much of it building upon earlier labor circuits, wartime guestworker programs, and pre-1965 migration streams rather than emerging ex nihilo. The Act did not create the Valley's reliance on immigrant labor, nor did it alone explain the region's demographic transformation; instead, it regularized and expanded pathways of settlement in a region already shaped by exclusionary labor systems, racialized land ownership, and uneven access to citizenship. In this sense, the 1965 Immigration Act functioned less as a sudden rupture in the Valley's history than as a legal hinge—one that linked older patterns of agricultural capitalism and migration to new forms of permanent community formation, political presence, and cultural life in the late twentieth century.[105]

The changing landscape of immigration policy in the 1960s took place simultaneously to tumultuous neo-colonial conflicts that took place in Southeast Asia in the wake of the decline of the French Empire. Due to concerns over the Soviet Union's spread of

influence in the region, the United States developed a significant economic and military presence in the region in the 1960s. Famously, the United States became embroiled int the Vietnam War and waged a secret war in Laos along the Vietnamese border with the support of Hmong and Khmu militants. Due to political pressures at home, the American military withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, and ceased political support for quasi-democratic governments in Cambodia and Laos. Without US support, the regimes of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were incapable of resisting popular communist adversaries, and were toppled. The conclusion of U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia in 1975 precipitated

[104]Mae M. Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, 238–269; Erika Lee, America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States. New York: Basic Books, 2019, 201–224; U.S. Congress, Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 89-236, 79 Stat. 911.

[105]Natalia Molina, How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, 167–198; Rick Baldoz, The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898–1946. New York: NYU Press, 2011; Matt Garcia, From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, especially contextual discussion of post-1965 labor and migration dynamics.

one of the largest refugee movements in modern American history. The fall of Saigon, the communist takeover of Laos, and the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia displaced millions. Given America's decades of support for political and ethnic communities in the region, humanitarian support for refugees became a political necessity. Between 1975 and 1990, more than one million refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were admitted to the United States, reshaping local communities across the country. Due to its economic infrastructure, the North San Joaquin Valley became a central hub for the refugee diasporas from Southeast Asia.[106]

Early refugee admissions were managed through emergency measures such as Operation New Arrivals, but policymakers soon recognized the need for a permanent framework. The Refugee Act of 1980 marked a turning point by aligning U.S. refugee policy with the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and creating the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services.[107]

ORR coordinated federal assistance to states and voluntary agencies, funding English-language instruction, employment placement, healthcare access, and short-term cash assistance. While the federal government set admissions policy, the practical work of resettlement unfolded locally, where housing markets, labor demand, and social networks shaped refugees' daily lives. California emerged as the primary destination for Southeast Asian refugees, and within the state, Stockton and Merced became significant refugee population centers. Federal agencies and nonprofit sponsors initially placed refugees in mid-sized cities with available housing and lower costs of living, and the cities of San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties constituted a resettlement zone within the ORR scheme. Official data from ORR in the 1980s provides great insight into the nature of resettlement programming. In the 1982 Annual Report of the program, Resettlement Region J, encompassing San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties, received

substantial grant funding for the purposes of refugee support. Major grant-award winners that year included Catholic Charities, the Stockton Unified School district, and the Yosemite Community College District. Services provided through grant funding included ESL and vocational training, public health education, and employment support.[108] Through official

[106]Carl J. Bon Tempo, Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 162–190.
[107]U.S. Congress, Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102.
[108]United States. Office of Refugee Resettlement. Refugee Resettlement Program. Hyattsville, Maryland: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Social Security Administration, Office of Refugee Resettlement, page 139.

resettlement programs, the North San Joaquin Valley housed significant communities of Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, Khmer, and Khmu people by the mid-1980s.[109]

Over time, secondary migration—the movement of refugees from their initial placement sites to join family or ethnic communities elsewhere—reinforced settlement patterns in the North San Joaquin Valley. Agricultural employment, a familiar climate, and growing co-ethnic institutions drew refugees inland from coastal cities, transforming the demographic and cultural landscape of the region.[110] In the context of Merced, secondary refugee migration was a dominant factor in community development. As of 1981, the ORR did not even designate the Merced area as an official resettlement zone. Due to the pioneering efforts of Dang Moua, a former clerk at the US Embassy in Laos, however was closely tied to the migration of Hmong families from Laos, many of whom had allied with U.S. forces during the CIA's clandestine "Secret War." Following persecution after 1975, Hmong refugees passed through camps in Thailand before resettling in the United States. Community leaders encouraged settlement in Merced, where agricultural labor opportunities and affordable housing mirrored aspects of rural life in Laos. By the late 1980s, Merced had become one of California's most significant Hmong population centers.[111]

Stockton's experience was particularly shaped by the arrival of Cambodian refugees, many of whom were survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide (1975–1979). After years in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, thousands of Cambodians resettled in Stockton during the late 1970s and 1980s. By the mid-1980s, the city hosted one of the largest Khmer communities in the United States. Along with the Khmer community, large numbers of Hmong, Lao, Khmu, and Vietnamese refugees also settled in the city, greatly altering civic life. Buddhist temples became central institutions, serving not only

religious needs but also functioning as community centers where language, history, and cultural memory were preserved.[112] At the same time, refugees confronted severe challenges, including untreated trauma, poverty, and limited access to culturally competent mental-health services—conditions that shaped intergenerational experiences well into the following decades.[113] As in Merced, community leaders in Stockton developed organizations to solve

[109]See the U.S. Decennial Census, for 1990 for an account of regional Southeast Asian ethnic diaspora.
[110]Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III, Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 34–36.
[111]Chia Youyee Vang, Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 77–103.
[112]Sucheng Chan, Survivors: Cambodian Refugees in the United States (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 91–118.
[113]Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, "Khmer American Memory Work," Journal of Asian American Studies 8, no. 1 (2005): 1–31.

common problems. Organizations such as Lao Family Community Empowerment, and the housing cooperative Apsara addressed critical needs in communities and continue to operate to this day. By the end of the 1980s, Stockton and Merced had become enduring centers of Southeast Asian American life. Their histories demonstrate how global conflict, federal policy, and local conditions converged to produce new communities—ones defined by resilience, cultural continuity, and the ongoing work of memory and belonging.

CHAPTER 11

Expansion of the Bay Area Housing Market & the Subprime Lending Crisis

Expansion of the Bay Area Housing Market & the Subprime Lending Crisis

Two economic trends have characterized the trajectory of the North San Joaquin Valley economy in the past thirty years. First, Bay Area housing market policies and outcomes have led to the rapid expansion of exurb – oriented housing in the North San Joaquin Valley. Functionally, as housing in the Bay Area became progressively more expensive, and as the region continuously reduced its affordable housing stock in percentage terms (through the lack of construction in conjunction with a growing population) between 1980 and 2020, opportunistic developers in the North San Joaquin Valley increasingly pushed to build more single-family homes across the region. Cities such as Lathrop, Manteca, Riverbank, Tracy, Patterson, Los Banos, Ceres, and even Stockton and Modesto grew dramatically during this period.[114] One city, Mountain House, was planned essentially from the ground-up to take advantage of this real estate opportunity. Patterson, in Stanislaus County, provides a characteristic and definitive example: in 1980 the town counted 3,908 residents. In 2020, the number had jumped to 23,781 – a staggering 609 percent growth. For context, California's growth as a state in that timeframe is closer to 167 percent – showing the phenomenal and culture-

shattering growth of the region in comparison to that of the state.[115] Many of the houses built in the region during this era were purchased by economic refugees from the Bay Area who work in, congregate, and recreate in their cities of origin, but who cannot afford to live in those places. To punctuate this, the westside towns of Los Banos and Tracy are reported to have some of the highest average commute times, and the largest percentages of commuters per capita, in entire the United States.[116] This exurban development dynamic has created ongoing social and cultural shifts in the region, where large populations of residents earn and spend much of their disposable income in the Bay Area, and yet are reliant on local public services and utilities.[117] We continue to grapple with these historical processes today. The 1980s-2000s era growth of housing in the North San Joaquin Valley was part of a larger

[114]Alex Schafran, The Road to Resegregation: Northern California and the Failure of Politics. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018.

[115]See the US Census for demographic data on the growth of Mountain House, Patterson, and other North San Joaquin Valley communities. "Census of Population and Housing," Census.gov, Retrieved September 10, 2024.

[116]Information gathered from https://247wallst.com/city/workers-in-los-banos-california-have-some-of-the-longest-commutes-in-the-country/.

[117]The only scholarly text on the growth of the Bay Area's housing shed is Alex Schafran's The Road to Resegregation: Northern California and the Failure of Politics. Berkeley: UC Press, 2018.

nationwide housing boom, accelerated by increased immigration and dynamic economic growth in financial centers across the country. In the early 2000s, the housing boom was supercharged. Driven by easy credit, low interest rates, and innovative financial products that expanded mortgage access far beyond traditional borrowers, construction firms across the region built suburban neighborhoods at an incredibly fast clip.[118] Central to this expansion was the dramatic growth of subprime lending — mortgages issued to borrowers with weaker credit histories, often with adjustable-rate features and low initial payments that later ballooned. Nationally, subprime mortgages grew from less than 10 % of originations in the early 2000s to roughly 18–21 % by 2004–2006, before the market collapsed. These risky loans, facilitated by an originate-to-distribute model that packaged and sold mortgages into securities with insufficient oversight, helped inflate the housing bubble and later magnified the crisis when borrower defaults surged. The roots of this phenomenon extend back to decades of financial deregulation. Beginning in the 1980s, legislation such as the Depository Institutions Deregulation and Monetary Control Act and the Alternative Mortgage Transaction Parity Act relaxed interest-rate ceilings and opened the door to adjustable-rate and other non-traditional

mortgage products.[119] These changes, coupled with the 1999 repeal of Glass-Steagall and a broader deregulatory ethos, removed many traditional constraints on lending and risk. The expansion of securitization and capital markets in the 1990s and early 2000s meant lenders could offload risk quickly — weakening underwriting discipline and incentivizing high-risk loan origination.[120] In the North San Joaquin Valley — particularly Stockton, Modesto, and Merced — these national trends were amplified by local conditions. Rapid population growth, spillover demand from more expensive coastal regions, speculative building, and aggressive mortgage marketing drove housing prices sharply higher in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Stockton's real estate market, for example, more than tripled in value between 1998 and 2005, a striking illustration of the local bubble; once prices began to fall in 2006–2007, the median home value in Stockton plunged dramatically.[121]

By the peak of the crisis, Stockton, Modesto, and Merced consistently ranked among the highest foreclosure markets in the nation. In 2007, Stockton had one of the highest

[118]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Unequal Burden: Income and Racial Disparities in Subprime Lending in America. Washington, DC: HUD, 2000.
[119]Public Policy Institute of California, The California Housing Crisis: Causes and Consequences. San Francisco: PPIC, 2008, 14–22.
[120]Robert J. Shiller, Irrational Exuberance, 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, 123–150.
[121]U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2000–2007 estimates for San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties.

foreclosure rates in the United States; for several years, all three cities were frequently listed in the top national metro areas for foreclosure filings.[122] Foreclosure rates in the region often exceeded both the California and national averages, and these areas saw price drops of 15 % or more even before the broader national downturn fully unfolded.[123] The scale of the crisis in the Central Valley contrasted sharply with the broader U.S. experience. While U.S. home prices peaked in 2006 and then declined roughly 20 % on average through 2008, inland California regions experienced far steeper relative losses, and foreclosure rates in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties exceeded many coastal and Midwestern markets. California overall had one of the nation's highest foreclosure and subprime exposure rates, and the North San Joaquin Valley was among the most affected subregions.[124]

In essence, the cities of the North San Joaquin Valley were not just victims of a national crisis; they were microcosms where deregulated lending, speculative growth, and socioeconomic vulnerability created conditions for one of the most intense localized impacts of the subprime mortgage collapse in U.S. It is crucially important to understand that the subprime lending crisis of 2007-2008 disproportionately impacted communities of color. In the cities of the North San Joaquin Valley, Latino and Black households were much more likely than white borrowers to receive high-cost subprime mortgages on homes, even when controlling for income and credit-worthiness.[125]

During the housing boom of the early 2000s, deregulated lending institutions and mortgage brokers targeted these same neighborhoods with adjustable-rate and "exploding" mortgages, marketing them as pathways to homeownership while obscuring their long-term risks.[126] When interest rates rose and housing values collapsed, Latino and Black neighborhoods of south and east Stockton, west Modesto, Los Banos, and Merced far exceeded county and national averages for foreclosure rates, resulting in concentrated housing loss, neighborhood destabilization, and the loss of intergenerational wealth.[127] In the growing cities of the western rim of the North San Joaquin Valley, such as Tracy, Patterson,

[122]Public Policy Institute of California, The California Housing Crisis: Causes and Consequences (San Francisco: PPIC, 2008), 14–22.
[123]Ibid.
[124]See U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2000–2007 estimates for San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties for localized impact data. See RealtyTrac, U.S. Foreclosure Market Report, annual reports for 2007–2009 for detailed foreclosures market reports. See Public Policy Institute of California, Foreclosures in California: Trends, Characteristics, and Impacts. San Francisco: PPIC, 2009 for analysis of the subprime lending crisis more broadly.
[125]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Unequal Burden: Income and Racial Disparities in Subprime Lending in America. Washington, DC: HUD, 2000.
[126]California Reinvestment Coalition, Paying More for the American Dream: The Subprime Shakeout and Its Impact on California Communities. San Francisco, 2008.
[127]Public Policy Institute of California, Foreclosures in California: Trends, Characteristics, and Impacts (San Francisco: PPIC, 2009), 21–27.

and Los Banos, recent refugees from historically Black and Mexican communities in the Bay Area were much more likely to foreclose on homes than their white counterparts. More broadly, the crisis transferred wealth out of historic communities of color at an unprecedented scale, as foreclosed properties were often likely to be acquired by institutional investors, as opposed to returning to owner occupancy. In the North San Joaquin Valley, the subprime crisis thus functioned not only as a financial catastrophe, but also as a continuation of structural inequality in finance – one that reshaped the social and political landscape of communities.[128]

[128]Adam J. Levitin and Susan M. Wachter, "Explaining the Housing Bubble," Georgetown Law Journal 100, no. 4 (2012): 1177–1258.

CHAPTER 12

The Warehousing Boom, and the North San Joaquin Valley's New Economy

The Warehousing Boom, and the North San Joaquin Valley's New Economy

The second great shift in the regional economy that has taken place in the past thirty years concerns the growth of warehousing and logistics as primary industrial engines of the San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and increasingly Merced Counties. Growing consumer demand, the rise of big-box stores and Amazon, hyper-rationalized retail business practices in retail, and a legacy of inexpensive diasporic labor markets have combined to reconfigure the landscape of the Northern San Joaquin Valley through the promotion of warehousing as a prominent use of land, and logistics industries as a dominant regional employer. To the extent that logistical systems are critical for any regional economy, the North San Joaquin Valley has always served as an advantageous location for warehousing industries within the context of Northern California. Since the 1850s, warehousing concerns have existed in the region to help store and ship the various agricultural and manufactured products of the region. Centrally positioned between the Bay Area, Sacramento, and the Sierra Nevada, with access to Interstate 5, State Route 99, and several rail lines, and possessing major infrastructural assets such as the Port of Stockton and Stockton Metropolitan Airport, the region has always served as a processing and shipping center. While the available economic data from prior to 1990 is challenging to decipher, most warehousing and logistics operations in the region prior to the 1980s appear to have serviced export industries – the storage of agricultural goods, processed foods, and manufacturing goods that would be shipped to the Bay Area and then sold further afield. In the 1990s and 2000s, several changes in the global economy led to increased needs for consumer products warehousing and trucking operations. Due to shifting global supply chains in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and the acceptance of the People's Republic of China into the World Trade Organization in 2001, manufacturing in the United States – already on the decline – began to slow more precipitously. Simultaneous to that development, the rise of big-box stores and e-commerce industrial giants such as Walmart and Amazon also created enormous demand for warehousing space adjacent to the Bay Area.[129]

While many warehousing projects in the North San Joaquin Valley entered the design and permitting phase between 2000 and 2010, construction and operation truly began to grow

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considerably in the early 2010s. In San Joaquin County, official statistics show that employment in transportation, warehousing, and related fields expanded rapidly

between 2013 and 2018 – with a 74.3% increase in the sector.[130]Similarly, Stanislaus County saw employment growth in warehousing grow from 7,079 in 2010 to 10,839 in 2020 – showing consistent growth, if smaller in scale than what took place in San Joaquin County.[131] During the 2010-2020 period warehousing projects transformed the physical and cultural landscape of the region. Largescale construction of facilities such as the Patterson Logistics Center, Amazon Warehouses in Stockton Patterson, and Turlock, the Paradise Tomato Project in Los Banos, the Prologis installation in Tracy, and several large corporate warehouses in Lathrop and Manteca have greatly altered the physical appearance of much of the region. The physical transformation has been felt by many. Between 2018 and 2023, 32.4 million square feet of new industrial space was built in San Joaquin County alone, with another 10 million square feet in projects underway.[132] In contrast to the rapid growth in San Joaquin County and steady growth in Stanislaus County, Merced County has seen less growth in warehousing industries. This is likely due to the county's inland location, distance from the Ports of Stockton and Oakland, and the scale of Merced County's metropolitan centers. Simultaneously, to serve these new industrial centers, enormous numbers of trucking companies have opened in the North San Joaquin Valley in the past twenty years. Throughout the years of the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, trucking industry growth outpaced all other sectors in the region. Between 2006 and 2013, San Joaquin County saw a 36% increase in the number of freight trucks with a gross wright of over 26,000 lbs.[133] According to some estimates, since 2000, more trucking companies have opened in the region than in any comparable geography in the US. Industrial data from State Department of Transportation economic forecasts for Stanislaus and Merced Counties paint similar pictures: rapid growth between the start of the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic.[134] It is worth noting that a disproportionately large

[130]"San Joaquin County: The next Inland Empire" Stocktonia News, August 21, 2023. Accessed at https://stocktonia.org/news/opinion/2023/08/21/san-joaquin-county-the-next-inland-empire/

[131]"San Joaquin Valley Regional Planning Unit Data Analysis: Stanislaus County," Stanislaus County Workforce Development. Section concerning 2010–2020; Transportation & Warehousing Employment. Accessed at https://stanworkforce.com/media/k13hurk1/sjvrpu_stanislauscountylabormarketprofile-data.pdf

[132]"State of the County, 2023," San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors. September 20, 2023. Accessed at https://www.sjgov.org/department/bos/soc

[133]"Trucks Carry SJ County Economy," The Manteca Bulletin. August 27, 2013. Accessed at https://www.mantecabulletin.com/news/trucks-carry-sj-county-economy

[134]See "Stanislaus County Economic Forecast" and "Merced County Economic Forecast" in the State Department of Transportation's :2020 County-Level Economic Forecast." Accessed at https://dot.ca.gov/-/media/dot-media/programs/transportation-planning/documents/new-state-planning/transportation-economics/socioeconomic-forecasts

percentage of the trucking workforce is Punjabi Sikh – a diaspora community in this region with deep historical roots dating back to the 1900s.[135] The Northern San Joaquin Valley evolved into a haven of the logistics industry because regional leaders made strategic choices to champion port and trucking-based development. Policy and business leaders collaborated to create policy systems for logistics industry operators through advocacy for transportation infrastructure projects. State agencies also stimulated logistics development through the incubation of a regional land market that used zoning restrictions and building codes to encourage the expansion of trucking and warehousing industries.[136]

[135]See "An All-American Industry Changes the All-American Way," The Economist. May 3, 2018.

[136]Warehousing data can be discerned from the databases available at the San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced County Associations of Governments.

CHAPTER 13

The Valley Remade: Shifting Demography between 1980 and 2020

The Valley Remade: Shifting Demography between 1980 and 2020

Between 1980 and 2020, the North San Joaquin Valley underwent profound demographic change. While the region was always incredibly diverse, prior to the 1980s the region was characterized by large non-Hispanic white majorities, with labor systems tied primarily to regional agricultural migration – dating all the way back to Chinese labor circuits in the 1870s. In the forty years surrounding the turn of the twenty-first century, global immigration and refugee resettlement, sustained chain migration from Mexico, and internal population movement from the San Francisco Bay Area greatly altered the demographic and cultural makeup of the region. While these vectors of change have been discussed independently, it is critical to illustrate how the interplay between these processes altered regional life. The United States Census shows incredible change in local ethnic demography since 1980. In San Joaquin County, non-Hispanic white residents declined from roughly two-thirds of the population in 1980 to less than one-third by 2020. Over the same period, the Hispanic or Latino population expanded to more than 40 percent of county residents, while the Asian population grew to over 17 percent. The Black population also increased modestly, reaching approximately 7 percent by 2020.[137] Similarly, Stanislaus County's population was overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white in 1980; by 2020, that share had fallen to under 40 percent. Hispanic residents approached half of the county's total population, while Asian residents—virtually absent in earlier

decades—comprised approximately 6 percent.[138] Merced County experienced even sharper transformation: by 2020, Hispanic residents made up nearly two-thirds of the population, while the non-Hispanic white share fell below 25 percent.[139]

In addition to refugee settlement from Southeast Asia, immigration flows from other parts of the world have greatly altered the region. The most transformative population influx entails chain migration from communities in southwestern Mexico. Mexican communities have existed in the North San Joaquin Valley since prior to anglophone settlement in the region, and were historically significant in the mid-twentieth century as a crucial source of farm labor, first through government work-initiatives such as the Bracero Program, but

[137]U.S. Census Bureau, summarized in Census Dots, "San Joaquin County, California: Race and Ethnicity Demographics," accessed 2025.
[138]U.S. Census Bureau, "Stanislaus County, California." Decennial census data, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020. Accessed at https://data.census.gov/table?q=Stanislaus+County,+California.
[139]U.S. Census Bureau, "Merced County, California." Decennial census data, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020. Accessed at https://data.census.gov/table?q=Merced+County,+California.

increasingly through straightforward immigration. Chain migration from Mexico to the United States began to expand dramatically after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, often-times mediated through village and kinship networks. Although precise county-level data on Mexican state of origin are limited, scholarship on California migration patterns consistently identifies states such as Michoacán and Jalisco as major sources of migrants to the state's agricultural regions. These migrants often arrived through family and community networks, settling permanently rather than seasonally, and facilitating subsequent migration through kinship ties.[140]

In the North San Joaquin Valley, Mexican farm laborers and their families have established long-term residence, purchased homes, and raised U.S.-born children. These communities have radically changed neighborhoods and small-business landscapes. Across the entire region, Mexican food constitutes the most commercialized cuisine, and Mexican cultural touchstones have become infused with broader popular culture. Demographic data supports these claims: by 2020, Hispanic residents constituted nearly half of San Joaquin and Stanislaus County's populations and are a clear majority in Merced County, compared to relatively small shares in 1980.[141] These changes reflect not

only immigration but generational settlement, underscoring the Valley's role as a destination rather than a temporary labor zone. The North San Joaquin Valley's demography has also been shaped by migration within California, specifically from communities gentrified out of the Bay Area. As has been discussed previously, rising housing costs and displacement pressures in coastal metropolitan areas beginning in the 1990s—and accelerating after 2000—pushed many households eastward into the North San Joaquin Valley. Cities such as Tracy, Patterson, Lathrop, Manteca, Riverbank, and Stockton saw explosive growth during this time period, and in the case of Mountain House, an entirely new town was developed. This movement included African American families seeking more affordable housing and suburban environments. As a result, Black populations increased or stabilized in communities such as South Stockton, Tracy, and parts of Stanislaus County, even as some Bay Area cities experienced declines in their Black populations. Regional demographic studies show that San Joaquin County, in particular, saw gradual growth in its Black

[140]Enrico A. Marcelli, and Wayne A. Cornelius. "The Changing Profile of Mexican Migrants to the United States: New Evidence from California and Mexico." Latin American Research Review 36, no. 3 (2001): 105–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2692122. For an excellent case study concerning migration from Michoacán to the North San Joaquin Valley, see Manuel Barajas, The Xaripu Community Across Borders: Labor Migration, Community, and Family. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009.

[141]See U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial census data, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020 for San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties. Accessed at data.census.gov

population share between 1980 and 2020, reflecting these inland migration patterns. Although the North San Joaquin Valley did not become a primary destination for Black migration at the scale of Hispanic or Asian settlement, this internal movement nonetheless altered neighborhood composition and regional racial geographies.[142]

[142]Brown University Spatial Structures in the Social Sciences Project, "Segregation and Diversity in U.S. Metropolitan Areas, 1980–2020," accessed at https://s4.brown.edu/. One can also learn much about outmigration from the Bay Area in Schafran, The Road to Resegregation.

CHAPTER 14

Migration and Economy: the North San Joaquin Valley

Migration and Economy: the North San Joaquin Valley

Over the past decade, heightened political tensions concerning borders and immigration have led policymakers, economists, demographers, and historians to become greatly preoccupied with economic and cultural impacts of immigration. Due to the unsettled nature of this debate in the American civic body, the relative merits immigration and diaspora have become crucial flashpoints for successive presidential administrations. This environment has given rise to barbed rhetoric and deep animosities across the political spectrum. This essay concludes with the brief but profound observation that the North San Joaquin Valley would simply not exist without migratory diasporas. From the mid nineteenth century through today, the economic infrastructure and systems that define this region were built and operated by diasporic communities that were often marginalized by racist legal regimes. Even today, migrants from the Bay Area – a cultural if not national diaspora – are largely responsible for

driving infrastructural change to the regional landscape. Historians are not trained to make policy recommendations concerning a region's economic outlook. We can, however, make data-based observations about our region's past.