

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Santa Clara Prunes

Dr. Rockwell Hunt in his recently published "California Firsts" has this to say in compliment to Santa Clara Valley: "With each returning springtime expansive areas of lovely Santa Clara Valley are transformed into a sea of blossoms, 60 miles long and 20 miles wide. This marvelous, mammoth garden, filling The Valley of Heart's Delight, is dominated by the billions of pure white blossoms of the millions of prune trees."

If Dr. Hunt visited the Valley today, he would of necessity feel that his estimate of the number of fruit trees would have to be lowered, for each day sees more and more of the trees being pulled out, the wood burned, and subdivisions take their places. Even an old-timer cannot find his way around the Valley today because of the changes in the scenery, new roads and rows of look-a-like, cracker-box houses.

We who have lived long enough to remember the "Blossom Trolley Trip" each year in the spring, cannot even find the trolley route now, out from San Jose to Los Gatos and along the foothills to Saratoga and return. We miss it all, but times must change, and folks still wish to live in California, so we can keep our memories of beautiful Santa Clara Valley and go back to Monterey to enjoy climate, scenery, and the beautiful blue water of the Pacific.

Whence came these prune trees into California? It is to Louis Pellier, a thrifty gold hunter from France, that we are indebted not only for the French prune but also, to a great extent, for the beginnings of many fruit orchards and vegetable gardens of California. Young Pellier was a keen observer. He quickly perceived that most of the fruit being purchased by the miners came from the mission orchards. A tremendous price was charged the hungry pioneers for apples and pears, often \$1 a piece for inferior quality.

Pellier remarked: "There is more gold in apples and pears than in the mines." The idea stuck. "One day," writes Frank J. Taylor, according to Dr. Hunt, "he threw down his pick and started for the Valley, determined to turn to gardening." His search for the right kind of land took him eventually to San Jose, where there was already a small colony of Frenchmen. The Pellier home was on San Pedro, off Market street where the nursery

was also located. A marker placed there was recently knocked over by a backing truck but will soon be replaced by the San Jose Historic Landmarks Commission.

Next follows the beginning of the Pellier nursery, later widely known as "Pellier's Gardens," which was to "revolutionize Santa Clara Valley." Longing for fine trees like those of his native France, he bargained with his brother Pierre, in 1853, agreeing to finance his trip to France if he would return with a supply of cuttings and seeds. It took Pierre three years to make the trip and return to California. With him came three well-worn trunks filled with seeds and cuttings, the scions being stuck into potatoes, whose moisture would help to keep them alive.

That winter Louis Pellier diligently, labored, grafting the improved scions on selected root stock, especially the wild plum. Fortunately, some of the grafts lived, chiefly the "Petit prune D'Agens." from the old home place, near Bordeaux. It was not long until some of the young trees were sold to neighbors. In 1863 samples of the first California grown dried prunes were exhibited at the State Fair in Sacramento. In 1866 the state had 650 acres of prunes; by 1890 there were 90,000 acres. It is claimed that most of the myriads of trees of Santa Clara Valley sprang originally from Pellier's improved cuttings.

Having mentioned potatoes as the source of moisture supply for the prune cutting, we would be remiss if we did not give credit to another Frenchman who brought the potato to California. It happened in the early autumn of 1786 that a French dignitary, first in the succession of distinguished visitors from foreign lands to call in Spanish-occupied Alta California, was Comte Jean de la Prouse, who stopped at Monterey for 10 days and whose keen observations were afterward published in Paris in four important volumes.

Prouse had brought some potatoes, in good condition from Chili. It was he who introduced them. Causing them to be added to the already long list of vegetables produced by the Franciscan missions. This proved to be great boon to the country, pronounced by the historian, Theodore Hittel as "perhaps the most important service he did and one for which he must be considered a benefactor." The potato was not long in becoming one of the staple foods.