

Chapter 1

Paradise Valley

Our road was now one of continued enjoyment and it was pleasant riding among this assemblage of green pastures with varied flowers and scattered groves and out of the warm green spring to look at the rocky snowy peaks where lately we had suffered so much.

John C. Fremont thus described California's San Joaquin Valley on March 27, 1844, as he approached the Stanislaus River at a point west of where Highway 99 now crosses it. While not the first non-Indian to enter the great Valley, the explorer was the first to do so under United States Government sanction. A lieutenant in the Topographical Corps, Fremont was charting the routes to and through California.

His party, which included Kit Carson and Broken Hand Thomas Fitzpatrick, had spent a rugged January and February crossing the Sierra in deep snow and with real hardships, coming close to starvation when snowbound for a month. After resting at New Helvetia (Sacramento), Fremont was enjoying thoroughly a spring ride on horseback south to Walker Pass over a route which gave him a sweeping view of the land now served by the Modesto Irrigation District.

Fremont waxed almost poetic in writing about the beauty of the landscape, commenting in his memoirs:

The lupine (is) a beautiful shrub in thickets, some of them being 12 feet in height. Occasionally three or four were clustered forming a grand bouquet about 90 feet in circumference and ten feet high. The whole summit was covered with spikes of flowers, the perfume of which is very sweet and grateful. A lover of natural beauty can imagine with what pleasures we rode among these flowering groves, which filled the air with a light and delicate fragrance.

He described the live oaks as "the most symmetrical and beautiful we had yet seen in this country" and marveled at the California poppy "of a rich orange color." In subsequent days as he moved through what now is Stanislaus County, Fremont noted that the beauty of the landscape "had been increased by the

additional animation of wildlife and now it is crowded with bands of elk and wild horses and along the rivers are frequent fresh tracks of grizzly bears, which are unusually numerous in the country.”

Fremont was not the first to describe in writing the area between the Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers, which later was to be known as Paradise Valley. However, his words were among the most descriptive about its beauty and the richness of its soil.

Spanish soldiers and mission priests earlier had visited the San Joaquin Valley. Among the first was Pedro Gages, who left the coastal missions in 1772 to search the southern Valley for Spanish Army deserters. He described the culture of the Yokuts Indians who populated the Valley from Bakersfield to Stockton in much more favorable terms than did some historians of a century or so later who based their descriptions of the “digger” Indians solely on the remnants of a people devastated by the invasion of the white man.

Estimates of the number of Valley Yokuts range from Kit Carson’s 1829 figure of “hundreds of thousands” to what probably is the most authentic, 25,000 in 50 tribes. The latter estimate was made by the foremost authority on Yokuts, Frank Latta, who grew up in western Stanislaus County where his lifelong study of the Yokuts began.

Heidi Warner, curator of Modesto’s McHenry Museum who has made an independent study of the Indians of Stanislaus County, has located more than 50 burial sites, some as large as 45 acres, evidence that the county’s Indian population was substantial.

In a forward to Latta’s *handbook of Yokuts Indians*, A. L. Kroeber, a University of California anthropologist who earlier had studied the Yokuts, describes them as “a tall, well built people of open outlook...frank, upstanding, casual and unceremonious, optimistic and friendly, fond of laughter, not given to cares of property or too much worry about tomorrow; and they lived in direct simple relation to their land and world, to its animals, spirits, and gods, and to one another.”

The Stanislaus River and Stanislaus County derive their name from an exceptional member of this race, Estanislao.

Estanislao was born and raised at Mission San Jose. It is assumed his parents were Yokuts, for by 1790 the Spanish had swept clean of Indians all the western San Joaquin Valley foothills and plains from the Carquinez Strait to Kern County and as far east as today’s Highway 99. The Indians were taken to the

missions presumably as “neophytes” for conversion to Christianity and to perform the hard labor for building and maintaining the missions.

Named for the Polish Saint Stanislaus, on whose birth date he was born, Estanislao received a good education at the mission and grew to be a tall – more than 6 feet – strong, intelligent leader. He rose to the position of alcalde, the mission’s chief administrative and judicial officer. In 1825 when the people of the mission pledged their allegiance to Mexico, Estanislao fled to the Valley, taking with him many Indian neophytes who had become disenchanted with mission life. Estanislao established his own tribal nation near the present location of Salida. From there, he raided missions and settlements.

In 1829 the Spanish sent two forces against him. The first was routed by the Indians. The second was led by Lieutenant Mariano G. Vallejo, who later as general became Mexican commandante of California. Vallejo was repulsed until he set fire to the woods surrounding Estanislao’s complex fortifications which included a system of trenches and barriers.

His forces literally burned out, Estanislao escaped and returned to Mission San Jose, where he was pardoned and lived until his death some seven years later.

In the spring of 1833 an epidemic variously believed to be cholera, measles, or malaria wiped out entire communities. A pioneer hunter and trapper, Colonel James J. Warner, had noted in 1832 there were hundreds of Indians living along the Tuolumne and Stanislaus Rivers about the San Joaquin River. Many villages had 50 to 100 buildings. When he returned in the fall of 1833, Warner saw only six or eight live Indians.

The first non-Indian to explore the Stanislaus area to any extent was Spanish Lieutenant Gabriel Moraga, who first crossed the Coast Range in 1806. Entering the Valley through the passes southwest of Los Banos, Moraga followed the San Joaquin River northward past the Merced, Tuolumne and Stanislaus Rivers, all of which he named. Only Rio de la Merced – River of Mercy – still is known by its original name. Moraga called the Tuolumne Rio Dolores and the Stanislaus Rio Laquismes. He also changed the name of Rio de la San Francisco to San Joaquin to honor his father, Jose Joaquin Moraga, who had entered the San Joaquin Valley from the north in 1776 and followed the river southward. It is not known if the elder Moraga reached the region now known as Stanislaus County.

Not long thereafter, the fur trappers arrived from Hudson Bay and other companies in Canada and the United States. Traveling in groups of 50 to 100, they found a rich harvest of pelts along the Tuolumne, Stanislaus and other rivers of the Valley. Jedediah Smith, the first American to enter California, trapped along the Tuolumne from 1825 to 1827 and reported the stream abounding with beaver and salmon.

In 1842 Dr. John Marsh, who had purchased “Ranchos los Meganos” at the base of Mount Diablo in 1835, forecast a tremendous agriculture future for the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys, describing them as one magnificent valley...capable of supporting a nation” but at the time inhabited by only 150 Americans and a few Indians.

The opinion was not shared universally. United States Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts in 1844 asked the United States Senate:

What do we want of this vast worthless area, this region of savages and wild beasts, of deserts of shifting sands and whirlwinds of dust, cactus and prairie dogs? To what use could we ever hope to put these deserts or these endless mountain ranges, impenetrable and covered to their bases with eternal snow?

What could we ever hope to do with the Western Coast of three thousand miles, rock-bound, cheerless and uninviting, with not a harbor in it? What use have we for such a country? Mr. President, I will never vote one cent of the public treasury to place the Pacific Coast one inch nearer Boston than it is today.

Even as Webster spoke, the agricultural economy of the area that would become Stanislaus County and the rest of California was emerging. This economic base ultimately would make the Golden State the nation’s largest in agricultural production as well as in population.

Between 1836, when the Spanish secularized the missions, and 1846, when the Americans took control of the state, the Mexican Government issued some 30 land grants in California, specifically for agricultural purposes, primarily the raising of cattle. All but six of these grants subsequently were confirmed by the United States Land Commission, a process complicated by the vagueness by which they originally were measured and described. Descriptions were from “this tree to that tree” and measurements were by the “length of a rawhide riata,” which was subject to stretching. The grants were limited to a maximum of eight square leagues, a Spanish league being slightly more than 2.6 miles.

Five grants were located in what now is Stanislaus County. Alfias Basil Thompson received 35,000 acres along both sides of the Stanislaus River between the present sites of Oakdale and Riverbank. It was on this ranch that William Tecumseh Sherman, the Union Army general who in 1864 led the

scorched-earth march through Georgia, raised cattle during the 1850s. His partners were Fred Billings, Henry W. Halleck and A. C. Peachy.

Rancho Del Rio Estanislao on the north side of the Stanislaus, extending east from the Thompson Ranch well into Calaveras County for a total of 48,888 acres, was granted to John Rowland.

Three grants were issued along the San Joaquin River. Valentin Higuerra and Rafael Feliz were granted 35,000 acres for the El Pescadero Ranch, which subsequently was the site of San Joaquin City, a river-streamer stopping place which was replaced by Vernalis with the coming of the railroad to the Valley's West Side. This grant extended from about Banta to some distance below Grayson. Immediately to the south was the Rancho del Puerto – 13,000 acres granted to Mariano Hernandez – and farther up river, extending into what now is Merced County, was the Orestimba grant of 26,000-plus acres to Sebastian Nunes.

One of the most famous of these grants was Las Mariposa, which included the present towns of Mt. Bullion and Mariposa. Awarded in 1844 to the former Mexican governor of California, Juan Bautista Alvarado, it never was occupied by its original owner primarily because of the threat of Indians. In 1847, Fremont purchased the ranch, which was to be the site of the 1851 Mariposa Indian War. Fremont, the famed "Pathfinder," resided there when in 1856 he became the first presidential nominee of the newly organized Republican Party, capturing some 40 percent of the popular vote for what then was considered a "third party."

Cattle were the prime product of these ranches, many of which were not habitable until 1847 or later because of the constant threat of raids by marauding Indians which continued in some areas well into the gold rush days.

Of the original five grants in Stanislaus County, it appears that only El Pescadero was occupied on a permanent basis during those early years. Higuerra and Feliz drove some 1,300 head of cattle, 350 sheep and 300 horses from the coast to locate there in 1843. They were the first permanent non-Indian settlers in the Stanislaus area.

The region's first planned colony was established in January 1847 on the north bank of the Stanislaus River about a mile and a half above its junction with the San Joaquin. Two parties of Mormons, one headed by Samuel Brannan traveling by sea and the other led by William Stout going overland, joined

to establish the City of New Hope. This was to be the destination of the Mormon people moving west to the “promised land of California” under the leadership of Prophet Brigham Young.

It is fascinating to speculate what the Stanislaus region would be like today had it not been for a chance meeting on the Oregon Trail.

In his *Valley of the Sun*, historian Wallace Smith tells how a pair of wild western mountain men, Jim Bridger and “Peg-leg” Smith, who had traveled extensively throughout the West, came across the main party of Latter Day Saints somewhere along the Platte River. The Mormon leader queried the pair about their San Joaquin Valley destination. So glowing were the accounts of Bridger and Smith, the Mormon prophet recalled his advance party from the City of New Hope. Young decided that any land which was as wonderful as the two mountain men claimed the Stanislaus River area to be would attract many, many people. Young and his church followers were seeking isolation from the “gentiles” who had persecuted them in the East.

And so, the region was to develop in other ways.

Free-ranging Castillian longhorns roamed the countryside in great numbers. This was stock stolen from the missions by marauding Indians, including bands of “neophytes” who had fled, as had Estanislao and his people. These longhorns were rounded up and branded by the early ranchers. The bands of wild horses mentioned by Fremont in his 1844 diary were from the same source.

At first, the market was not for meat, but for hides and tallow. Jack Brotherton in his *Annals of Stanislaus County* says the shipment of hides and tallow to San Francisco was responsible for the start of regularly-scheduled steamer trips up the San Joaquin and Tuolumne Rivers. The meat was left for the coyotes, vultures and other scavengers.

The American taste for beef during the gold rush changed this. Whole herds of cattle were driven to the mining camps from the Valley’s West Side and coastal ranches.

A new breed of cattle which was to replace the scrawny, stringy Castillian longhorns came with the gold-seeking argonauts of 1849. Some enterprising settlers saw their fortunes not in the mining but in supplying the miners. Walter Crow brought the first midwestern American cattle to California in 1850 with a herd of 500. Crow died shortly after arriving in the state, but his four sons, James, William, Benjamin

and Alfred, drove the cattle to the Stanislaus region where they established a ranch along Orestimba Creek. The family name is borne by the town of Crows Landing.

From that time on, cattle were being driven into the state and Paradise Valley. By 1854 there were many thousands of cattle roaming free on the plains of Stanislaus. Early historian George H. Tinkham quotes cattleman William K. Wallis as reporting the county “was one immense pasture.”

L. C. Branch, who in 1881 wrote the first history of Stanislaus County, included an autobiography by Wallis’ brother Thomas, who recounts his introduction to Paradise Valley cattle when traveling from San Francisco to join his brother in April 1863:

When I arrived in Stockton, I found that no steamer would leave for the San Joaquin River for two weeks and, as there was no stage line or team coming this way, I concluded to come across the country afoot. There were no houses on the plains at the time, and wild cattle roamed over them at freedom in vast numbers. When traveling between the Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers, I saw a band of wild cattle coming toward me, shaking their heads. I immediately fell to the ground and crawled on my hands and knees for a long distance until they had lost sight of me. I afterward learned that they were infuriated by being caught and branded, and would have killed me had they caught me.

Even as Wallis was crawling away from infuriated longhorns, the decline of the livestock industry was approaching. The extremes of weather and the influx of people doomed the Paradise Valley cattle industry.

The decline began with the devastating floods of the winter of 1861-62, which brought the entire economy of Northern California and much of the rest of the state to a halt. The floods were followed by three years of drought.

Transportation into Stanislaus County became easier with the advent of river steamers and better roads. The population swelled with newcomers settling on the prime riverbottom land. In 1860 the census recorded 2,245 residents in Stanislaus County. By 1870 the population had tripled.

The new king was to be wheat.

So rapid was the rise in wheat production that within five short years, Stanislaus County’s production topped that of all California counties. The state was the nation’s leading wheat producer. Individual wheat farms of 50,000 to 100,000 acres were not uncommon in Paradise Valley.

Midwesterners, some disillusioned with the mines and other coming to Stanislaus directly from their Plains States homes to seek a new life, found Central California land ideal for growing grains. The

soil was fine loam easy to plow. The rainless summers from May to October meant no worries about showers at harvest time and the wheat heads were hard and dry. Once harvested, the wheat could be left sacked in the fields or in warehouses without worry. For many, farming proved to be more profitable than digging for elusive gold.

As early as 1850 the richness of soil had been recognized by a state legislative committee. It declared that the region around Tuolumne City, a community just emerging on the north side of the Tuolumne River a few miles above its junction with the San Joaquin River, “will shortly be a sort of Jauja’, the golden city of the fabulous region where rivers of milk and honey flowed and farinaceous fruits grew spontaneously.

A couple of years later, James C. Carson, an army sergeant who while on furlough explored the San Joaquin Valley and for whom the Carson River Pass are named, was more specific and much less flowery in his evaluation of the soil’s fertility:

The traveler crossing this valley or traversing it in any direction during the dry season would judge from its parched appearance that it is a barren waste unfit for any of the purpose of man. This was my opinion on my first visit but being a practical farmer, I had a curiosity to examine the soil, and the inducements offered by the general aspects of the country to agricultural pursuits.

Carson referred to Central California as “the garden of California.”

In addition to the vagaries of weather and the influx of people, two factors were significant in the transition of Stanislaus’ farm economy from cattle to wheat. By 1864 the American Civil War had disrupted many traditional wheat-growing areas, thus opening European markets to California producers. Soon thereafter, the Franco-Prussian War created tremendous new demands for wheat to feed starving people on the European Continent. San Francisco financiers were quick to capitalize on these events by encouraging the planting of California wheat.

Although wheat was firmly established as the county’s prime agricultural commodity by 1870, the crowning blow to the cattle industry came that year when the state’s “no fence” law was extended to Stanislaus County. This simply declared that farmers did not have to erect fences to keep livestock out. It was the responsibility of the stockmen to fence in their herds. Those cattlemen who actually owned land

could not afford to enclose the vast acreages required for grazing. Many stockmen had no land to fence as their cattle roamed freely on unclaimed public domain.

In October 1870 the arrival of the railroad in Stanislaus County facilitated the shipment of the crop. On the 27th of that month, the first load of wheat to leave the San Joaquin Valley by rail was shipped from Modesto to Oakland by M. M. McClanathan.

Although the boom in wheat production began in 1867, wheat had been grown in the county for a decade and a half. As early as 1852, when pioneer farmer Elihu Birrott Beard purchased 10,000 acres north of Waterford, farmers began experimenting with the production of wheat, barley and other crops, including produce for home consumption and for shipment by steamer to San Francisco.

Beard, whose son Thomas K. Beard was to be instrumental in the 1913 creation of the Waterford Irrigation District, was the first farmer in 1852 to practice summer fallowing of the land for increased production. He encouraged the use of more efficient mowers, reapers and headers and in the 1860s introduced gang plows by which wheat growers could plow several furrows at once.

An inventory of new equipment was developed in the 1860s by the inventive farmers of Paradise Valley and surrounding areas.

In 1860, only 22,500 bushels of wheat were produced in the county. Production increased so fast that by 1870 more than 4 million bushels were harvested.

A newspaper report in 1868 proclaims: "That part of the county between the Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers, an area of 125 square miles and known as 'Paradise', is one unbroken field of grain."

In the expansive literary style of the period, historian Branch described what Paradise Valley was like in 1870:

This part of the county had, within a few years, developed into a rich agricultural region. The largest herds of cattle that once roamed over these plains had disappeared from view; the long horn of the Spanish steer was no longer in view. The farmer had taken the place of the vaquero, the plow the place of the lariat. The branding iron and the rawhide, the lasso and the rodeo had become relics of the past. The first bright gleams of the glamorous future were dawning over our people. The great valley had become a unit in interest and alike in feeling. Agriculture and grazing- the two conflicting interests – no longer crossed their swords in eternal warfare, but they were now united, led by a common interest. All had become stock breeders; all grain growers.

It is true there were no major battles between the cowboys and the sodbusters such as those occurring in other parts of the West. Circumstances had forced the change.

The droughts of 1873 and 1874 reduced production but did not discourage wheat farmers, who bounced back in 1875 to produce 3 million bushels – with 410,000 Stanislaus acres in production – then 5 million bushels the following year and 7 million bushels in 1878, a record unequalled until 1881.

As the new decade of the 1880s began, Branch wrote of traveling for hours through vast fields of wheat: “In every direction was wheat, not a house, tree or object of any kind in sight, only wheat, wheat, wheat.”

On this occasion, he described his first personal look at the Centennial Harvester, developed in 1876 by David Young of Stockton in response to requirements of growers in Stanislaus and elsewhere, in this manner:

At last our eyes caught sight of queer looking object in the distance, and curiosity as well as a desire to see something besides wheat, led us toward it.

We were astonished at the sight, and looked long in wonder and amazement at a combined header and thresher. Twenty-four horses were pushing this immense machine over the ground and as it passed along dropped sacks filled with wheat. The horses were six abreast – twelve each side the tongue – and the swath cut was, we judge, thirty feet wide. The grain heads in the meantime, instead of passing into the header wagon, went directly into the separator and the grain was sacked and thrown off. It was worth a long journey to see this wonderful machine with its twenty-four horses trained like circus animals, and all moving at the command of the man ‘at the wheel’ who guides the header by a tiller attached to a wheel at the end of the tongue which acts as a rudder for this ‘agricultural ship’.

While watching its operations the writer wondered if on his next trip that way, he would not also see the grist-mill attached and the machine throwing off sacks of flour!

One of the first in Stanislaus County to use the Centennial Harvester was E. Cogswell, who in 1878 harvested 20,000 bushels of wheat from nearly 1,500 acres in 42 days.

Growing wheat was a tough, demanding occupation, especially at harvest time. The ground was plowed as soon as the first rains of the fall would permit. Once the wheat was sown, the success of the crop depended upon the weather. In a good year harvest crews would move in after the rains had ceased and the wheat heads had time to harden dry in the hot summer sun.

Handling teams of 12 to 24 mules or horses was an art in itself, to which the muleskinner added an artistic vocabulary when things did not go right. In 1868 one Stanislaus muleskinner, Irwin S. Wright, simplified the task of controlling long teams when he invented the “jerk line.” He extended a single rein

down the left side of the team, attaching it to the collar of the “near leader” in such a manner that a jerk would pull the animal’s head to the right and a steady pull would lead it to the left.

Central Californians who helped to expand the wheat yield with new machines included George Stockton Berry. Starting with a discarded portable steam engine, Berry built the first mechanically-driven combine. Benjamin Holt of Stockton invented the Caterpillar tractor. Although designed primarily to solve the problems of farming the San Joaquin- Sacramento River Delta peat soil, it soon became standard equipment for most farming operations in Stanislaus County. In World War I, the British worked with Holt to develop the first army tank.

The early combines were unique to the San Joaquin Valley because the vast acreages to be harvested made the huge machines practical; in eastern states where fields were smaller they would have been impractical.

Even as the production reached its peak, new forces were working to promote more diversified farming.

Ora McHenry, L. M. Hickman, J. B. Caldwell and others were planting orchards, vines and vegetables. By the start of the last decade of the 19th Century, McHenry was the leader in the fruit industry, having some 100 acres in production. And at Paradise Gardens, three miles from Modesto, Peter Leshner in 1891 grew some 700 tons of fruit, primarily apricots but also including 200 tons of peaches and 8,000 boxes of Bartlett pears.

The same ingenuity, courage and determination that allowed the taming of a wild Valley wasteland, converting it to the state’s leading wheat region in a scant 30 years, were to shape the future of Paradise Valley and much of the rest of the state. This dramatic change was to come through the development of the first fiscally-sound system of irrigation by wisely using the water which flowed from the Sierra through California to the sea.

But it was not going to be an easy task.