

When strawberries became king

STRAWBERRY PRODUCTION PLUMMETED in Santa Cruz County during World War II. It was a temporary setback for the popular fruit. A postwar rush to plant the palate- and profit-pleasing berry placed it on a path to become the top agricultural product in the Pajaro Valley in the second half of the 20th century.

Expanded acreage, improved varieties and production techniques, new water sources and a secure labor force fostered the development of the strawberry industry that increased in value from less than half a million dollars in the early 1940s to nearly \$100 million by the late 1990s.

Pajaro Valley growers planted commercial fields of strawberries as early as the late 1870s, selling the produce in local and San Francisco markets. Around the turn of the century, strawberries were often planted as a filler crop in apple orchards that hadn't yet come into bearing.

However, a local woman made a discovery over breakfast in about 1902 that placed the strawberry on a more important track, and put Pajaro Valley growers at the head of a developing statewide industry. Louise Herman, the sister of a local strawberry grower Joseph "Ed" Reiter, was visiting a friend in Shasta County when she was served a sample of a tasty berry from the friend's garden. Recognizing that the Sweet Briar berry was superior to those grown in the Pajaro Valley at the time, she soon headed home to tell her brother and his friend, Richard "Dick" Driscoll, about her discovery. Driscoll and Reiter subsequently formed a partnership with Thomas Loftus of Shasta County. Loftus would propagate the plants, Driscoll and Reiter would produce and market the berries.

Reiter and Driscoll planted their first Sweet Briar patch near Watsonville in 1904. In 1912 the producers wrapped blue paper ribbon around crates of Sweet Briars to attract the attention of buyers, and renamed the berry Banner to reinforce the marketing ploy. The Banner soon became the most prominent berry in California fields, according to Stephen Wilhelm and James E. Sagen, authors of "A History of the Strawberry: From Ancient Gardens to Modern Baskets." In the early 1920s, a group of Pajaro Valley growers, Henry A. Hyde,

O. O. Eaton, Unosuke Shikuma and Heizuchi Yamamoto, created the largest strawberry operation in the state when they planted over 200 acres of Banners on a ranch near Salinas.

Over the first few decades of the 20th century, the development of new strains, combined with advances in cultivation, packing, preserving, shipping and organization to secure the strawberry's position as an important piece of the Pajaro Valley agriculture pie. Apples, however, reigned supreme until the mid-1950s.

The 1941 crop report listed nearly 400 acres of strawberries with a value of \$334,000. By 1943, the total acreage had dropped to 70, the crop's value to \$47,000. The dramatic decline was pinned to the evacuation of Japanese specialty farmers, labor shortages and shifts to other crops due to wartime demands, according to a June 7, 1943, Sentinel article.

Several developments put strawberries onto the comeback trail in the late 1940s. The University of California released new varieties in 1945 that were more disease resistant and produced record-breaking yields. New wells opened up acreage in the San Andreas Road area, where sandy soils that had once been considered unfavorable for agricultural production were found to be well-suited for pro-

ducing strawberries. The formal extension of the wartime bracero program in 1951 ensured the availability of workers for the labor-intensive production.

In 1949, strawberry acreage was climbing, and the annual crop report noted that berries worth \$823,000 had been harvested from 235 acres. In 1950, the strawberry harvest surpassed the \$1 million mark for the first time. Between 1951 and 1955, the amount of acreage dedicated to strawberries quadrupled, reaching an unprecedented high of 1,900 acres, and the strawberry joined the ranks of the apple and lettuce crops at the top of the Santa Cruz County agricultural heap.

Strawberry production has not grown without controversy. Methyl bromide, a fumigant used to purge fields of pests and weed seeds before planting, has boosted productivity. But the chemical has been linked to depletion of the ozone layer and is due to be phased out nationwide by 2005.



After a historical production low in the early part of the decade, the strawberry crop acreage and value was boosted in the late 1940s. Pajaro Valley Historical Society

