



SAN JOAQUIN HISTORIAN

Volume VII, New Series

Spring 1993

Number 1

Vernalis, The Story of a Farming Community and its Early Settlers

by
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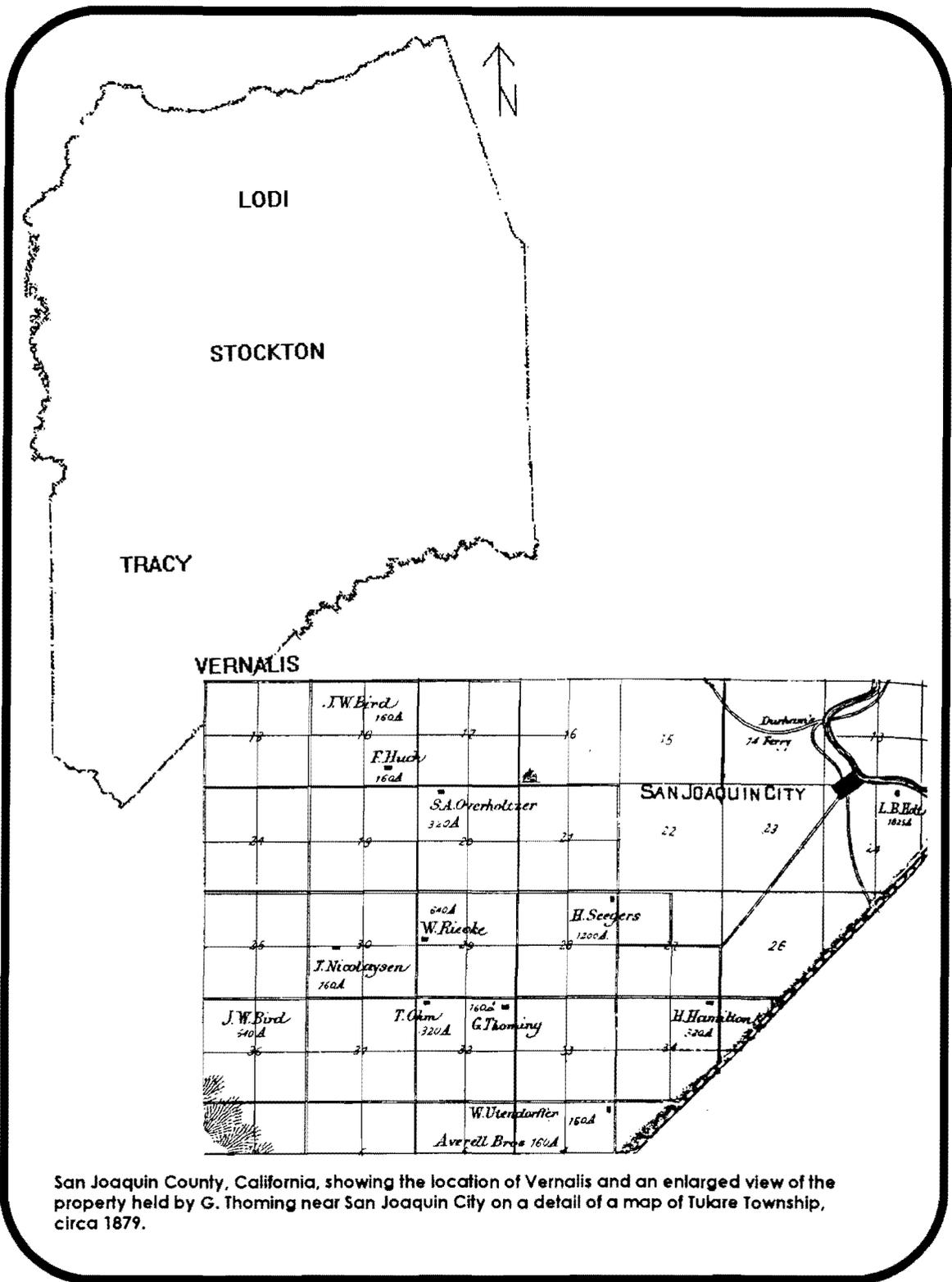
Vernalis is a farming community with many of the original immigrant families still working the land of their ancestors. The people who have made this area their home have worked hard, and they should be proud of its productivity and contribution to our national economy and security. This is the story of some of those dedicated settlers and the prosperous community they helped build.

The promise of land inspired hearty European immigrants to make the arduous trip across the Atlantic to the United States. Immigrants from countries such as Germany, Ireland and Scotland found fertile soil in and around Vernalis, in the southwestern part of San Joaquin County. The Thomings are one such pioneer family that came to this area and their family history is illustrative of the early settlers' experiences.

In 1860, Jurgan Thoming, the grandfather of Vernalis farmer Ed

Thoming, migrated to California from northwestern Germany. Jurgan traveled by ship to Cologne, Panama where he changed his mode of transportation to mule. The Panama Canal had not yet been built, so these nineteenth century argonauts from Europe faced three choices; the dangerous and lengthy sea passage around the southern tip of South America, the rigorous overland journey through malaria-ridden Panama, or the wagon trip across the United States. Jurgan chose mule transportation across the Isthmus from Cologne, Panama to Panama City.

Finally, after many months of arduous travel, he arrived in San Francisco. At first he worked as a farmer on the San Francisco Peninsula. His brother and sister-in-law, Thies Thiesen Thoming and Magdalena Mashoff, were already living in Vernalis with their children. During this time, on December 12, 1868, Jurgan wrote to his brother and parents in Germany telling them of the



San Joaquin County, California, showing the location of Vernalis and an enlarged view of the property held by G. Thoming near San Joaquin City on a detail of a map of Tulare Township, circa 1879.

great earthquake which had occurred in October of that year: "I felt it myself because I was just sitting in the hotel at a table to have breakfast when the shaking started. You should have seen how fast we were in the street and how the big stone houses swayed. You would think they all would collapse." The letter ended by saying "I'll come to an end until next time because it is getting light and I have to go out to plough."

Not long after Jurgan wrote this letter, Thies died and Jurgan moved to Vernalis to help Thies' widow. He eventually married her and they, Jurgan and Magdalena, had two children, one of whom was Jacob, Ed Thoming's father.

In 1877 Jurgan received the Thoming family's first land patents from the United States Government, personally signed by President Rutherford B. Hayes' deputy. Originally, the Thoming family farmed three 160-acre quarter sections, located off of Koster Road, near Highway 33. They and the other Vernalis immigrants were dry farmers, growing mostly wheat and barley. At any one time, one-half of their acreage would lay fallow to protect the soil and prevent the depletion of its nutrients and moisture.

Following the California gold rush, many of the early settlers came to Vernalis to farm the land with the skills they had acquired in their homelands. They received land patents, as did the Thomings, as the result of the Homestead Act. According to local farmer and historian Clifford William Koster, many of the Germanic settlers brought

farming techniques that were not necessarily well suited to the windy and arid Vernalis area. The farmers had to learn techniques of farming that would help the soil retain nutrients and moisture.

Mr. Koster is the grandson of Nicolaus Koster. At the age of nineteen, Nicolaus Koster left his Germanic homeland to avoid the war between Denmark and Germany. Although the Kosters did not receive one of the area's original land patents, by 1885 or 1886, within eleven years of his arrival in the United States, Nicolaus Koster was able to purchase 160 acres from the Ohms, another pioneer family. Today this property and quite a bit more is still being farmed by the Koster family.

Much of the wheat and barley grown by Vernalis' first dry farmers was transported via the San Joaquin River. Ed Thoming remembers sacks of wheat being loaded onto river barges at San Joaquin City. These sacks would be loaded onto hand carts and then wheeled onto the barges and unloaded for shipment up and down the river.

Until 1879, most of the transportation in the valley was provided by the San Joaquin River and a lot of people built their homes along its banks. But, in the 1880's, the Southern Pacific Railroad came to the San Joaquin Valley and the entire town, then known as San Joaquin City, relocated from the river to Vernalis, nearer to the railroad. All that remains of San Joaquin City is a resort area (run by descendants of another pioneer family, the Fisks), the Fisk and Ohm family home and a historical marker.

In 1913 Jurgan Thoming returned to Germany to visit his family. When he came back to California, he brought



Annie Von Bohl Thoming, who married Jacob Thoming after coming to California from Germany with Jurgan Thoming, Jacob's father, in 1913. Annie and Jacob had three children, one of whom is Ed Thoming.

with him a bride for his son Jacob: Annie Von Bohl. Jacob and Annie had three children, one of whom is Ed Thoming. Jurgan also brought back another unmarried young woman named Mary Opitz, and she married into another pioneer family, the Walters.

The Walters, in addition to being farmers, were a musical family and they would play their brass instruments at the Saturday night dances that were held at the local granaries or in the second story of the Vernalis store, near the Vernalis train station. More people played musical instruments in these days before radio or television, and the music at these gatherings would be provided by the local families. The old Vernalis store is said to have really rattled and shook when everyone started dancing and having a good time.

Another local place which was used for gatherings was the New Jerusalem one-room schoolhouse. This wooden building would be converted into a theater by stringing sheets on a wire across the front of the classroom, where the teacher's desk sat on a platform. This desk would be pushed aside and, because there was no electricity, oil lamps would be hung from the ceiling. Half way through the evening program, the oil lamps would have to be pumped and primed so they would last through the rest of the evening. Grammar school commencement was held in this manner, and other productions may have also been held here.

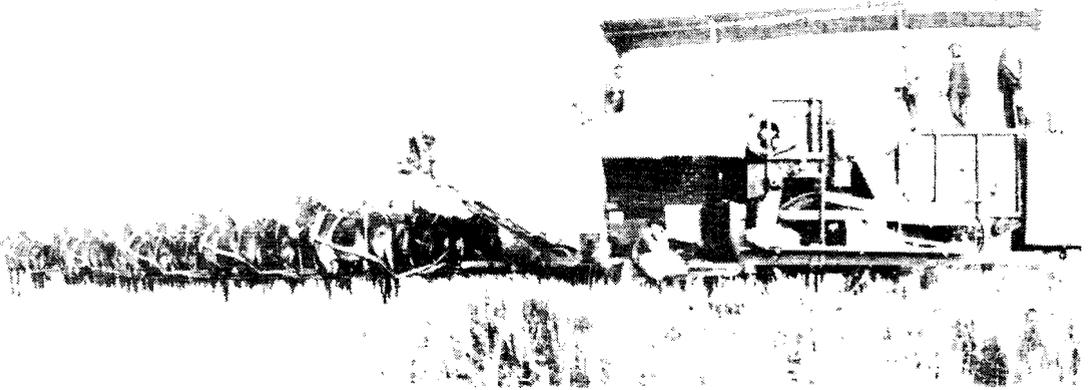
Although the one-room, wooden building is now gone, the New Jerusalem school remains in active use. Originally, the land on which the school was built was donated by a pioneer family named Ebe. Henry Ebe came to

the Vernalis area as part of a religious sect. He donated the school site, with the condition that the school always be called New Jerusalem. The buildings may not be the same as they were when Ed Thoming went to school, but both Ed, his father, and all of his family have attended this school.

During World War I, help was needed to harvest wheat in the Natomas area, northwest of Sacramento. In response to this need, in August of 1918, Jacob Thoming loaded up his family and workers, and hitched up teams of mules to his combine, thresher and chuck wagon. The whole procession rode by barge and boat up the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers to Natomas. The Thoming family spent the month of August in Natomas and harvested the wheat. Annie, Jacob's wife, cooked for all of the workers.

In September, the company made its way back to Vernalis, but this time by road. Each time they would come to a turn in the road they would have to unhitch the machinery and negotiate the turn one piece of equipment at a time. Ed Thoming was only four years old at the time, but he remembers this frustrating journey which nearly ended two and one-half miles from home, when the combine was unable to take a particularly sharp turn. Darkness prevented them from being able to see well enough to maneuver around the turn, so the whole family, after a long and frustrating journey, had to spend one more night on the road. When daylight came, they made the turn and gratefully arrived home.

Most trips taken by the early settlers were less daunting than the Natomas trip. On each Sunday during



Combined harvesters were pulled by mules until the transition to tractor power just after World War I. The machinery cut, threshed and sacked the grain in one operation. Sack sewers rode on the back, sewing the sacks of wheat or barley closed. Mule skimmers sat on a "Jacob's Ladder" and controlled the animals.



The New Jerusalem School site was donated by Henry Ebe on the condition that the school would always have that name. This is the second building to be called New Jerusalem School, where all of the Thomings have attended classes.

the 1920's after the arrival of the railroad, the local farmers would take the much shorter and less arduous journey down to the Vernalis train station. There, they would wait for the train to bring the *San Francisco Examiner*. This was a time for the farmers to smoke cigars, have a soda and socialize with one another. When the train arrived, the papers were distributed and each farmer would tuck a copy under his arm and either walk, ride a horse or drive a Model T Ford back to his farm to read the news.

In the 1920s the Banta Carbona Water District was established. The district, which still operates today, was formed by a group of landowners in a large dry-farming community in southwestern San Joaquin County, including those in the Vernalis area. These landowners purchased the water rights of the River View Land and Water Company, and with the proceeds from sales of municipal bonds, built an irrigation system which serves approximately 15,500 acres and 111 farmers. Throughout its history, the district has had only three directors in District Five: Henry Ohm was the director from 1926 until 1955, Ed Thoming was the director from 1955 until 1989, and Jim Thoming, Ed's youngest son, has been the director from 1989 to the present.

At first the pioneer farmers, accustomed to their dry farming methods in the relatively arid Vernalis area, were unsure of the wisdom of irrigated farming. Jurgan Thoming sold off two of his three quarter sections because he was unwilling to pay the fees imposed by the district and he was unsure of the new farming methods. But, with the influx of farming families from southern California such as the Bogettis, irrigated farming became an

acceptable method of farming and today a wide variety of crops, such as tomatoes, walnuts, almonds, apricots, cantaloupes, sugar beets and beans are grown in the Vernalis area.

In the 1930s, Antoine and Jeanne Bogetti heard that land was opening up in Vernalis and so they gave up their grocery store in Ventura and moved their family to Vernalis. Bertha Thoming, their daughter and Ed Thoming's wife, recalls that when her family moved to Vernalis, the water district was still fairly new and the local farmers were skeptical of irrigated farming. Her father, having come from an Italian farming family accustomed to this method of farming, began using the irrigation water and showed that it could be a benefit. Mr. Bogetti's success encouraged other farmers and helped lead to the expansion of irrigated farming in this area of San Joaquin County.

During World War II, Vernalis played a significant role in the national effort; it was home to both a prisoner of war camp and a naval air station. The prisoner of war camp was located on a 700-acre site at the southeast corner of the intersection of Highways 132 and 33, on what is today an almond orchard. World War II prisoners of war, mostly Italian and German, were housed at the Vernalis facility. Jacob Thoming, believing that these prisoners should be treated as we would like our captured soldiers to be treated, would visit the POWs and take tobacco to them. The government employed these POWs as laborers to grow rubber plants in Vernalis because of the rubber shortage during the war.

Unfortunately, these plants did not grow well in the Vernalis climate.

Vernalis' naval air station was established in 1942 for the training of navy fighters flying from carriers moored at Alameda, California. Bertha Thoming's sister, Antoinette Bogetti, worked at this station as support personnel during the war.

With the coming of World War II, there were shortages of both men and materials. Ed Thoming at the time was running a welding shop and he lost several of his men to the ship yards, which were paying good money at the time. Steel and metal became quite dear, and so when the opportunity presented itself, Ed took over the land lease of his brother-in-law, John Bogetti, who had been drafted and was stationed in the Aleutian Islands. Ed Thoming helped in the war effort by teaching welding at the high school to local farmers because, just as had happened to his shop during the war, many of the other shops had also closed and the farmers needed to learn how to keep their machinery running.

Today, Ed Thoming and his sons, John and Jim, continue to farm in Vernalis. John and Jim each joined in their father's farming operation after their respective graduations from high school in 1959 and 1961. In addition to the land of their father, Ed's sons hold and lease their own land and have expanded the family's farming operations, operating under the entities known as Ed Thoming & Sons, and Thoming Farms. Like their father, John and Jim dedicate time to farming-related organizations and to their community. Following his father's lead, Jim is the present director of the Banta Carbona Water District and serves on

the local bean board. John is the chairman of the Western Division of the American Dry Bean Board and he is a former chair of California Dry Bean Advisory Board. In the past year he has traveled around the world twice, promoting beans as an alternative source of protein and developing foreign markets for this local product on behalf of the American Dry Bean Board.

The Bogetti family also continues to farm in the Vernalis area. Two of Antoine and Jeanne Bogetti's sons, Robert and Albert, are Vernalis farmers. Bertha Thoming and her sister, Antoinette Reece, have both married into farming families, and John and George, two other siblings, are now retired after a career of farming in Vernalis. George and Albert also own and operate the Orchard Restaurants, located in Vernalis, Tracy and Turlock. Antoine and Jeanne must have struggled and worked hard, but the farming tradition and legacy they left for their children has benefitted their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great, great-grandchildren, most of whom still live in the Vernalis area.

The marriage of Bertha (Bogetti) and Ed Thoming has not been the only successful joint venture between the Bogetti and Thoming families. Today these families own and operate a state-of-the-art apricot packaging plant. This plant sorts the apricots by weight and size through an electronic eye and it allows these families to quickly package their fruit so it can be flown to markets throughout the United

States.

Many families settled in Vernalis and contributed to its development. The Thomings, Bogettis, Ohms, Fisks, Nicolaysens, Walters, and Koters are just a few of them. The pioneer families that left their homes and families to come to this unknown, undeveloped and relatively arid area were courageous, dedicated settlers. Although they faced many hardships, they shared a sense of freedom and opportunity. Although they labored long, hard hours, they came to know and enjoy nature in ways denied modern man. The distant call of the young hawk, the wind rushing through a field of wheat, the sights and sounds of a gathering storm; these are experiences the early settlers came to understand and appreciate far more than we often do, in our more urbanized and sheltered lives. In facing our modern day challenges, it may be instructive to remember what life was like less than 100 years ago and to muster our shared pioneer spirit that gave humanity the courage and dedication to progress to what is now our modern life.



Acknowledgments:

The author would like to thank Ed and Bertha Thoming for taking the time to recall the stories in this article which breathe life into history, making it three-dimensional. She would also like to thank Clifford Koster and Cynthia Bell for their insights and historical information. A finally, but not least, she would like to thank Gary Christopherson and Leslie Crow for their editorial assistance.

Editor's Note: The following is a translation of a letter written in German by J. C. Thoming to his parents from the Vernalis area in December of 1868.

San Joaquin Valley, Dec. 12, 68

Beloved parents and brother!

I received your letter end of October and learned that you are all well, thanks God. I was in the City at that time when brother's wife came down here with her son to have him baptized. Beloved parents, I think everything else my brother wrote to you. That's why I waited a few weeks, I would have written sooner but I found a job rightaway at Wilhelm Reiks a Holtorf in the neighborhood and I will always have a job there.

Dear parents,

October we had a big earthquake here, the biggest one that ever happened here. I felt it myself because I was just sitting in the hotel at a table to have breakfast when the shaking started. You should have seen how fast we were in the street and how the big stone houses swayed. You would think they all would collapse.

..... continued on page 10

Pamela H. Burgess was born in Shiloh Valley, Illinois on May 28, 1959. She was educated at the University of California, Los Angeles, earning her B. A. in 1982. She attended the McGeorge School of Law, part of the University of the Pacific, and was admitted to the California Bar in 1992. She is a member of Phi Delta Phi, and the recipient of the Tort Award for Scholarly Performance. She served as the Assistant Comment Editor for the Pacific Law Journal, 1990-1991 and was a finalist in the International Moot Court Memorial Competition. She is a member of the San Joaquin County Bar Association; State Bar of California and the American Bar Association. She is presently an Associate Member of the law firm of Kroloff, Belcher, Smart, Perry & Christopherson in Stockton.

I think you might have read about it, because I enclosed a report in brother's letter.

Dear parents,

I have been in Napa this fall at the 3 brothers Heinrich. I had not seen any of them so I stayed with them for a few days. I was also at C. Thedens and M. Guden, they are all well and send their best regards. The harvest was just fair, They usually have had good crops, but not in Napa because it was too wet last winter. Grain is very expensive now, Wheat is probably 2 1/2 c per 100 lbs. and barley 2 c.

Dear parents,

What might P. Harder be doing? Did you ever talk with him? As far as I know he will be here again pretty soon. Maybe H. Rohver from Wrohm will be coming home next summer, he has his place in Solano County. He moved away to the City with his wife because her family lives there, but he was not certain about it.

If P. Harder should come over next spring and you feel like it why don't you come along. Brother has built a new house this fall on his land which is still wet and bare. We talked about it sometimes, it would be much better if you would come here because his house is ready for you, it has everything in it, stove and dishes.

Dear parents,

2 boys arrived here from Linden from whom I heard that the families in Hagen and Linden are still well. Antje Thoming is married with somebody from Linden. I would have thought she would invite us to her wedding, but we should not have counted on it, because she did not know our address, give her my

best regards. They told us that Gretchen Thoming is going to Dellstedt, they did not know who she married, tell me about it sometimes.

Best regards to Grandfather, Uncle and his wife, tell them that I am still well and I hope they are too. Best regards to the whole family. I'll come to an end until next time because it is getting light and I have to go out to plough.

Hope to hear from you soon,

I remain your son

J. C. Thoming

Dear Brother!

Now I'll turn to you to talk a few words with you. According to what you wrote to me you opened your own repair shop which is probably better after all. Do you have enough work if I may ask? I hope. Your friend Conrad Muller has a job here in town. I do not know how much money he makes, he apparently gets paid by the piece. Johann Gladen built himself a house where I worked last summer, yes in Solano County and he works for himself. Harms Clausen married M. Suhr from Hennngten this fall, I was at the wedding, all the girls who came over with me are married, except Elisabeth Gosch, but as rumors say is she spoken for. Dear brother, I wish you would write again soon. I remain hopefully

Your brother,

J. C. Thoming

Best Regards to all my friends and relatives.

An Apology to the Koreans

by
Dr. Donald Walker

As early as 1905 Koreans may have begun to work in San Joaquin County. Beginning in 1903 at the urging of the Korean emperor's American advisor Horace Allen, these immigrants began to leave their homeland in response to disastrous economic conditions there that were occasioned by alternating floods, droughts, plagues of locusts, and a cholera epidemic. Virtually all Korean immigrants went first to the Hawaiian Islands as contract laborers then came to the mainland in search of better wages and working conditions when their contracts had expired.¹

The San Joaquin County White public paid no attention to these new immigrants. They were few in number and generally assumed to be either Chinese or Japanese. Research has discovered virtually no mention of Koreans—identified as such—in the local press. Most factual information about Korean immigrant activities in San Joaquin County is available only in two Korean language histories published in the 1950s. Both of these works are cited frequently by Bong-youn Choy, Hyung-chan Kim, and others who have written in English about Korean immigrants in California. It is not clear from English language sources whether the Korean

language histories carefully identify and document their sources. It is possible that the two works, Kim Won-yong's *Chae-Mi Hanin osimnyonsa* [A Fifty Year History of the Koreans in the United States] (Reedley, California: Charles Ho Kim, 1959) and Noh Jae-yon's *Chae-Mi Hanin saryak* [A Short History of Koreans in America] (Los Angeles, 1951,1963), make use of Korean language newspapers and personal interviews for much of their information, but until these works are translated and republished, research on Korean immigrants remains something of a closed book to those not fluent in the Korean language.

The researcher conversant only with English soon discovers that certain surnames—notably Kim—are unmistakably Korean. The bearers of these names may be confidently identified as Koreans when the names are discovered in land records and English language newspapers even though the individuals are not identified as Koreans. These persons are included in the tentative Korean roster provided below. Depending upon spelling, other Korean surnames like Choy, Han, and Yi, can resemble Chinese names. The exclusively English-speaking researcher who

would distinguish between nationals of the two groups must regularly cope with this dilemma.²

English language sources cite four items pertaining to Korean immigrant activity in San Joaquin County. They are here offered to the reader by way of apology to the Korean community and as a tentative beginning of the historiography of Korean immigrants in the county.

Bong-youn Choy states that in October 1911 Hu Seung-won and Yi Soon-ki established a "variety department store" in Stockton that "[d]istributed supplies to Korean families in the area." Choy offers no source for this information. We can probably assume that it is taken either from Kim Won-youn or from Noh Joe-yon. The merchants' names do not appear in San Joaquin County directories but by 1911 Asian names do not generally appear there. If, in 1911, a Korean store could survive in Stockton it must have had more than a few patrons. Unhappily, the 1910 census counts Koreans as Japanese nationals and it is therefore difficult to determine just how many more.³

Hyung-chan Kim and Wayne Patterson mention a curious chain of events that transpired in 1915 involving a Korean resident of Stockton. Oh Jingu-guk of Stockton is said to have spoken with militant nationalist leader Pak (or Park) Yong-man on July 12, 1915 while the latter was visiting San Francisco. Park, the principal adversary of Christian leader Syngman Rhee, advocated military ouster of the Japanese from Korea while Rhee favored negotiation. The two men were not on friendly terms. Apparently Mr. Oh intended to assassinate Rhee.

It is not clear from Kim's rather incoherent entry whether Park had hired Oh to dispatch Rhee. In any event, Oh took ship for Hawaii (where Rhee lived) but apparently changed his mind about killing the man and jumped overboard before the vessel reached Honolulu. Kim provides no source for this information but again it seems likely that the tale originated with Kim Won-yong or with Noh Joe-yon.⁴

Kim and Patterson also report that in February 1916:

A group of sixty Koreans residing in Manteca, California, rented a total of 1,300 acres of land in order to grow sugar beets. Sin Kyong-Whan, Ha Young-Suk and Yi Sung-no rented a total of 320 acres of land.

This peculiarly-worded statement does not make clear whether the three individuals named were among the sixty who are said to have rented 1,300 acres or were a separate group renting additional acreage. The same source notes that in March, 1917, "Koreans in Stockton and Manteca...cultivated a total of 3,920 acres of land for sugar beets." Again, the information is undocumented--although a passing reference to the first item in Houchins' "The Korean Experience in America" published in the *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (1974) indicated that the item appears (with variations) in both Kim Won-yong and Noh Chae-yon.

Research has yet to discover as many as sixty Korean renters in the 1916-18 county land records. As the reader will see, the present tentative roster does not extend beyond ten names. Crop mortgage records do



Crops such as these sugar beets were often tended by the Korean agricultural workers in San Joaquin County. Franch Camp, Ripon and the Manteca area were the locations of many of these tracts. More research will be necessary to determine how many Koreans resided in the county in the first part of this century since they were often mistakenly identified as members of other Asian nationalities.

indicate that in 1918 two Koreans rented many hundreds of acres near Ripon. They, however, grew tomatoes--not sugar beets.⁵

Evidently there was a large Korean community in Manteca during the First World War since, according to Kim and Patterson, these immigrants dedicated a Christian church there on September 22, 1918. Evelyn Prouty Thompson does not mention this church in her *Manteca: Pages From Its History*.⁶

Dr. Donald Walker completed his dissertation called *Race Relations and Specialty Crops: Horticulture in San Joaquin County, 1900-1925* as part of the requirements for a Master's Degree in History at California State University Sacramento in 1992. This material represents an excerpt from his complete work. Dr. Walker is on the staff of the University of the Pacific's Holt-Atherton Pacific Center for Western Studies and is the Librarian-Archivist at the Gerald D. Kennedy Reference Library at the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum.



An Apology to Koreans Endnotes

1. Lee Houchins and Chang-su Houchins. "The Korean Experience in America," in *The Asian American Experience* (Santa Barbara: Clio Books, 1974), 131-32.
2. H. Brett Melendy. *Asians in America: Filipinos, Koreans, and East Indians* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 113.
3. Bong-youn Choy. *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 129.
4. Hyung-chan Kim and Wayne Patterson. *The Koreans in America, 1882-1974: A Chronology and Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1974), 24.
5. Kim & Patterson. *Koreans*, 24, 26; Houchins. "The Korean Experience," 144; San Joaquin County Recorder's Office. *Book 1 of Miscellaneous: Crop & Chattel Mortgage Records* 59:38.
6. Kim & Patterson. *Koreans*, 27.

Leslie Crow, Editor

c 1993

Published Quarterly by the
San Joaquin County
Historical Society, Inc.
Michael W. Bennett, Director
P. O. Box 21, Lodi, California 95241

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 located in Micke Grove Regional Park.

Roster of Non-Whites in San Joaquin County, 1900-25

KOREANS	Date	Reference	How cited	Location
Bing Yuen	1912	CCE	Cv	Staten Island
Ha, Yong-suk	1916	(Kim)	L	Manteca
Kim, C. L.	1912	31:469	CrM	Roberts Island
Kim, M. C.	1918	59:038	CrM	Ripon
Kim, Pil K.	1917	DR	CrM	Ripon
	1919	DR	CrM	French Camp
Kim, S. M.	1916	(Kim)	L	Manteca
Kim, W. T.	1917	DR	CrM	French Camp
	1917	DR	CrM, CM	Lathrop
Kim Yuen	1912	CCR	Cv	Staten Island
Lee, K. S.	1917	DR	CrM	Manteca
Lee Nam Chin	1912	CCR	Cp	Staten Island
Lim, S. H.	1918	59:038	CrM	Ripon
O Chee	1912	CCR	Cp	Staten Island
Sin Kyong-whan	1916	(Kim)	L	Manteca
Yi Sung-no	1916	(Kim)	L	Manteca

Key to abbreviations:

CCR	=	Central Calif. Record
DR	=	Daily Report
Cv	=	Crime victim
CrM	=	Crop Mortgage record
Cp	=	Crime perpetrator
L	=	Lease

(All others from S. J. County Chattel & Mortgage records)

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