

# Sugar beets have a sweet local history

**J**UST OUTSIDE Hollister on the way to San Juan Bautista there used to be an unforgiving turn in the highway which gave out-of-town truck drivers very wide eyes their first time through.

Known locally as the "pepper-tree curve," the turn was particularly wicked for eastbound drivers after the long straight stretch across the San Juan Valley. Pepper-tree curve was a blessing for folks on the lookout for free produce, however, because as the trucks whipped desperately around the curve, they sprayed the roadside with the crop of the day. Locals never hesitated to stop and gather up armloads of greens. There was no class distinction at this impromptu produce stand — I remember seeing Packard Clippers stop as often as old Plymouths.

No one liked that curve better than my grandmother, and whenever she came to visit she would watch intently as we slowly rounded the turn, and should there be anything visible in the gravel or roadside weeds, we stopped.

No matter how many times we explained it to her, she would always stop and pick up some sugar beets should they be in season. She was determined to make something edible out of those darned things. No amount of chopping, soaking and boiling ever worked, but she never stopped trying. It was not until I studied the history of the Great Depression that I realized that her relentless pursuit of a sugar-beet recipe was a permanent resourcefulness she learned during the '30s.

I was reminded of the sugar beets on pepper tree curve the other day as I watched a tractor slowly planting sugar beets in a field above Greenfield in Monterey County. Last year the dollar value of sugar beets slid farther down the list (beets ranked 25th in Monterey County on the dollar value list) and the acreage drops steadily

## Hindsight



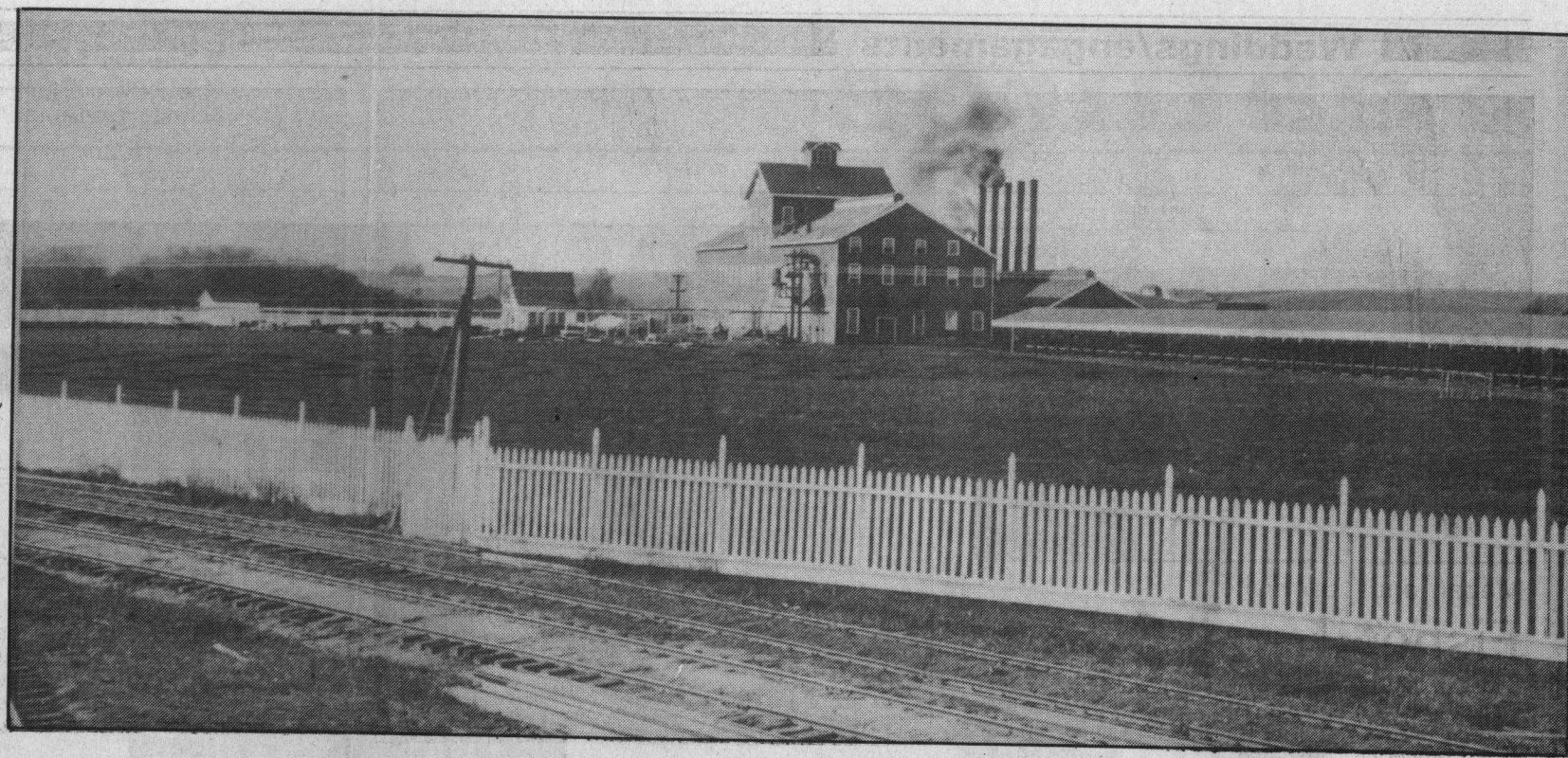
Sandy Lydon

each season. Those sugar beets being planted above Greenfield mark the end of an agricultural revolution that began in 1874 in a field where Capitola's Nob Hill market now stands.

Sugar beets were revolutionary because most of the farmers that came into this region in the 19th century were permanently wedded to growing cereal grains. As late as 1870 this country was one big wheat field. Growing wheat in the Pajaro and Salinas valleys is like buying a Ferrari and forever driving it in first gear. The rich soil cried out for something better, but all it got in those early years was dull, stupid, unimaginative wheat.

Several brave regional investors opened the first beet sugar factory alongside Soquel Creek in 1874 and for the next five years, sugar beets were hauled to the factory from Aptos and the Pajaro Valley, turned into loafs of sugar and shipped off the Camp Capitola wharf to San Francisco.

Claus Spreckels was not involved in the Soquel sugar factory. However, the parade of sugar beets past his Aptos summer home obviously made an impression on him, because immediately upon his being tossed out of the Hawaiian kingdom in 1886 (he was guilty of arrogance), he set out to open the



Roy Christian collection

Spreckels' Watsonville sugar-beet factory, as it looked around 1890.

largest modern sugar-beet plant somewhere in the Monterey Bay region. When Salinas Valley farmers expressed disinterest in growing sugar beets, Spreckels built his first plant in Watsonville and transformed it into Sugar City.

Dependable farm labor was the key to raising sugar beets, and for the next 10 years, Chinese immigrants living in Watsonville's Chinatown provided the delicate and diligent hands in the fields. In those days, the young sugar beets were thinned by crawling along the rows on hands and knees and plucking the excess plants by hand.

When the sugar-beet acreage began to move into the Salinas Valley in the 1890s, Spreckels decided to move his factory closer to the action to cut down transportation costs. The Watsonville factory closed in 1898, and the following year the largest sugar beet factory in the world opened just south of Salinas City at a place named, appropriately, Spreckels. The decade 1888-1898 transformed the Pajaro Valley from a grain-dominated region to the intensive, diversified garden we know today.

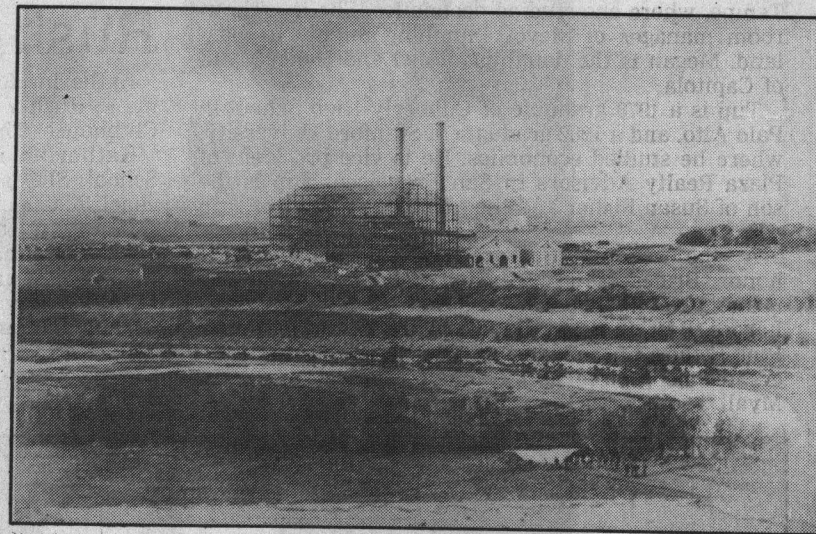
It took a lot of beets to feed the 120 foot tall brick factory at Spreckels, and over the years, growing sugars was the entry-level

occupation for wave upon wave of immigrants into the region. Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Sikhs, Slavs, Danes, Swiss, Germans and Mexicans maintained the flow of beets into the voracious plant.

Sugar beets transformed the Salinas Valley. Irrigation, wind breaks, cooperative transportation and crop diversification came into the valley with the beets, and once the farmers had a taste of a dependable income from growing sugar beets, they experimented with other crops. They grew lettuce, celery and soon the area became known as the Salad Bowl of the World.

Meanwhile, the beets marched south, and just as in 1898, the cost of transportation rose to a point where it was no longer profitable to operate the factory and it closed in 1982. When it closed, the Spreckels sugar factory was still the largest such factory in the world.

The factory building still stands (though badly shaken by the 1989 earthquake) as a monument to one of our truly regional agricultural industries and its aggressive promoter, Claus Spreckels. But the mortar which binds the bricks and the history of the region is the sweat of all those immigrant laborers who, on their hands and knees, transformed the Monterey Bay region into one of the world's leading



Sandy Lydon collection

Spreckels' factory under construction near Salinas in 1898. The scene is looking north, with the Salinas River in the foreground.

agricultural areas.

**History Alert.** Monterey County is considering a request from Amstar, the owner of the sugar factory site, to demolish the sugar beet factory. Monterey has jurisdiction in the matter, but the building represents history which goes well beyond the county's boundaries. There is a bit of Aptos and Watsonville in that building and I

cannot imagine the Salinas Valley without it. If you have an opinion, you should write quickly to Mary Tsui, Monterey County Planning and Building Department, PO Box 1208, Salinas, Calif. 93901.

*Sandy Lydon is an author and lecturer on matters historical. He can be seen regularly on KCBA TV 35's evening news discussing history and the weather.*