



*“Fruit growing in Nevada County has proved successful
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of the greatest resources of our county.”*

NEVADA COUNTY WATER CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION, 1913

CHAPTER 2

The Birth of Local Agriculture



Agriculture in the Sierra foothills began during the Gold Rush and expanded afterward as the land was settled and communities were established. Initially, the influx of miners created a need for food. As an added benefit to farmers, the miners were willing to pay premium prices, making it enticing to raise crops, ranging from fruits and vegetables to wine grapes. During this time, ranches formed to raise sheep and cattle. In a short time, as agriculture developed, local farmers boasted of their quality crops and advertised their properties as the best grazing land in the state.

A Nevada County ranch in the late 1860s.

The most important horticulturist in Nevada County was Felix Gillet. Born in France, Gillet settled in Nevada City in 1859. By 1866 he had established the Barren Hill Nursery, one of the first fruit and nut nurseries on the West Coast of the United States. He began importing select fruit, nut and grape varieties from France and expanded to eventually include plants from more than 30 nations. Gillet has been referred to as the most important California nurseryman of his



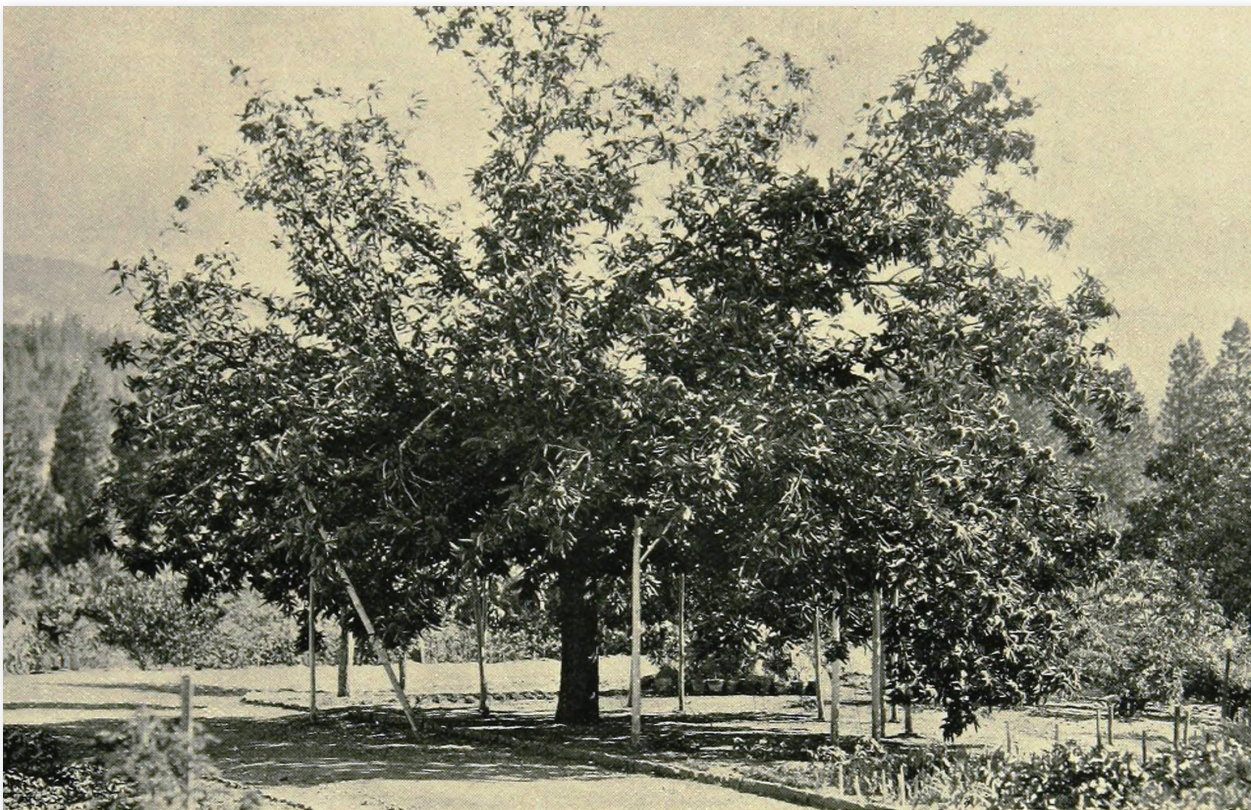
This 1884 photograph, below, shows one of Felix Gillet's chestnut trees in full bearing at Barren Hill Nursery in Nevada City.

generation, and his introductions provided primary varieties for Western agriculture, including almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts and chestnuts. He also introduced the primary varieties of prunes, cherries, pears, apricots, wine and table grapes, figs and strawberries.

Cattle, dairy cow and sheep ranches also thrived during this time. By 1880 Nevada County boasted of 206 registered ranches with 93,000 acres cultivated in western Nevada County. Besides their foothill properties, many ranchers leased land in the mountains. A common practice was to winter the livestock at the lower elevations, and then drive the herds up into the mountains for cooler summer grazing.

However, local agriculture took a hit with the rise of hydraulic mining, which saw the number of miners dwindle from several thousand to a few hundred. As a result many farms that supplied food to the miners were abandoned.

"The magical but feverish and short-lived prosperity of the passing period, the days of old,



MARRON COMBALE CHESTNUT.

A 32-year old tree, in full bearing, in Barren Hill Nursery, Nevada City, California.

the days of gold, the days of '49, had left its acutely depressing reaction," Lardner wrote in his 1924 history of the county. "Then, little by little, the initial stages of what is now California's giant industry, horticulture, began to influence agricultural expansion in this county, particularly in the development of the fruit-shipping industry opened the markets of the East and even of Europe to fresh fruits grown in the Sierra foothills. Truly speaking, they are 'fruithills.'"

Basically, local agriculture re-invented itself. Besides the quality crops and orchards being cultivated, a little public relations effort helped put Nevada County back on the map. The newly formed Nevada County Land and Improvement Association printed and distributed pamphlets throughout the United States, as well as Canada and Europe. For example, in 1888, a 96-page booklet promoted "The Famous Bartlett Pear Belt of California," claiming there was no superior place for growing conditions, and that every variety of fruit would grow and flourish in the county.

To the south, Placer County was also bustling with agricultural activity. The town of Lincoln was established in 1859 along the proposed line of the California Central Railroad. The new track reached Lincoln in early 1861, but further construction stalled due to lack of funds. However, the seed literally had been planted by those relocating in search of productive farmland. Agriculture thrived. Thomas S. Myrick wrote in February of 1881: "Thirty years ago the veteran pioneer in fruit culture in Placer County, Mr. James R. Nickerson, planted an orchard and vineyard on Doty's Ravine, three miles north of the thriving village of Lincoln. He sold his fruits at fabulous prices in the mining camps of Yuba, Nevada and Placer counties. In the process of time he extended his grounds until he had over one hundred acres in fruit and vineyard cultivation."

As the Gold Rush waned, agriculture quickly became the region's biggest consumer of water. Ranchers and farmers depended on groundwater wells, creeks and springs, as well as limited flows of water from the old privately owned ditch systems dominated by mining companies and companies that established themselves later to sell water. Still these sources could not provide



adequate and dependable water supplies to meet the growing needs.

"The most limiting feature for agriculture in the county was the lack of irrigation water," noted the Nevada County General Plan 2012.

The California Legislature gave a nod to agriculture when it passed the Wright Act in 1887, allowing farming regions to form irrigation districts funded by bonds that were then payable from the proceeds of assessments levied upon the land. The Act permitted owners of small farms to band together and build water systems to store water for use during the irrigation season. It was a good idea, but new districts encountered problems in selling their bonds, filling their reservoirs and fairly allocating water. The state also realized there was insufficient state supervision to prevent the organization of wholly speculative districts and a failure to give the state any control of district finances. In 1897, the Legislature amended the Wright Act, which effectively stopped new irrigation districts from being formed. The Sierra foothill farmers and ranchers would have to wait for a solution to their irrigation needs.

Johann Ludwig and Anna Elizabeth Bierwagen were advocates of forming an irrigation district. As an adult, Ernst Bierwagen (with his mother) went on to serve 25 years as a District director once NID was formed.



Before organized irrigation, ranchers would take their livestock to higher elevations during the summer to graze and drink from the natural waterways.

As the new century dawned, farmers and ranchers were thriving in the foothills. However, they still had not secured a reliable long-term irrigation water source, even though there had been serious attempts.

To bolster Nevada County's name recognition, the Nevada County Board of Supervisors established the Nevada County Promotion Committee to disseminate information about the diversified resources of the entire county in 1902. Bayliss Rector was elected the first chairman to the committee (Rector and his brother, John, owned the National Exchange Hotel in Nevada City). Also elected to the commission was William Fellows Englebright, who acted as secretary. Englebright was a mining engineer who during the Gold Rush was the principal of the South Yuba Canal Company and owned two gold mines. In 1906, he was elected to fill an unexpired term in the U.S. Congress and was elected to the seat two more times to serve California's 1st District.

Nevada County farmers had grown restless and were more than ready for a permanent solution to their water needs. In May 1912, they gathered to protest high water rates charged by the privately held Excelsior Water and Power Company, which diverted water from the South Yuba River. According to The Sacramento Union newspaper, farmers were enraged when the company raised the price of water from \$5 per acre to \$7.50 per acre after the year's plantings had been completed.

Talks continued about a desire for a public water supplier. As the Nevada County Water Consumers'

Association, formed in 1913, reported, "There is an abundance of water in the county for all purposes to which it may be applied, but it is held by large corporations which, for reasons of their own, are not developing it for irrigation. Fruit growing in Nevada County has proved successful in the past few years, and with irrigation will be one of the greatest resources of our county."

The association tried unsuccessfully to reach an agreement for the formation of an irrigation district and a partnership with Pacific, Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) to build new dams and canals. In February 1913, PG&E was also trying to secure water rights for the Yuba River and Bear River.

PG&E Superintendent George Scarfe called it a scheme to secure funds through PG&E to build a new district's dam and canal systems. Later in the year, Scarfe met again with the water committee to give PG&E's side of the argument that the utility was in no position to enter negotiations for financing any large scheme to secure funds to build or form a new water district. He favored the farmers forming an irrigation district under the Wright Act. Such efforts were underway, and The Morning Union newspaper ran with the headline on November 1, 1914: "Eight local districts will organize to vote for an irrigation district formation." This new water district was to be formed under the California Irrigation District Laws of 1913, the revised Wright Act. The eight districts were Chicago Park, Forest Springs, Lime Kiln, Indian Springs, Cottage Hill, Pleasant Ridge, Clear Creek and Markwell. Despite prominent local farmers and ranchers supporting the effort, ultimately the proposal failed.

Meanwhile, local farmers became organized. The Bierwagen family, which in 1902 settled in Chicago Park, nine miles southeast of Grass Valley, became leaders in bringing together Nevada County farmers. Pioneers Johann Ludwig and Anna Elizabeth Bierwagen emigrated from Russia in 1881, farmed in South Dakota, then settled in Chicago Park. Their son, Christian, bought adjoining farmland next to the original homestead and worked alongside his father. In 1914, Christian invited landowners, their families and friends to a picnic, during which they formed a farm club to discuss issues and problems facing their community. A key focus was on the old ditches that conveyed water to pastures and farmland,

which were falling into disrepair at a time when agriculture was ramping up.

As the years progressed through World War I, Nevada County farmers toiled to meet demand for more food production needed during the war, and farming and ranching had become staples of the Nevada County economy.

On the governmental front, the Nevada County Promotion Committee was working to advance the recognition of agriculture. The group organized displays at state fairs and even at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (the World's Fair) in San Francisco in 1915, when Nevada County won the Grand Prize for Bartlett pears, beating out fierce competition from many states and every pear-producing county in California.

"The publicity work of the Promotion Committee was far-reaching in its effect, and among the notable accomplishments of the publicity was the revival of the fruit industry. Many hundreds of acres of fruit were planted in the county as the direct result of the committee's activities," Lardner wrote in 1924.

Thirteen farm centers had organized in 1917, including Penn Valley, Chicago Park, Peardale, Gold Flat, Rough and Ready, Clear Creek, Forest Springs, Indian Flat, Lime Kiln, Grass Valley, Pleasant Valley, Birchville and North San Juan. Irrigation activists were motivated and were among the primary organizers in forming the Nevada County Farm Bureau. Community leaders had realized mining would no longer sustain the economy; private companies controlled water supplies – an increasingly expensive situation – and they feared that if they did not ensure a long-term water supply for their community, valuable water resources would be claimed by downstream interests. They became committed to finding a local solution that could sustain their agricultural industry, give them a voice in the operations and, above all, secure a reliable water source for the region under an organization that could maintain and manage a quality supply of water for many generations. The next few years of hard work helped realize the dream. ■

