



SAN JOAQUIN HISTORIAN

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Volume IV, New Series

Spring 1990

Number 1

Serving Agriculture from the Air

The Story of Precissi Flying Service

As Told by John Precissi



Lou, Augie, Joe and Frank, circa 1933.

Crop dusting began in the cotton growing regions of the South during the '20s. The procedure started in San Joaquin County about 1940 with "nomads" coming here to dust, flying out of pastures, Linds Airfield and Kingdon. In 1990 there are about 180 crop dusting businesses in California and about 500 pilots.

The Precissi Flying Service was established by four brothers who learned to fly before World War II. The oldest was Louie, next was John's father - Joe. Louie and Joe began their working careers driving turck to deliver beer in Stockton. The other two brothers were twins; Frank was a farmer and Augie was a carpenter, both are still alive (Jan. 1990).

Louie began taking flying lessons in the late '30s from Marty Kromburg at Kingdon Airfield and the other brothers joined in the lessons soon thereafter. The licensing procedure was fairly simple in those days, and the brothers soon had their licenses. World War II came along and flying was curtailed on the west coast. Louie and Joe went to Reno Sky Ranch to teach primary flight. But the brothers did not want to wait to be drafted so Joe and Augie joined the Army Air Corps and Louie joined the Naval Ferry Command. Frank continued his farming at the end of Woodbridge Road on a deferral. Augie was assigned to the Cadet program and Joe went to Tulare with Tex Rankin. (Tex Rankin was a colorful Barnstormer during the late '30s.)

After the war Tex Rankin asked Joe to join him in a crop dusting business in Tulare, but Joe preferred to come back to the Stockton area. He did some research and associated himself with Linds Airfield (Jahant Road and 99 - north of Lodi) where he gave flight lessons, took aerial photos and did other flying jobs.

The brothers bought a Travelair biplane (N8134) for \$5,000.00. The plane was built in 1927 and was already equipped for dusting. They got a big job planting clover for pasture land and were able to pay off the \$5,000.00 within one year.

Next they bought 50 acres on a high

knoll along the Lower Sacramento Road from Jos. Fillipi. The foundation for the building was poured in December 1945. Frank had all the money because he had done well farming during the war. He came into the crop dusting business, taking care of the ground crews and loading planes. The business got its start with CPT (Civilian Pilot Training) under the GI Bill. Agricultural services became the main activity after CPT ran its course and the business has since acquired seven airstrips for their use plus Linds Airfield. They have their own road grader and rent these strips from the farmers.

It was all dust in those days, DDT and other deadly materials came in dust form. There was no training; the brothers learned as they went along, applying whatever the Farm Consultant or farmer supplied. Th dust was handled by hand from 100 pound sacks; later the materials were packaged in 50 pound sacks. Now days nothing is touched by hand as it is all piped in. Sulphur is used in the vineyards to control mildew; a vineyard might be sulphured 4-5 times in a season. Sulphur is non-toxic although it is an irritant; now days it is a

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Historical Society, Inc.
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The San Joaquin County Historical Society, a non-profit corporation, meets the fourth Monday monthly except July, August and December. Membership includes subscriptions to *The San Joaquin Historian* and the newsletter, *News and Notes*. Non-members may purchase individual copies from the Society. The Society directs the operation of the San Joaquin County Historical Museum.

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The New Generation in 1981 - (l-r) Don, Joey, Peter, and John Precissi and mechanic Don Kinter.

petrol product rather than being mined. Fifty percent of Precissi's business is in the vineyards, mostly dusting sulphur. Dusting planes are up at 6 a.m. and are in by 9 or 10 a.m. depending upon the wind. Dust rises when warm and a farmer may not get full benefit if it is too windy or warm. Heavy materials like seed can be dispensed in a higher wind than lighter materials.

Liquid spraying began about 1950 and required a plumbing system on the planes so some of the Travelairs were converted, some Stearman planes added, an Eagle was acquired in 1980 and another in 1982 for this purpose. Applying insecticides from the air is limited because there are usually several materials used in one spray. This can clog an airplane's plumbing system since they use less water than is used

in ground equipment. Liquid requires much more attention in its handling and application.

The Precissi brothers preferred the Travelair airplane for their dusting work since the planes were readily available from the rice fields around Sacramento. They had as many as 15 airplanes at one time. The business still has five Travelairs, all built in 1927 and still in use. Of course, they have been rebuilt many times. The aircraft is equipped only with an oil pressure gauge, air speed indicator, altimeter, gas gauge, and tachometer. There are no other instruments necessary for the flying that is done. There is a log book in each plane for billing and maintenance purposes.

Each pilot must have an annual physical. I (John) have an Applicator's

license (it's not necessary that each pilot have an Applicator's license). Fields are smaller now; 100 acres can be dusted from the air in one tach hour. We got \$1.25 per acre for dusting in the beginning, now we get \$5.00.

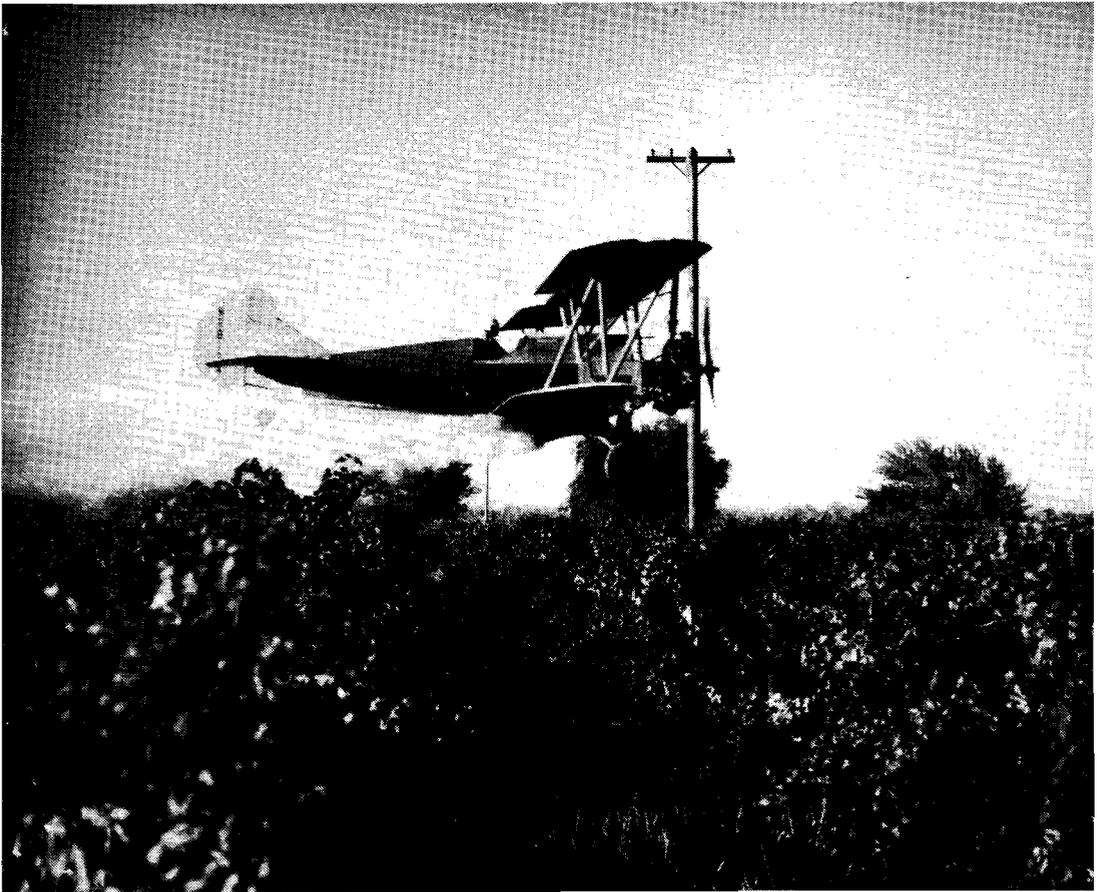
Our planes must be completely worked over for maintenance. We do everything on site: sandblasting, painting, fabricating, woodworking, welding, etc. We bought a lot of surplus parts for the Travelairs and can probably keep them going for another three generations. We go to aucitons to buy parts for the two Eagles which are 1980 and 1982 models.

Each of the four Precissi brothers who started the business had one son (there were daughters, too). Their names are Peter, Joey, Donald, and John. Peter is the oldest and John is the

youngest. While growing up, the sons worked gasing planes, sweeping and doing other jobs as needed. All went to college, however. Peter went to Sierra Academy in Oakland where he learned flying and mechanics. Peter got all of his credentials and came back to break into the crop dusting business.

In the beginning, the fathers discouraged their sons from becoming crop dusters but eventually hired Peter in 1973. Joey and Donald got out of school in 1974 and John graduated in 1975. All began working in the business.

In 1977 the fathers asked the boys if they wanted to buy the business and the boys paid "good" money to make the purchase. (The fathers still own the building and adjoining land.) The papers were finalized in February 1978.



Lou dusts grapes with sulphur in N8134, circa 1953.

The boys (cousins) get along very well and work as a team. Peter and John are pilots; John is also trained to handle the business. Donald runs the ground crews while Joey runs the ranches.

This is a fairly safe business; other air traffic is at a higher altitude. The danger is the wires, and ranches are smaller now than they used to be. The only regulation as to altitude is when ferrying (500 feet). Two other pilots are employed as well as a ground crew to mix insecticide and to work in the shop. In the summer, high school students are employed to load sulphur. The work hours, 3:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. are attractive to the students.

There are a number of environmental controls: FAA, Department of Food and Agriculture, Water Quality and others. We make a real effort to keep the same pilot in the same area so that he becomes thoroughly familiar with local conditions. For example, my father, Joe, took care of the islands where there is a lot of wind, Augie took care of Farmington and Uncle Louie took care of the grapes.

Liability insurance is a firm necessity to provide for crash possibilities and the drift of spray materials.

There have been many changes in farming practices since we started. Truck farming is providing a new activi-

ty for us. We spray tomato beds in the spring for weed control to reduce the amount of cultivation for the farmer, and a new strain of sugar beets must be sprayed twice each year to control mildew. Air spraying can't do it all; helicopters work well in subdivisions, but Precissi has not gone into this.

San Joaquin County is big in agriculture. Many of us are unhappy to see the great agricultural land being used for other purposes. We like to provide field trips for young people so that they can see what we do. Many think of us as using a lot of insecticides when that is only 20 percent of the business. We apply fungicides, fertilize, plant alfalfa, wheat, and barley, and bait for rodent control.

There is competition in the crop dusting business, but the regulations make entry into it costly and restrictive. Precissi does not advertise; however, the firm contributes to the Farm Bureau, Italian Club and similar community activities.

What is the future? While we are busy year round, we believe that the work here will be winding down because the fields are getting smaller because of urban development.

Maybe part of our future lies in the area of antique airplanes.

Gaspare Indelicato

Said "Let's Make Wine"

Much of the information in the following article is embodied in a cookbook developed by Dorothy Indelicato and Arlene Mueller, celebrating 50 years of family wine making. The story is enriched further with information furnished by Dorothy and from "Meet Delicato" - a monthly newsletter.

Gaspare Indelicato was born in Sicily, came to this country in 1919 and settled near Manteca in 1920. He and Caterina were married in 1921 in a double wedding ceremony with Caterina's twin sister Serafina and Sebastiano Luppino.

The Manteca area was like Sicily for the Indelicatos with the warm weather,

sandy loam and the crops. Gaspare was a farmer and in 1923 he borrowed money to buy 68 acres to grow food for his family. His vegetable garden was the envy of everyone around, and he would give fruits and vegetables to his guests to take home whenever he had a surplus.

For many years, six Indelicatos and five Luppinos lived in a small frame house (where the parking lot is now). They lived a simple life and had little money. There were four Indelicato children: Frances, Vincent, Anthony, and Frank. Gaspare believed in the value of work, so the kids did chores every day around the farm. If they ran out of things to do, there were always bottles to wash.

In Sicily, the Indelicatos always made wine from grapes that grew near the house. Gaspare did the same thing when he came to this country. In 1924, Gaspare and Sebastiano planted small



Washing wine bottles on a Saturday morning for Monday's bottling, circa 1947. Shown (l-r) Antonio Luppino, Anthony Indelicato, Frank Indelicato, Joe Sciabica, Gaspare Indelicato, and Sebastiano Luppino.

plots of Carignane, Mission, and Zinfandel grapes for making their own wine. They also sold grapes to the East Coast for family wine making.

The Indelicato and Luppino families were making a living on the land until prohibition ended in 1933. Then customers on the East Coast no longer needed grapes for making their own wine, and Gaspare couldn't sell the grapes for \$5.00 a ton, so he said, "**Let's Make Wine.**"

The winery opened officially in May 1935. Gaspare and Sebastiano were partners and decided to americanize their names: Sebastiano became Sam and Gaspare changed to Jasper. The new venture was called the Sam Jasper Winery. The first vintage, 3411 gallons, was made in a converted hay barn using a small hand operated crusher and press. Local people bought the wine for 50 cents a gallon. Gaspare no longer needed to make wine for his family, but

he remembered others who did. So he provided them with a high quality bulk grape juice.

The winery grew slowly but steadily. The price of wine went to 95 cents a gallon in 1940 and to \$1.95 in 1944. Wine production was limited during the war years so the winery sold all that it could produce.

The three Indelicato brothers joined the business in the early '50s. Production reached 74,107 gallons in 1955, and Gaspare died in 1962 while the winery was still a small, struggling business. Frances Indelicato married Joe Sciabica in 1944 and Vince married Dorothy Cardoza in 1954. Dorothy had lived with her parents on a dairy farm adjoining the Indelicato land. She had been employed as the first office clerk in the early '50s and is now Treasurer of Delicato Vineyards and manager of the winery's tasting room and gift shop. All members of the married families work-



Each Autumn during the crush, the Delicato parking lot is jammed with pickups and trailers loaded with empty wine barrels. Many of these home wine makers drive hundreds of miles each year to get the high quality juice. They also visit with old friends and share winemaking secrets as well as enjoying a picnic breakfast.

ed around the winery and by 1975 all of Gaspare's grandchildren had jobs - they are the third generation of Indelicatos to work in the family winery.

Six glass lined tanks arrived in 1964 on the Turner Station railroad siding. All of the wine had been aged in wooden tanks before this installation. The new tanks increased the winemaking capacity to 403,000 gallons, three times the capacity of the previous year.

In the seventies, the three brothers formed a corporation and renamed the winery - Delicato Vineyards. New buildings were dedicated in 1975 and in 1983. The tower now "springs up where mom and dad once tended their garden." Now, fifty years after the winery's founding, Delicato has a 40 million gallon facility, more than ten thousand times the first vintage. Delicato is now the nation's 12th largest vintner. The wine boom of the seventies brought great changes. North coast wineries needed bulk wine to expand their sales, and Delicato was able to provide the bulk needed, bringing their sales into the million gallon category.

Delicato buys grapes from Napa, Sonoma, Monterey, Santa Barbara and the Sierra foothills to supplement those from the Manteca and Lodi areas and to maintain high quality standards.

The most recent development is the purchase by Delicato of the San Bernabe Vineyard in Monterey County. This is a 12,000 acre vineyard developed by McCarthy Farms and the Prudential Insurance Company. According to wine industry sources, this is the largest contiguous vineyard under one ownership in the free world, measuring over 13 miles north to south and five miles east to west. Delicato built a new winery on adjacent property and began crushing grapes at the new facility with the 1988 crop. The new acquisition puts Delicato among the foremost suppliers of Premium Wines in all of California's coastal region.

The growth of the business has presented the Indelicatos with many challenges, such as inventory control, quality control, blending, storage, and

much more. While they used to keep records by hand, they now have sophisticated equipment that can even tell which grower's grapes are in a bottle of wine.

The one thing that has not changed is the Indelicato's strong feeling for the family traditions and the humble beginnings in working the land.



Delicato has hosted a charity grape stomp to benefit the local community each year since 1972. Each stomper is given 90 seconds to crush as much juice as he/she can from a 25-pound box of grapes. One of the youngest contestants is shown working hard.

Lee Miller, Almond Huller

by Evelyn Prouty

Rarely is the better mousetrap designed by an individual who has never chased the rodent. More often than not, an invention is produced out of necessity. The mechanic reaches a breaking point and decides to sit down and design a better carburator. The computer expert knows a better program exists.

And so it goes, and has always gone, with agriculture.

While the post-Civil War era has been recognized as the industrial age and many agricultural improvements surfaced during that time, improvements and inventions did not halt with the beginning of the 20th Century.

As more farmland became available to the grower, better equipment was needed to farm that acreage faster and cheaper.

With agriculture, perhaps more than in other industries, the inventor was the little guy. On a farm or ranch, the tools to experiment with were there along with skills.

Most farmers at the Turn of the Century were amateur blacksmiths, welders, electricians, plumbers. They had to be. Financial crunches forced them into unexplored fields. Rarely were they college educated.

That was not the case with Lawrence Miller, a native of Atlanta — that's the intersection of Jack Tone, Lone Tree and French Camp roads northeast of Manteca.

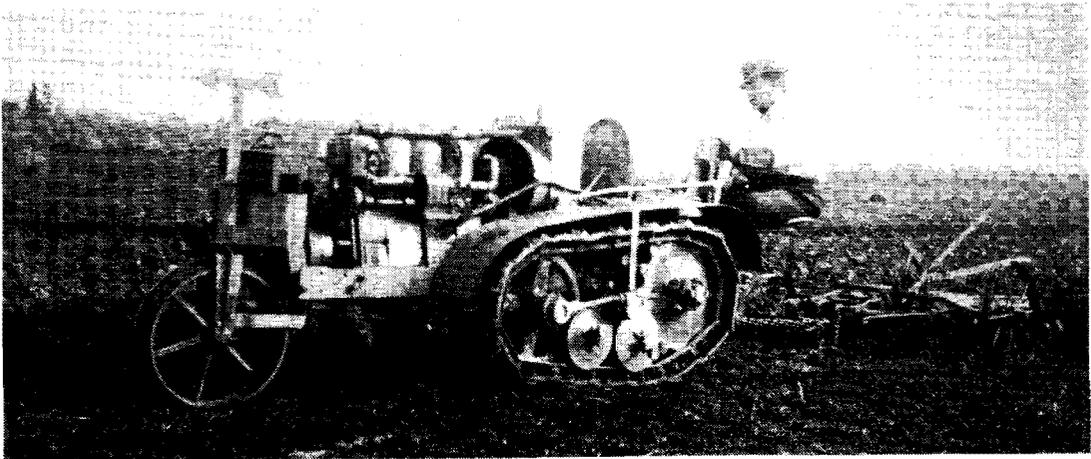
The son of a pioneer who came west from Farmington, Mo., in 1849, Miller — known by his middle name of Lee — was a 1908 graduate of University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in engineering.

That degree, and his natural ability, would land the young man a job with Benjamin Holt in Stockton and eventually, his own patent on an almond huller.

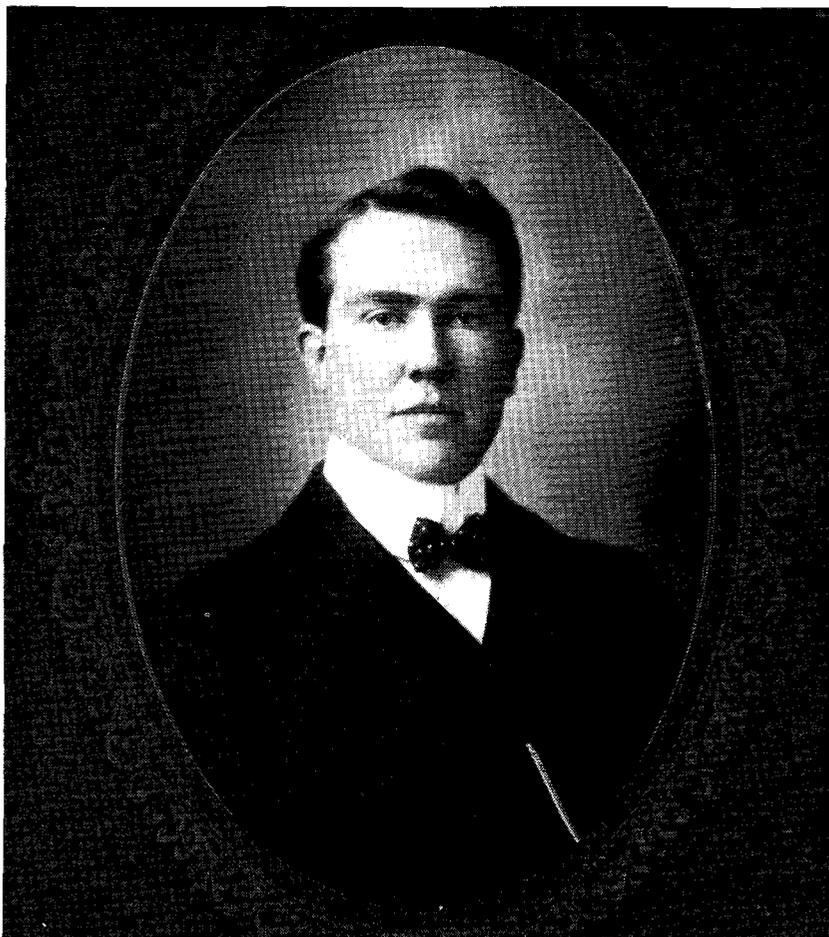
Miller joined the Holt Manufacturing Company shortly after graduation and began working on something new. It could cross the damp adobe soil east of Stockton without bogging down or travel on newly reclaimed Delta land to the west.

Another engineer working on the same project described the contraption as "resembling a caterpillar" and the name stuck.

Rather than the D10s we are familiar with today, the first Caterpillar looked more like an old John Deere with spiked wheels. Miller and others fine-tuned the invention until it was a marketable com-



Lee Miller testing one of the first Caterpillar tractors.



Graduate Lee Miller, U.C. Berkeley, 1908.

modity. by World War I, its track was adapted to a weapon of war.

But that story has been told.

Ten years after graduation, Miller returned to the soil. By then, he had married the daughter of Benjamin Goodwin, for whom the dam still remaining on the Tuolumne River was named and one of the founders of the South San Joaquin Irrigation District. He also had three sons and a daughter.

The original Miller ranch bordered the Goodwin ranch along Highway 120 west of Jack Tone Road and Lee received land from both his father and father-in-law.

With 200 acres to till, a home to build and four children to raise, he returned to the land. But he took his engineer's mind with him.

First he planted olives. But his wife, May, became so allergic to the pollen that she had to leave the ranch during spring and harvest. Perhaps being stuck home with four small children prompted the farmer to rethink his crop selection.

Almonds soon replaced olives, May's allergies improved, and the family was in business.

Watching almonds being cracked, smashed and eventually destroyed as they fell through the antiquated huller during harvest sent Miller to the drawing board.

In his application for a patent, Miller described his work. "A huller in which the nuts will be efficiently hulled and the danger of cracking the shells while so doing will be reduced to a minimum; one from which the hulled nuts and the

hulls will drop easily and without danger of their sticking between the grates; and one that adjusts to suit different conditions as to the kind and size of the nuts."

His invention worked so well that his patent was granted in 1926, the same year he began to commercially market the machines.

Ten years later, according to an article in the Manteca Bulletin, the Miller Almond Huller was "accepted as the best machine manufactured."

The newspaper article further described the huller as featuring adjustable screens, grate and cylinder, brushes to prevent the hulls from clogging and "many other features others don't have."

Miller was building two sizes of the huller, a small model that would handle 2,000 pounds of Nonpariels in an eight-hour run and 5,000 pounds of Texas almonds in the same time; and a large model with twice that capacity.

His best year was 1931; however, five years later the almond crop was diminishing and so were his sales. Even so, all the machines he produced had been sold. Nearly all of the hullers were made in the Ripon blacksmith shop of Irv Goodwin, his brother-in-law, and all were sold within California.

When not marketing almond hullers, Miller worked on the establishment of Manteca High School and served on the first board of trustees. Lending his abilities to the nearly-formed Manteca Union School district, he also served as building inspector during construction of the two-story Mission-style high school.

Two of his sons, Kent and Marvin Miller, would later serve on the board and his daughter, Muriel Prouty, would teach within the district — at Manteca High and French Camp Grammar School — for 36 years. His eldest son, Duane, found a job with R.G. LaTourneau Company. He died in the 1930s while working on a construction project back east.

When Lee Miller died of a heart attack in February 1941 at the age of 62,

district schools closed at noon to show respect for the former board member.

A few years later, his wife sold the patent to Capps Brothers in Stockton and the Miller almond huller name continued.

Today, many of the old wooden hullers with hand-hammered blacksmithing remain, deteriorating in the back of barns. To the Miller family of Atlanta, those hullers represented more than agricultural progress. The Miller huller put four children through college and helped keep the family solvent during the difficult Depression years.

Lee Miller served his family, and the agricultural industry well.

Evelyn Prouty

is the granddaughter of Lee Miller and News Editor of the Amador Ledger Dispatch in Jackson.

A native of Stockton, her interest in family history began in the mid-1960s when she compiled a genealogy of her San Joaquin County families — Miller, Goodwin, Clapp, Shedd, Maxwell.

That interest led to expanding her knowledge of the French Camp-Manteca area where she was raised. She joined the staff at the Manteca Bulletin in 1975 and wrote brief histories of the area for the newspaper for several years.

In 1980, those articles were combined into "Manteca - Selected Chapters from its History," a 200-page history of the area.

She moved to Jackson in 1981 as Foothill Life editor at the Ledger Dispatch and was promoted to editor in 1983.



A very good friend of the San Joaquin Historical Society has underwritten the cost of printing this quarterly issue of the Historian. While we respect his request for anonymity, we want him to know that we are most appreciative of his generous support of the Society's activities!

Editorial Comment

For the Historical Record: Our article on Lodi Cooperative Wineries, printed in Winter 1989, should have reported that the new Blending and Bottling facility for Guild in Lodi began operations on September 5, 1947, rather than 1942.

The Historian is continuously seeking reporters of historical stories and events in San Joaquin County. There is a wealth of information and experience among members of the Historical Society; we urge you to share it with us by calling (209) 369-1616.

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