



Below the Helm house on top of the hill on Toyon Lane, a growth of two-year old lemon trees were cultivated in 1949 by Karl Helm and his son John, today replaced by the I-805

The Lemon Industry of Chula Vista 1890 -1960

by Peter Watry

Citrus booms in Southern California The first orange trees were brought to Southern California by the Spanish missionaries in 1769. By 1805, the San Gabriel Mission is credited with having the first orange grove of any size. The first commercial orchard was planted in Los Angeles in 1841 using trees from the San Gabriel Mission. These oranges were not outstanding in terms of their quality ~ and gave little hint as to what was to come.

Meanwhile, the first ancestors of the navel orange were grown in India by the Portuguese then transplanted to Portugal, and eventually brought to their colony in Brazil. In 1870 twelve of these Brazilian trees were sent to the U. S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. and propagated by budding on to small stocks. And two of those, in turn, were sent to a friend in Riverside, California. These proved to be perfect for California < deep orange in color, the fruit had a rich flavor and could be easily peeled and sectioned, and its thick skin withstood handling and shipping. It came to be known as the "Washington navel" and remained the backbone of the California citrus industry. Orange production in Southern California just boomed < orange groves by the thousands of acres sprang up. Remnants of one of the original two "Washington navels" still produces in Riverside.

Meanwhile, the Valencia orange, so full of juice, made its way from the Azores to Southern California to complement the navel orange. Lemon trees and grapefruit trees were not far behind. Soon, citrus production in Southern California far surpassed the local market demand.

Lemons boom in Chula Vista

What is now National City, Chula Vista and Bonita was originally one of the Mexican land grants called Rancho de La Nación. It was purchased in 1868 by William P. Kimball and his brothers. They first developed National City as a town and then developed the 5,000 acres south of National City, called Chula Vista, as an agricultural community. It was soon discovered that the local environment was perfect for growing lemons - cool and no extremes of heat. Sweetwater Dam was completed in 1888 and by the 1890s and early 1900s, Chula Vista came to be recognized as the "Lemon Capital of the World."

Chula Vista reflected the rest of Southern California in this gigantic boom of citrus production ~ production that was far outstripping the demand for their product. The average grove was probably no more than ten acres, so there were thousands of citrus growers. They would all sell their production to a relative few packing houses owned by others, and not infrequently the growers ended up owing the packers, rather than vice versa, to process and market their crop.

Rival Co-ops to the rescue

As a result of citrus overproduction throughout Southern California in general and the resulting losses being sustained by growers, some growers decided to together in order to (1) market their citrus production themselves and (2) eventually to control the quantity and quality of what production actually went to market as to maintain an acceptable price. The most successful of these grower co-ops organized itself in the Riverside area in 1893 and called itself the Southern California Fruit Exchange. Later, as they extended their influence into the San Joaquin Valley, they changed their name to California Fruit Growers Exchange. The logo used on their fruit, particularly aimed at the back east market, first suggested as "Sun Kissed," was "Sunkist." And in 1952 they changed their name to reflect they are now known as Sunkist Growers, Inc. They are, of course, still very active today.

In 1916 a group of growers in the Redlands area, not satisfied in how much say-so Sunkist was allowing its members, formed a rival co-op called "Mutual Citrus Distributors," M.O.D. Their logo was "Pure Gold," and in 1958 they followed Sunkist's example, changing their name to Pure Gold. There were also a couple lesser-known co-ops.

Both these major regional co-ops were active both on the demand side, by really pushing their product in the east, and on the supply side by limiting how many members could send to market. "Sunkist" was originally just a key word in their logo and M.O.D. used "Pure Gold" as their logo < both trying to convince the market that eating or drinking citrus products from California was a way of getting some of that golden sunshine from the golden sunshine state. But these words were a small part of an extensive effort to increase demand for citrus products in the eastern United States, and eventually overseas.

On the supply side, the co-ops (in cooperation) would set weekly "prorated" limits on how much could be shipped each week, and then the total limit was broken down to limits for each individual packing house. This was done successfully on a voluntary basis beginning in the early 1920s. In 1933, during the Great Depression, the federal and state governments added government approval to the prorating system. For a variety of reasons, the government withdrew its support of prorating in 1993 and so today there are no more "prorated" marketing orders. This statement from the 2000 Annual Report of Sunkist reflects the current situation: As supermarkets continue to consolidate, more sellers compete for fewer customers. The marketing order is gone, and with it the mechanism for an orderly flow of product to market. Global competitors now fight for customers that traditionally have been served by Western citrus growers. Competition for shelf space is intense and ruthless.

Rival Co-ops in Chula Vista

The first attempt to form a co-op in Chula Vista was the formation of the Chula Vista Fruit Association in 1894. A co-op would have been useful at the local level for cooperating in picking and packing their product. Although it is not known if they were associated with a regional co-op or not for marketing purposes, there is evidence that they were associated with Sunkist. The immediate concern of these grower co-ops would have been to control the costs of packing and shipping themselves. What is known is that Chula Vista Fruit Association had a wonderful crate label for their "Bay Brand" of lemons: a painted view of Chula Vista lemons in the foreground and San Diego Bay and Point Loma in the background.

We do not know the fate of the Chula Vista Fruit Association < it may have been a victim of the severe frost of 1913. In 1916 some Chula Vista growers organized the Chula Vista Citrus Association and associated themselves with Sunkist. The C.V.C.A. remained a member of Sunkist from 1916 until the C.V.C.A.'s demise in 1965. Many old-timers will remember their big packing plant on the southeast corner of Third Avenue and K Street. George Cox moved to Chula Vista from Riverside in 1918 to be the first manager of that packing plant. His grandson, Greg Cox, served many years as a Chula Vista Councilman, then for two terms as Mayor of Chula Vista, and is at this writing a member of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors.

Charlie Butler was a long-time manager of the Sunkist packing house. Walter Carey was the last manager of the Chula Vista Citrus Association. Walter was born in Pennsylvania in 1902 and moved to Chula Vista with his family in 1920. He started work almost immediately with the Sunkist Chula Vista Citrus Lemon Packing House. Walter worked in all phases of lemon packing production: he washed, culled and packed lemons. For a number of years he was Field Superintendent supervising and directing the entire outside operation. He became the assistant manager, then finally he managed the entire plant. The only job Walter never had was to wash lemons in the forty years he was employed by Sunkist. A decade later, in 1926, some other growers organized themselves into the Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association and associated themselves with Mutual Orange Distributors, M.O.D. As stated, the major Sunkist packing plant was situated on the southeast corner of Third Avenue and K Street, site of a Bank of America bank today. The major M.O.D. packing plant was located on Fourth Avenue just south of F Street, where Parkwoods Condos are today. The Sunkist packing plant was torn down in 1960; the M.O.D. packing plant, the last one standing, was torn down in 1965. I remember the giant "M.O.D." sign atop that packing plant's highest tower.

The first manager of the Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association was Aaron Riesland, who served in that capacity from 1926 until 1958. The last manager of the Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association (M.O.D.) was Thomas Whittingham, and he continued to live in Chula Vista, until his death in 2002, on the site of his lemon grove. Mr. Whittingham was most generous in both educating the current members of the Heritage Museum and in supplying us with records and artifacts of Chula Vista's lemon history.

Tom's father, Tom Sr., came to Chula Vista about 1900 and began work in the lemon groves as a picker. CVMLA was formed in 1926 and Tom Sr. became the foreman in its packing house near the corner of F Street and Fourth Avenue. Tom Jr. was born in Chula Vista in 1907 and went to work in the CVMLA packing house in 1929. He fulfilled many jobs there, was Assistant Manager for quite a number of years, and then became Manager the last few years of its existence.

By limiting how much citrus actually was shipped to market (the weekly "prorates"), the regional co-ops could prevent any overproduction from actually reaching the market and thereby depressing the price. Fruit that was not allowed to be shipped was used in the many extracts and by-products that were developed. Lemons, particularly, have many uses besides being used directly as lemons. Lemon by-products include citric acid, frozen concentrates, refrigerated juice, lemon bioflavonoids, oils and distillates, crude oil from the peels, pectin used in jams and jelly, and citrus molasses for cattle feed.

For the better part of the century, 1923 to 1993, Sunkist, M.O.D. and a few other co-ops were quite successful in keeping the overproduction off the market, the same time working very hard to develop new markets for their products, both back east and overseas, and new by-products for the excess fruit. Chula Vista lemons were a part of that great California citrus boom and industry manipulation. And up until World War II, Chula Vista's lemons were a major source of lemons for the world (Today, by the way, the center for U.S. lemon production has moved north to the Ventura area, north of Los Angeles. Argentina, however, is the world's largest exporter of lemons today.)

Lemon Operations in Chula Vista

As with any branch of agriculture, lemon production in Chula Vista had its ups and downs for the entire seven decades of its existence. In the 1890s, drought initial challenge that lemon growers faced in Chula Vista. Sweetwater Dam had been completed in 1888, but the drought meant that the dam's reservoir was empty. Wells were drilled in an effort to supply enough water to keep the trees alive and the efforts were generally successful. At another time, the price of water doubled by the water company, making it very difficult to produce profitably.

Lemons thrive in cool temperatures - but not too cool! Generally speaking, lemons can tolerate temperatures down to 28 degrees. Below that, the fruit may be damaged, and much below that, even the trees can be damaged. In 1913 the January temperature dropped to 10 degrees and sub-freezing temperatures lasted for two days! Known thereafter as the Big Freeze of 1913, the freeze spoiled the lemons on the trees and killed the weaker trees. Some growers replanted new trees that take five to six years for lemon saplings to become profitable. Many other growers gave up on lemons, deciding to switch to annual crops like celery and corn. But 1913 was not through yet - "Santa Ana" winds hit in September and temperatures got as high as 110 degrees, again damaging the weaker trees and the new saplings. Significant freezes hit again in 1922, 1937, and 1949.

Lemons must be picked one at a time. The picker grasps the lemon with one hand and then with the other hand, and a special cutter, he must cut the stem from the lemon, but not so close as to cut the lemon. If the stem is too long, it will puncture and damage other lemons as it goes through the packing process. One with an excessively long stem can damage twenty other lemons as they tumble together in the packing-house process. Normally, pickers are paid by how many lemons they pick so they must work quickly to earn a decent wage, yet not too quickly so as to result in damaged fruit.

Up through the 1920s, pickers were normally local men, local agricultural workers. But in the 1930s there was an influx of thousands of "Okies" and others from their homes in Oklahoma, Arkansas and that area by the terrible twin events of the "Dust Bowl" and the Great Depression. They were desperate, hard working and eager for any job. These Okies became the workforce of agriculture all through California, including Chula Vista. Today, many of the most successful agricultural business operators throughout California are these Okies who made good.

With the advent of World War II, everyone, including the Okies, could make much more money in the war factories, particularly the aircraft factories and shops in California. Rohr Aircraft Corporation had moved its operations to Chula Vista early in 1941, just months before Pearl Harbor. Rohr's main product were the cowlings, the metal work, that surrounds the engines. Demand for their product, and in turn their demand for workers, just soared. That might well have be disastrous for agriculture because the prices of their output, including lemons from Chula Vista, were fixed by wartime controls. Fortunately for Chula Vista growers, the government worked out a solution. In cooperation with the Mexican government, the Mexican Farm Labor Supply Program (the "bracero" program) began in July 1942. The "bracero" program brought agricultural workers up from Mexico on an organized basis. They were housed and fed by the growers, in addition to being paid, and then returned to Mexico. The braceros were paid the same amount per lemons picked as the American workers had been getting, they were housed and fed by the growers, they could take a great deal of money back home with them.

The Chula Vista Citrus Association (Sunkist) housed their bracero workers in special-built barracks adjacent to their packing house. The Chula Vista Mutual Association (M.O.D.) housed their bracero workers in their packing plant itself. They had previously expanded their packing plant at Fourth and Center and an old boiler room to be converted into living spaces. The bracero program was so successful that it lasted until 1964. World War II caused a great increase in the demand for lemon products, however price-controls meant that quantity was the only gain.

Post World War II

World War II had seen a great influx of people into Chula Vista. For the most part this meant war-workers to work at Rohr Corporation, which manufactured sheet-metal parts that encased the engines on airplanes. On large multi-engine planes particularly, where the engines are mounted out on the wing, the engine enclosure, called a nacelle, became Rohr's specialty, and in fact continues to be so to this day. Thousands of temporary homes of one type or another were built to house these war-workers. Of course that usually meant cutting down lemon orchards to make room for them. Also, even in the 1930s lemon groves were being cut out to make room for other types of agriculture, particularly "truck farming" - tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, etc. In addition, during World War II millions of men came through the San Diego area on their way to the war in the Pacific Theater. The great bulk of these were, of course, Navy and Marine men (and some women, too). They liked what they saw in terms of climate and such and so returned to try and start their civilian careers and families here. By the early 1950s subdivisions were being built all over Chula Vista, after the lemon trees were torn out.

Thus housing projects and new businesses began to replace lemon groves in Chula Vista in the 1950s. It happened at such a rate that by 1960 both major packing plants had basically shut down operations. Indeed, the Chula Vista Citrus Association's "Sunkist" packing plant at Third Avenue and K Street was torn down and was soon replaced by a Bank of America branch. The Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association's "Pure Gold" packing plant at Fourth Avenue and F Street last to be torn down in 1965, but it also ceased operations as a lemon-packing plant in 1960.

There were other pressures operating against the continuation of these lemon associations besides suburbanization, and these were affecting citrus operations everywhere. For more than a half a century lemons and oranges had been shipped in rather large wooden boxes or crates. These crates packed about 84 pounds. In the mid-1950s these wooden crates began to be replaced by cardboard cartons packing about 40 pounds of fruit. The cardboard cartons were much cheaper to manufacture. Both of the Chula Vista lemon packing plants made the switch to the cardboard cartons.

Another consequence of this change-over from wooden crates to cardboard cartons was the loss of the rather remarkable "art work" of the crate labels that had been used for a half century on the end of the crates to tell commercial jobbers whose fruit it was and what grade the fruit inside was. The multi-colored art work labels is quite remarkable in retrospect, and since the end of the wooden crates these crate labels have come to be considered art work in themselves and many hundreds of dollars. The new cardboard cartons come pre-printed using just one or two colors. The Chula Vista Heritage Museum has many examples of art work used by Chula Vista packing houses before the switch.

Labor costs might have become prohibitive in the post-war boom but fortunately the Mexican bracero program was continued until 1964, several years after Chula Vista growers had ceased operations. But there too, the handwriting was on the wall: the bracero program would not continue forever, so packing houses elsewhere began a major move to automate their operations. The Chula Vista packing houses would have had to do likewise if they had wanted to stay in business.

Another change adversely affecting Chula Vista growers was a change in the groves. For decades pickers had used heavy wooden "field boxes" to put their fruit in they picked it. In the 1950s a new innovation was the use of very large bulk bins in the fields holding some ten times the amount of fruit as the field boxes did.

course this also required machines such as fork lifts to handle the bins. Those bulk bins are still the standard a half-century later, but the Chula Vista growers afford to make the switch. Another factor harming Chula Vista lemons, as well as citrus everywhere in Southern California, was the hard freeze of 1949. So compared it to the Big Freeze of 1913, but in any case it was one more hit on the future of lemons in Chula Vista.

Another change that occurred in the 1950s was minor in its effect but interesting. The citrus association that for so long had used the logo of "Sunkist" was named the California Fruit Growers Exchange. But their logo was so successful that in 1952 it changed its name to Sunkist Growers, as it remains to this day. Chula Vista Citrus Association "Sunkist" packing house at 3rd and K Street was the Chula Vista firm affected by this. The Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association located at 4th and F Street, was associated with the Mutual Orange Distributor co-op operating out of Redlands. Their logo was "Pure Gold" and they followed and in 1955 changed the name of their co-op itself to Pure Gold. (Much later, in 1989, Pure Gold went out of business, selling the rights to its name to Sunkist Growers.) But the large "MOD" atop their packing plant remained until it was torn down in 1965.

By the mid-50s it was clear that the grower-base was shrinking due to groves being sold for housing developments. This was happening elsewhere in San Diego County, too. The C.V.M.L.A. took on some growers in Escondido to take up some of the slack. Later, in 1957 when the C.V.M.L.A. itself began to consider its operations, its remaining growers would have been welcomed into the Northern San Diego Fruit Exchange.

In 1957, for reasons that are not now clear, the Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association actually discussed switching to Sunkist Growers, but did not do so. If they did switch to a co-op operating out of Los Angeles called Western Fruit Growers for marketing their fruit, but of course that lasted for only the two or three remaining of C.V.M.L.A.'s existence.

The Minutes of the C.V.M.L.A. reflect this dilemma all through the 1950s. On the one hand they sought alternatives to continuing in business, on the other kept buying new equipment, and indeed in June of 1960 they were still ordering new field boxes. Thus by 1960 the housing boom in Chula Vista had virtually destroyed every lemon grove that remained, both major packing houses had ceased lemon operations, and the lemon era in Chula Vista, that began in 1890, came to an end.

Chula Vista Lemons - and the Reefers

In the 1890s, following the introduction of the "Washington Navel," the citrus industry in Southern California just exploded. Very quickly that boom included Valencia oranges and lemons. Soon, citrus production in Southern California far surpassed the local market demand. Chula Vista lemon production reflected that of Southern California in this gigantic boom of citrus production.

As a result of this overproduction, and the resulting losses being sustained by growers, growers decided to band together in co-ops in order to market their surplus citrus production. And a key to that effort to expand their markets was to create a market in the midwest and in the east for California citrus products. They first started running ads in Iowa and then in points further east extolling the virtues of being able to have some "California sunshine," of "California gold," and of "sun-kissed," which soon became "Sunkist"

The marketing scheme worked; now they needed a way to transport citrus and other California produce 2,000 or 3,000 miles back east. Such a method had already been pioneered by the meat industry, particularly by Armour Meat Company, in building a fleet of railroad cars that used ice in them to keep the refrigerated contents. Copying this example, the Union Pacific, the Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe railroads started building thousands of "reefers," railroad cars using ice to keep the contents, to transport California citrus and other produce eastward.

The Union Pacific and the Southern Pacific jointly created the Pacific Fruit Express Co. for their use while the Santa Fe had its own fleet. Most of us with grandfathers can remember seeing the long, long trains of yellow/orange reefer cars headed east. The blocks of ice were put in bunkers at either end of the car and then either by natural breezes created by the moving train circulated the cooled air throughout the car. As the trains crossed the country the reefers would be periodically re-iced with ice at various points. For lemons, the transit temperatures only had to be kept to 50-55 degrees so they often used only half-bunkers of ice or none at all which were to be kept at 40-44 degrees.

Sources state that the Pacific Fruit Express had an icing station in Chula Vista that could serve 42 cars at a time (The San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railroad, the tracks in Chula Vista was a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific). That is a major-sized icing station and demonstrates the importance of Chula Vista lemon production. In the 1920s and 1930s Chula Vista became a major source of truck-farming produce as well, such as celery, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and such. Reefers would have been used for those, too.

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