

Agricultural Roots of San Lorenzo

Farming

Farming was the primary industry in San Lorenzo, and settlers who came to the area discovered a wealth of natural resources for farming:

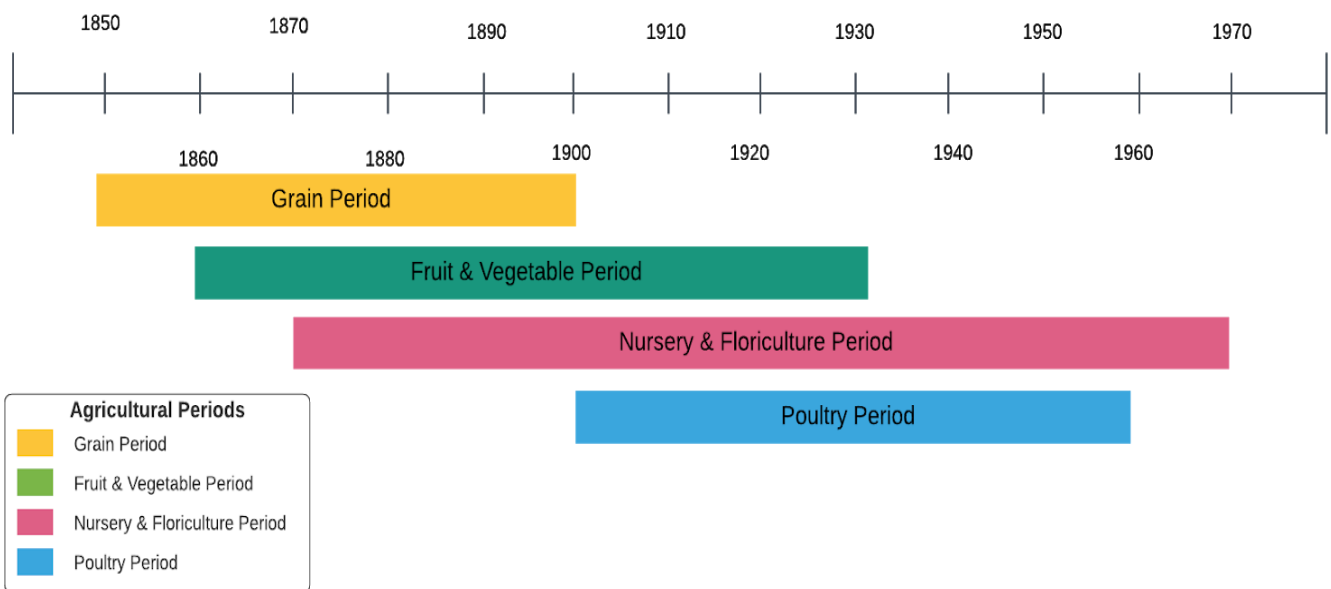
- Water - Diverted from the San Lorenzo Creek and other local creeks allowed farmers to irrigate their crops.
- Fertile Soil - Annual flooding and silt from the San Lorenzo Creek enriched the soil with minerals beneficial for crops.
- Good Weather - Consistently moderate temperatures meant that mild-weather crops, such as leafy greens, could be grown throughout the year.



This farmer is using horse-drawn machinery to harvest his field.

Eden Township was established in 1853, the same year Alameda County was created. It included the towns of Hayward, Castro Valley, San Lorenzo, Mount Eden and San Leandro. The types of crops grown and animals raised by farmers were influenced by the availability, demand, and market price. The book “Eden Township: Its Agriculture” outlines changes through several different time periods.

Eden Township Agricultural History 1850-1970



Grain Period (1850–1900)

The first commercial crops were grains such as wheat, barley and oats. Hay was also grown to feed livestock. Neal McConaghy ran a gristmill that processed wheat for food production. At first, farmers would use manual methods and horse-drawn equipment to harvest their crops, but these eventually gave way to the development of more efficient, fuel-powered harvesting machines.



Fruit and Vegetable Period (1860–1930)

Fruit and vegetables gained favor with commercial crop farmers. Soil exhaustion had resulted in declining harvests of grain crops, causing farmers to search for other things to grow. Farmers such as William Meek planted orchards of cherries, apricots, plums, peaches, pears, almonds and walnuts. Other farmers planted row crops, such as strawberries, tomatoes, peas, fava beans, cucumbers, cauliflower, rhubarb, and spinach. Fruit drying became a

popular means of preserving apricots, prunes and pears from spoilage during railroad shipping, while avoiding the cost of expensive refrigerated railroad cars.

Poultry Period (1900 –1960)

The poultry industry thrived in Eden Township by the 1900s. Poultry took less space to raise and made a good profit. The mild climate and easy accessibility to grain made it the perfect place for raising chickens, pheasants, and squab (pigeons) for the marketplace. While poultry farms were most popular in Castro Valley, small poultry operations could be found through the Hayward area.



Nursery and Floriculture Period (1870 –1970)

Horticulture, or the science of producing edible fruits, vegetables, flowers, herbs, and ornamental plants, thrived in the 1870s as nurserymen, such as Meek and Lewelling, brought fruit trees to the area and supplied stock for farms and orchards throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Floriculture is the growing of flowers and other decorative plants for commercial sale. Field and greenhouse flowers, such as roses, carnations, gladiolus, orchids, bonsai trees, and chrysanthemums became important industries in the 1920s, thanks in part

to Japanese floriculturists. In Hayward, these included the Domoto, Fujii, Shibata and Yoshida families. In San Lorenzo, the Kawahara, Kuramoto, Nomura, Okada, Sakuri and Shinoda families were important floriculturists. The flowers and other plants grown in the area were sold wholesale to buyers throughout the San Francisco region, to individual residents of the Hayward area, and later flown across the country to other flower shops.



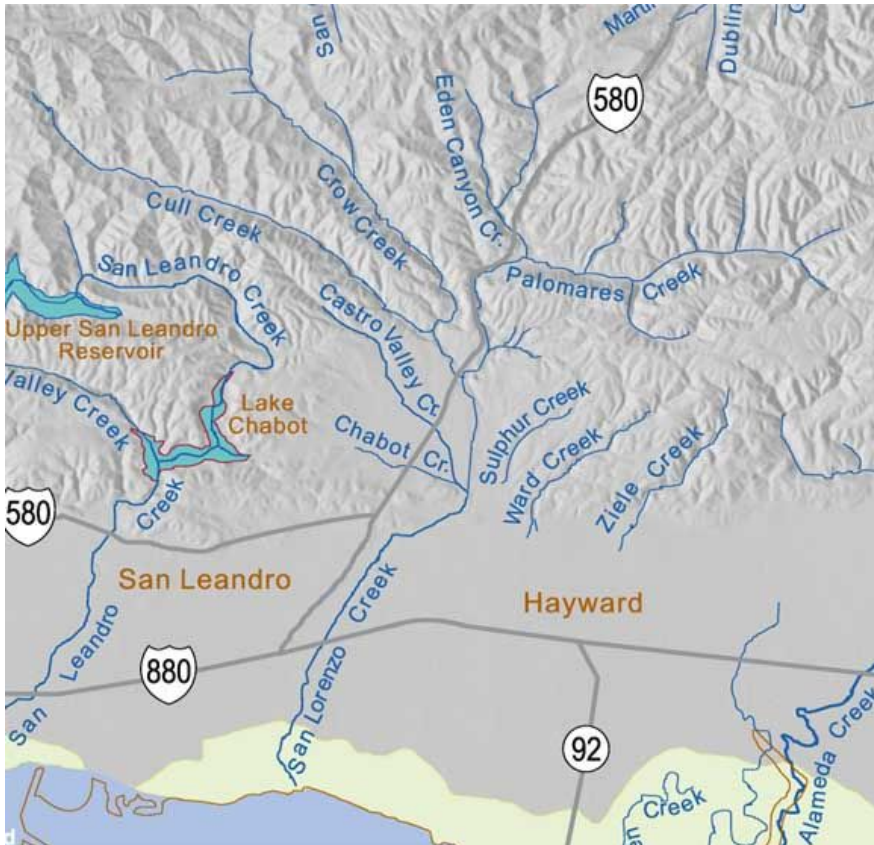
Japanese farmworkers, San Lorenzo

San Lorenzo Creek

The creek was important to the early development of San Lorenzo.

The native Muwekma Ohlone relied on the fresh water and abundant resources of the creek for thousands of years.

When Europeans arrived in the area, the creek provided fresh water for horses and people at the stage stop, San Lorenzo House, which also was a hotel.



This map shows the San Lorenzo Creek watershed.

A watershed is all the land that water flows over or under on its way to a creek, lake or bay.

Water travels down hills, across farm fields, through suburban lawns and city streets into creeks and streams. Water also seeps into the ground and travels as ground water.

The fresh water of the San Lorenzo Creek watershed has made this area a good place to settle for many groups of people over time.

Water enters a watershed from 3 main sources:

- Precipitation, such as rain and snow
- Surface Water, such as creeks, streams and lakes
- Groundwater, where water has seeped into the ground

Before storm drains were built, San Lorenzo Creek used to flood regularly. There are newspaper accounts of a flood which peaked on January 23, 1862. Following an extremely heavy rain of 1 inch of rainfall in 40 minutes, the water in the creek rose 7 feet, 2 inches in 58 minutes. The flooded creek washed two slaughterhouses downstream, then overflowed its banks to cover the surrounding farmland in water.



Flooding of San Lorenzo Creek, ca. 1930s

Orchards

Do you have a fruit tree in your yard? You may have one of the few artifacts of San Lorenzo's orchard era. The *Centennial Yearbook of Alameda County* (1876) said: "San Lorenzo is a place of about 250 inhabitants, and one of the most beautiful horticultural villages anywhere to be found. It is a mass of orchards and gardens, with fine roads and good drives."



Vegetable Farms

The San Lorenzo area was known as the largest producer of farm crops in California and was most famous for rhubarb and tomatoes. The ease of shipping vegetables by refrigerated rail car created a national demand for California vegetables as early as 1912. The first rhubarb of the season to find its way to east coast stores often came from San Lorenzo farms. The Nicoletti family sold some of their crops at a stand immediately in front of their house on Washington Avenue.



Vegetable crops in rows, c. 1925

Fruit Dryer

It seemed logical for fruit growers in San Lorenzo to want to process their crops so they could sell them for a higher profit. They had been drying their own fruit by laying it out in fields. But in the 1870s, they tried something new. They created a fruit-drying facility, and employed locals, including local Chinese-American workers, to help dry and process the fruit. According to the *Centennial Yearbook of Alameda County, 1876*, "A few years [ago] a number of the fruit-growers formed a joint stock company and established the first Alden process fruit-drying establishment on the coast. For some cause, or perhaps a combination of causes... the enterprise has not proved a success. The factory is in San Lorenzo." The fruit drying factory failed, but the community gained in the long run. The building became the Village Hall which was the social center of town for many years to come. Fruit dryers were tried again around 1890 with more success.



Nurseries and Greenhouses

In the early days of San Lorenzo, there were many nurseries and greenhouses on Lewelling, Grant and Ashland Avenues. According to the *Centennial Yearbook of Alameda County, 1876*, "One of the foremost nurseries in the state is that of Eli Lewelling at San Lorenzo."



Higashi Morio Kay nursery, c. 1980

Japanese Nurseries

A wave of Japanese immigrants came to the East Bay in the early years of the twentieth century. The East Bay Flower Growers Association members were mainly Japanese. Families worked hard to establish greenhouses and raise flowers, along with specialty crops such as strawberries. Hot house roses and carnations were shipped via refrigerated cars to Los Angeles and New York. The first Japanese immigrants found work as cannery foremen; tomato, cucumber, pea and rhubarb farmers; berry farmers; strawberry farmers; and as nursery workers.

Unfortunately, the Japanese immigrants were not always welcomed by the other San Lorenzo residents. Laws were established that prevented Japanese people from becoming citizens or owning land. They had to rent land to farm or purchase land in the name of their American-born children, who were citizens by law. When the United

States entered World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Executive Order 9066 required all Japanese-Americans to leave their homes, farms and nurseries and enter temporary detention centers. These detention centers were often hundreds of miles away, such as Manzanar, in the California sierras east of Fresno, or Topaz, in Utah. With their owners detained for the duration of the war, many of the farms went to ruin.

After the war, many Japanese returned to the Hayward area to rebuild their farms and nurseries, and soon the thriving nursery industry returned.

Shipping

The most efficient way to get to San Francisco to sell crops was to take a boat from Robert's Landing. This landing at the mouth of the San Lorenzo Creek was originally established by Robert Thompson in 1850. William Roberts bought him out just a few months later. Besides shipping, the landing also served as a base for fishing boats and oyster hunters.

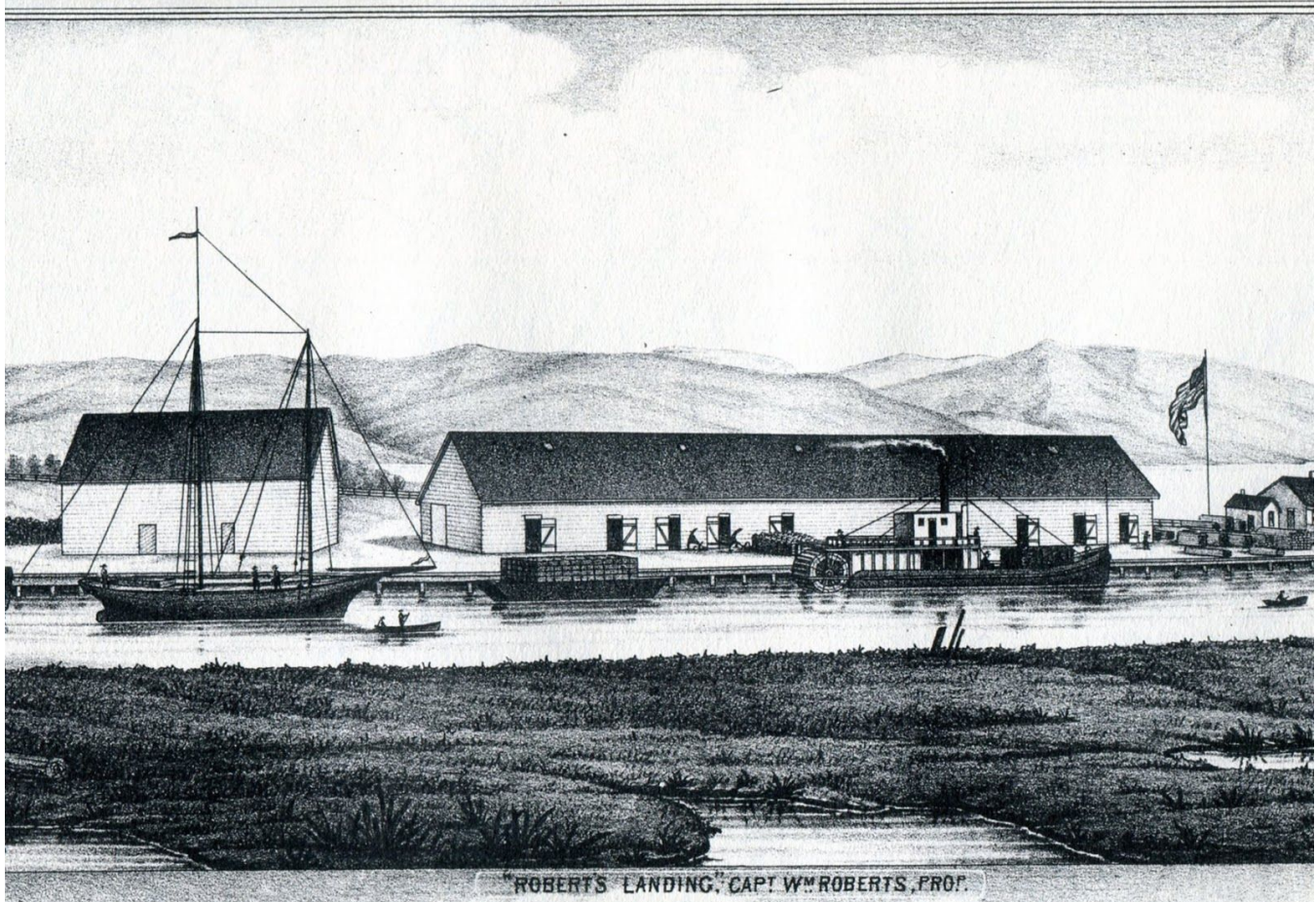


Illustration of Robert's Landing, c. 1878

Cannery Work

California Packing Corporation provided seasonal work at a facility in San Lorenzo in the early 1900s. It operated as Del Monte Plant Number 9. The large cannery opened with the asparagus season in early spring and ended in the fall with the tomato crop. Because many of the workers were women, the cannery operated a daycare center as early as 1919. The facility was located on Hesperian where the Highway 238 interchange is now.



Del Monte Packing Corporation, c. 1940