

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

October 13, 1954

The Sugar Beet

The officers of the Monterey County Historical Society had a bright idea when they planned a tour in the evening to the Spreckels Sugar Factory for the program of the October meeting. Meeting there at 8 o'clock there were about 50 members of the society under the direction of the president, Mrs. Donald Davies Jr., of Salinas. Attending from the Monterey Peninsula were Mrs. Mary Greene, Mrs. William Kneass, Mrs. Eleanor Frasier, Mrs. Marie Antonia Thompson, Mrs. Juanita Johnson Cooper, Mrs. Laura Austin, Mrs. W. M. O'Donnell and Carroll Votau.

The administration building at the factory in Spreckels was the setting for the preliminary indoctrination of the society's tourists, which prepared them for the amazing sights they were to see in the more than one hour's tour of the huge plant – the largest of its kind in the world.

We were told that when the sugar beet industry really was established in California, it was begun by men who knew how sugar was made. They had studied the process developed in Europe.

Since ancient times sugar has been an important substance. First it was used as a medicine. The sugar beet as a plant served to nourish the builders of the Pyramids in Egypt. In Roman days the root was one of the principal foods of the slaves, while the leaves had long been used as fodder for stock.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth of England, sugar became popular as food. She was the first person to introduce sugar as an article of household diet and ordered it on her table regularly.

Cane sugar was long preferred to beet sugar because it could be more easily extracted from the plant. It was not until 1747 that a German chemist found a way of extracting the sugar from the beet. Before that, people had to eat the beets to get the sugar. Around 1800 a French scientist found a method of extracting it on a commercial scale.

According to an article which we have recently read in a 1938 edition of "California History Nugget," which was published six times a year by the California State Department of Education, the method of making sugar from the beet was discovered just in time to help

France. Six years after the first beet sugar factory was built, the Napoleonic wars cut off the supply of sugar usually imported to France from British colonies. The French government built local factories that kept their country supplied with beet sugar until the end of the war.

The beet sugar industry in France failed after that because the ports were again opened to cheap cane sugar. French methods of making beet sugar were crude and the beets were of poor quality. It was hard to separate the sugar from the bitter minerals in the beets.

The early history of the beet sugar production in the United States is one of the trials, hardships, and failures. The reasons for this were the methods used were still crude; the early efforts were made in poor beet producing areas and suffered severe competition from tropical cane-growing regions.

California was the first American state to produce beet sugar profitably. The first successfully operated factory was built at Alvarado, Alameda County in 1870, we learned at the factory in Spreckels as we were prepared for the tour last week. The founder, E.H. Dyer, was a man who had been working in the industry for a long time. Although he failed in his business four times, we have learned that for 19 years he persisted. He is known as the father of the American beet sugar industry. The factory he established was the only one in the United States from 1880 to 1888. A small sugar-producing community near Santa Ana is named Dyer in honor of this pioneer sugar financier.

It was explained to us by our guide through the factory that sugar beets will grow in almost any soil, but they are sweeter if grown where there is a short rainy season followed by a long dry one with much sunshine. Therefore California has a good climate for beets.

The seed is sown after the spring rains. Harvesting begins as early as the latter part of July and continues until as late as Thanksgiving. The harvest season varies in different parts of the state. Since sugar beets wear out the soil rapidly, farmers often vary their crops, rotating sugar beets with beans, barley and alfalfa.

(To Be Continued)