

Lydon. Sandy

Lesson of the mustard seed

From Frederick Hihn to Jim Jack, immigrants have made valuable contributions to the region

IMMIGRANTS see things better than we native-born Americans. It is as if we look at things so often that we can no longer really seem them — our eyes become dulled by a film of familiarity. Immigrants, on the other hand, their eyes sharpened by necessity and their hands powered by need, prowl the edges of the economy rejuvenating tired and discarded industries or inventing new ones.

For example, in the recent past it was Korean families who saw the value of the small, neighborhood convenience markets and pumped new energy and life into them. Or the Vietnamese fishermen who developed markets for overlooked species of fish and pumped some new life into the fresh fish business. Or the Mexican immigrants who see hope and opportunity in jobs where native-born folks see drudgery and despair.

Much of what we now take for granted in the Monterey Bay Region was shaped and influenced by hungry immigrant eyes. On the Monterey side of the bay, David Jacks (Scotland, arrived in the United States, 1841) was the most influential person in shaping the destiny of both the Monterey Peninsula and Monterey County. At one time in the 1870s, Jacks owned more than 70,000 acres, including most of the Monterey Peninsula, Pacific Grove and huge ranches in the Salinas Valley.

Jacks' counterpart in Santa Cruz County was Frederick Augustus Hihn (Germany, arrived in the U.S. in 1849). Hihn was responsible for not only getting the Santa Cruz to Watsonville Railroad built, but he developed the towns of Capitola and Aptos as well as parts of Felton and Soquel. Hihn also played a major role in the development of the county's water systems, lumber industry and banking industry. Claus Spreckels (Germany, arrived in the U.S. in 1846) helped turn the region's agriculture into the diversified mega business it is today when he championed the growing of sugar beets here in the 1880s.

Many regional industries were pioneered by groups of immigrants such as fishing (Chinese, Italian and Japanese), whaling (Portu-

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guese), dairies (Swiss, Italian, Portuguese), and apples (Slavs). Immigrants provided the muscle that turned local wheels of industry including lime and cement (Greek, Italian, Portuguese), and agriculture (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Sikh and Mexican.)

THIS IMMIGRANT business came to mind one recent sunny afternoon while driving through the Pajaro Valley. My car radio was tuned to a radio talk show where caller after caller railed against "those immigrants," piling on their shoulders the responsibility for all the ills of contemporary America and California. With my ears stuffed full of xenophobia, I drove past a huge, brilliant field of golden mustard. I rolled down my window to catch a whiff of that sweet, heavy smell and remembered the story of Jim Jack, the Chinese mustard king.

Mustard is itself an immigrant plant, having been brought here sometime during the Spanish era and probably quite by accident. By the 1850s mustard covered the local hills and valleys. The yellow stuff grew so high that a man on horseback could not see over it, and by the 1860s it had been declared a nuisance. A weed.

Along came Jim Jack, a Chinese immigrant with hungry eyes. (Jim Jack's Chinese name was lost over time.) One spring he offered to clear the entire San Juan Valley of the pesky mustard in exchange for the seed, and after the skeptical San Juan ranchers agreed (what's the catch? they wondered), Jim Jack and his crew of Chinese cut

and flailed the mustard, bagging tons of seed, which went into storage.

At that same moment, European mustard brokers were combing the world for mustard seed as disease and drought had destroyed most of the world's crop. Finally, one day, a French mustard broker showed up at Jim Jack's door to buy his tons of seed. Most accounts agree that Jim Jack received over \$30,000 in gold for his "weed" seeds, and at that moment a new industry in the Monterey Bay Region was born.

Farmers who had seen the mustard as a pest, now realized its value, and within several years, mustard was being planted intentionally all across the Monterey Bay Region. Between 1873 and 1905 10,000 tons of mustard seed were shipped out of this region to San Francisco and to mustard markets worldwide. After the turn of the century the mustard industry moved south to the Lompoc area where the yellow mustard was grown extensively into the 1920s. Today mustard is grown locally as a cover crop where it is plowed under to help enrich the soils of vegetable fields and orchards.

JIM JACK lived out his life in a tiny shack in San Juan Bautista, known as a kindly man who gave \$5 gold pieces to the town's children at Christmas. He was also known as the Mustard King because it was his immigrant eyes that saw the potential in something that everyone else had condemned as "weeds."

The list of creative immigrants like Jim Jack is a long one — from Marco Rabasa, Slav immigrant who saw the potential for the Pajaro Valley apple industry, to Gennosuke Kodani, who saw the possibilities for deep-water diving for abalone at Point Lobos — immigrants came here and helped everyone else see the infinite possibilities around them.

We would all be the poorer without the vision and energy provided by immigrants, and I cannot imagine the Monterey Bay Region's past, present or future without them.

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