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The Culture of California Agriculture
and the Giannini Foundation:
Prophetic Patterns in California's Development

Kevin Starr

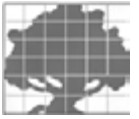


THE CULTURE OF CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE AND THE GIANNINI FOUNDATION: PROPHETIC PATTERNS IN CALIFORNIA'S DEVELOPMENT

Kevin Starr

Kevin Starr is university professor and professor of history at the University of Southern California. He is best known for his multivolume series on the history of California, collectively called *America and the California Dream*. He served as the California state librarian from 1994 to 2004. In 2006 he was awarded a National Humanities Medal.

In August 2004, professors Warren E. Johnston and Alex F. McCalla of the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California, Davis, submitted a special report to the Giannini Foundation entitled *Whither California Agriculture: Up, Down, or Out? Some Thoughts about the Future*.¹ In this provocative document, which guides my remarks to you this afternoon, the authors make a most intriguing statement at the beginning of their discussion. Despite the scope and importance of California agriculture, they point out, the field of agricultural history, as far as California is concerned, still lacks a comprehensive one-volume study. Of course, this deficiency might say more about contemporary scholarship—favoring the focused monograph that exhausts the subject over the comprehensive narrative—but it must nevertheless be pondered, as I have pondered it, given my respect for these two distinguished scholars and my admiration for the historical perspective they brought to their special report. On the other hand, despite the lack of an up-to-date comprehensive one-volume history, the more specialized bibliography connected to California agriculture is somewhat extensive, as I discovered in preparing my chapter “Works, Days, Georgic Beginnings”—with an obvious reference to Virgil’s *Georgics* in the title²—for my *Inventing the Dream*, the second volume of my *Americans and the California Dream* series.³ The literature of wine-making and enology is especially extensive, followed at a close second by books and articles relating to citrus culture and marketing. Of late, there has been a number of impressive studies in the field: *The King of California: J.G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* by Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman,⁴ for example, which the California State Library helped in part to support by purchasing the archives of the authors; or the first volume of the heroic two-volume *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769–1913*⁵ by Richard Steven Street, together with Street’s *Photographic Farmworkers in California*.⁶ I have been particularly impressed by the exhaustive research and lively writing of David Vaught of the Department of History at Texas A&M, as I tried to suggest in my review in the *Harvard Business Journal* (1999) of his *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875–1920*⁷ and my recent report to the Johns Hopkins University Press regarding Vaught’s forthcoming history of nineteenth-century ranching right here in the community now known as



Davis. Then there is Julie Guthman's recently published *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*, another fine study.⁸ Judith Taylor's *The Olive in California: History of an Immigrant Tree* is another fine study;⁹ and, of course, farmer-writers David Masumoto and Victor Davis Hansen have achieved national—indeed, international—reputations.

But all this being said—and I am sure that many of you in this audience have your own favorite titles to add to this list—the observations of Professors Johnston and McCalla still stand up, reinforced by the fact that these two scholars have in their special report themselves produced a brief but compelling history of California agriculture from 1769 to 2000. How can this be? How can such a heroic subject still be waiting comprehensive treatment? How can a historical literature that has produced comprehensive histories of aviation, motion pictures, Silicon Valley, water-related public works, and other endeavors be so lacking when it comes to the activity, agriculture, that has been the lead element in the California economy since the 1880s?

Part of the answer is the nature of California history writing itself. Understandably, scholars prefer manageable topics. Many historians these days, moreover, approach agricultural topics from a specific perspective that is being driven, significantly, by larger considerations, be they labor history, the history of women, the history of minorities, the history of economic and political hegemonies. Then there is the fact that the history of agriculture in California is thoroughly embedded in the history of agriculture itself. Thus, in the brief history provided by Professors Johnston and McCalla, the organization of the material in terms of its controlling topics could, with some adjustment, be used to outline a history of California itself. For that was what California was mainly up to in economic terms, agriculture, for the first century of its existence. How can one disengage, furthermore, the technologies of land and water movement of the Gold Rush era from the technologies of land and water movement of the irrigation era through the dam, reservoir, and aqueduct era in which California metropolitanized itself? From this perspective, the technologies of mining, agriculture, and metropolitanization—which is to say, the first seventy-five to one hundred years of the story of California in the American era—are so inextricably intertwined as to be the same entity.

Another part of the answer, I believe—and this should be of interest to members of the Giannini Foundation—is a certain kind of invisibility to the topic itself. This invisibility does not come from the fact that agriculture is not important. Far from it. It comes from the fact, I believe, that agriculture is pervasive, powerful, yet strangely isolated from general discourse. Part of the problem is the fact that it is difficult to sense a pervasive environment once you are living in it. The late Marshall McLuhan noted, in fact, that once you are fully aware of your environment—detached from it, analyzing it, seeing it as an objective phenomenon—it is no longer fully your environment. It has become something else, an object for study. This is both good news and bad news for the agricultural community. The good news is that California agriculture, as Professors Johnston and McCalla document in their report, remains a behemoth from whatever way you look at it. The bad news is that the behemoth can be invisible because it is such a pervasive constituent of the economy of California. From this perspective, Professor Donald Gerth and his colleagues, in their history of the California State University system, describe this system as an invisible giant. Perhaps



the freeway system of California, taken as a totality, and the total water system of the state possess a similar invisibility: known only in fragments, especially when those fragments are in a condition of stress.

Part of the problem, as well, I believe, can be traced to the intense urbanization and suburbanization of contemporary California (the most urbanized and suburbanized state in the Union according to Census 2000) and the consequent disassociation of Californians from the agricultural sector. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of Californians—except perhaps for the industrialized workers of the Bay Area—encountered agriculture as a living reality. During World War I, when the agricultural work force was depleted by the draft, college-educated and generally middle-class women went into the fields under a state program organized as an agricultural harvest corps, and many of them in later years remembered those times as the happiest in their lives.

As a boy in Ukiah, I picked prunes during the summer to make extra money (we did not call them plums; we called them prunes) together with a week or two picking pears in a mountain orchard near the Noyo River in Mendocino County. As a high school student in Mountain View in the mid-1950s, I walked through flowering apricot orchards to attend class. As a college student making a religious retreat, I worked alongside the monks of the Abbey of New Clairvaux in Vina loading hay bales onto a truck. Now I am the most city-slicker of all city-slickers; yet those experiences engendered in me an imaginative connection with agriculture as part of my personal memory system; indeed, I studied Virgil's *The Georgics*, looking up the word *apricus*, meaning "loving the sun," when outside the window I could see the actual apricots on a tree loving the same sun some 2,000 years after Virgil wrote his poetic paean to agriculture. Talk to Californians of a certain age—sixty somethings, I would say—even the most confirmed city-slickers, and they will most likely have similar connections to recall: whether the lima bean fields surrounding the UCLA campus or the citrus groves surrounding UC Riverside filling the campus with the scent of orange blossoms in the spring or the vineyards and orchards surrounding every Central Valley town, the flower farms of Santa Cruz County. They would have read the Frank Norris novel *The Octopus* with its depictions of wheat harvests in the San Joaquin¹⁰ or they would have worked in imagination alongside the Joads in the harvest fields via the pages of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.¹¹

The populace's connection to agriculture has not fully disappeared—indeed, the vineyards of Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, Santa Barbara, and San Diego counties have been expanded, bringing vineyards right up to the edge of cities and towns like the citrus groves were brought to those edges in Southern California in the pre-World-War-II era. But it is more difficult for today's suburbanized and urbanized populations to experience agriculture as a working process, although the cuisine revolution led by Alice Waters, M.F.K. Fisher, Julia Child, Wolfgang Puck, and others has alerted urban elites in an important new way to the realities of sound and sustainable farming, as attested to by the crowded farmers markets of our cities on any given Saturday morning.

One of the themes for a comprehensive history of California agriculture would obviously be how the agricultural establishment did its thinking and projected its

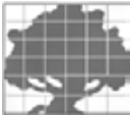


image: how, that is, it inaugurated a self-conscious reflection and analysis on behalf of a newly forming sector of the economy. Dealing with this topic, we could begin with such a figure as James Lloyd Lafayette Warren (1805–1896), the Massachusetts Forty Niner who, observing the scurvy in the mines, the result of a diet of whiskey and hardtack, determined then and there that what California needed was agriculture and agricultural institutions. Setting himself up in the seed business in Sacramento, Warren organized the city's first agricultural fair in 1852. By 1854 Warren was issuing his *California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences*, the first agricultural journal on the Pacific Coast.¹² On May 13, 1854, Warren was on hand to witness the signing by Governor John Bigler of a bill establishing the State Agricultural Society of California. In time, the *California Farmer* was joined by such other journals as *The California Rural Home Journal*,¹³ *The California Fruit Grower*,¹⁴ *The California Citograph*,¹⁵ and the exceptionally ambitious *Pacific Rural Press*¹⁶ founded and edited by Edward James Wickson (1846–1923). Wickson was a New York horticulturalist who had moved to California in 1875 and joined the faculty of the University of California in 1879 and who was known as well for such classics as *The California Fruits and How to Grow Them*,¹⁷ *The California Vegetables*,¹⁸ and *Rural California*.¹⁹ An 1869 graduate of Hamilton College in upstate New York and a regent leading the rest of the country in agricultural sophistication, Wickson had studied classics and chemistry as an undergraduate. By temperament and training, Wickson preferred to live his life imaginatively and professionally, at the point of intersection between literature and science, language and the practical arts. Like his beloved Hesiod, the ancient Greek author of the agricultural poem *Works and Days*,²⁰ and the Roman poet Virgil, author of *The Georgics* (each of these poems was studied by Wickson at Hamilton College in the original Greek and Latin and remembered throughout a lifetime), Wickson was enamored of agriculture as an archetypal act of culture-building: an enterprise in which all the details, all the prudent choices, coalesced to create a landscape and a way of life that promoted civility, prosperity, and good order. Wickson's best-known book, *The California Fruits and How to Grow Them*, is pervaded throughout its abundant detail by the sustaining vision of the new way of life that intensive farming would bring to California.²¹ Wickson not only offered practical advice; each step in establishing an orchard as he described it—budding and grafting, the laying out of trees in double or alternating squares, planting, pruning, weeding, watering, draining, fertilizing—contained a metaphor for life and society as well. Over the years, Wickson's books sold nearly 46,000 copies. *California Fruits* alone went through nine editions.

Wickson was brought to the University of California in 1879 by Professor Eugene W. Hilgard, whom Wickson succeeded as dean of the College of Agriculture in 1905. Hilgard (1833–1916) was a university-trained soils scientist—not as brilliant a writer as Wickson perhaps but a more formally trained scientist who helped anchor the College of Agriculture at the University of California onto a bedrock of the best scientific research of the era.

Also helping California agriculture think its way through in one sector or another was Agoston Haraszthy (1812–1869), whose *Report on Grapes and Wines in California* was the first manual of its sort to be written and published in this state. In 1862, after more than a year of travel and study in Europe sponsored by the State Agricultural Society and the state legislature, Haraszthy not only brought back from Europe

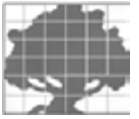


some 200,000 cuttings representing more than 1,400 varieties, thus single-handedly effecting a mass migration of vines from Europe to California; he also produced the classic *Grape Culture, Wines, and Wine-Making, with Notes upon Agriculture and Horticulture*, which remains to this day the Magna Carta of the California wine industry.²² Also of relevance in this regard was the very influential *Handbook of Grape Culture*²³ by the career diplomat turned Napa viticulturalist Thomas Hart Hyatt, who made a specialty as editor of the *California Rural Home Journal* of introducing the products of the Mediterranean—the vine, the fig, the orange, the palm, and the olive—to California. And don't forget E. Rixford's *The Wine Press*²⁴ and George Husmann's *Grape Culture and Wine-Making in California*,²⁵ or Frona Eunice Wait's *Wines and Vines of California*.²⁶

And as far as citrus is concerned, we encounter during the same era such classics as *Orange Culture in California*²⁷ by Thomas Garey, *The Orange, Its Culture in California*²⁸ by William Andrew Spaulding, and *A Treatise on Citrus Culture in California*²⁹ by Byron Martin Lelong. These extensively researched and elegantly written studies established the practical and theoretical bases for the development of citrus in the 1880s. In performing a similar role—as experimentalist and as writer—for improved strains of vegetables, fruits, and flowers, Santa Rosa nurseryman Luther Burbank (1849–1926) achieved in his catalogs and books the status of an almost mythic figure.

The fact is, then, that nineteenth-century California agriculture—in the rural-oriented press, at the University of California College of Agriculture, and among a generation of farmer-scholars—thought its way through, opened new horizons, and dealt with the practicalities as well as the poetry of agriculture. And I would like to include in this group as well the amazing young novelist Frank Norris (1870–1902), whose novel *The Octopus*,³⁰ referring to the Southern Pacific, contains in its story line a conception of the modern California agriculturalist as an entrepreneur to international markets. For Norris, the wheat culture of California—ironically, in the process of decline even as he wrote—embodied the intrinsic internationalism of California as a society and as a provider for food for the planet. The wheat ranchers of *The Octopus* follow the international commodities markets with ticker tapes in their ranch houses, the essence of modernity for the year 1901. Tragically, Norris died before he could finish the third volume of his wheat trilogy—he called it *The Wolf*—in which the wheat of California fed an India ridden by famine.

We cannot help, moreover, but be aware this afternoon of the fact that the Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics at the University of California was founded by a man who had grown up on a farm near San Jose and had spent the first phase of his career as a wholesaler of agricultural products. From this perspective, it is not too far-fetched to say that agriculture formed A.P. Giannini and A.P. Giannini formed modern banking, which in effect suggests agriculture as an initiating matrix for the democratization of banking practice brought about by Giannini and his colleagues. We must also remember that Giannini, as a boy, had witnessed the murder of his father by a disgruntled employee over a very small disputed sum. It does not push it too far, I believe, to suggest that Giannini—having witnessed as a boy in a catastrophic way what small sums meant to working people—decided to build his bank on the deposits of the multitudes and not just the few.



What a powerful confluence, then, of forces it was to have A.P. Giannini and the bank he founded and brought to such grandeur join with the University of California, in which the College of Agriculture had been a founding entity, for purposes of helping California agriculture think its way through, just as so many of the individuals I named helped it think its way through in the nineteenth century. And what a remarkable development both the university and the Foundation have experienced since that time. I recently had the privilege of writing the preface to Ann F. Scheuring's *Abundant Harvest: The History of the University of California*, Davis and I predict that this history will as well become a classic in the literature of California agriculture, chronicling as it does the extraordinary rise of this campus, with special regard this afternoon for the agriculture-related research that has been conducted here over the years.³¹

Still, as Professors Johnston and McCalla have suggested, there is room for a comprehensive history and may I suggest that these two professors in their brief *A Stylized History of California Agriculture from 1769–2000* have already established the structure of such a narrative.³² As in the case of the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers on agriculture, however, the connection between the agriculture of California and the culture of California will remain at the heart of the story. You cannot have one without the other, even if agriculture seems increasingly sealed off into its own sector as far as the popular imagination is concerned.

Such a history by definition, then, would deal with the interaction between agricultural forces and the larger society: an interaction that Professors Johnston and McCalla have already suggested. In my own *Americans and the California Dream* series, incidentally, I have made every effort to turn to agriculture, decade by decade, as a driving social and cultural force. The dams, reservoirs, and aqueducts feeding the mission gardens, for example, prophecy the eventual development of California as an agricultural empire and suggest the Euro-American reverberations this agriculture might possess. The introduction of the fig, the vine, the olive, and citrus runs parallel to—indeed, is inextricably part of—the Mediterranean metaphor that guided the development of California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One cannot disentangle rice from irrigation or irrigation from rice, either as a matter of practical rice-growing or as an evocation of the rice lands of the Sacramento Valley bespeaking the redemption of arid America through irrigation that so captivated Californians in the first half of the twentieth century. And when California internationalized itself in the postwar era, was it only accidental that the agriculture of California was internationalizing itself as well? Not just in terms of the opening of new markets but the introduction to California of crops from elsewhere and, of equal drama, the Californianization of such agricultural producers as Chile and northern Mexico and the entry of products from these countries into California markets. Time and again, across more than 200 years, agriculture and society, society and agriculture, have formed and paced each other in California.

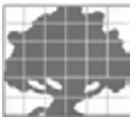
Which brings us to the present. What agriculturally related questions do I as a cultural historian have in mind as I contemplate the research efforts of the University of California and the Giannini Foundation across the better part of the twentieth century?



Let's start simply, in the local supermarket. The farmers markets I have already evoked, together with enterprises such as Whole Foods, Bristol Farms, and the specialty markets up and down the state, have, as I have indicated, reinforced a powerful new connection between elites and high-quality agricultural products. On the other hand, many are worried these days that our society is creating a widening gap of class and culture. It is not rocket science for a social and cultural historian to see this gap in food preferences. On the one side of the divide is the abundance of nature transformed by the art of wine-making and cuisine. On the other side of the divide are agricultural products as well but processed in a way paralleling what many fear is the rampant vulgarization of our popular culture. In times past, not to be wealthy or particularly educated or privileged did not involve—whether in the Cajun cuisine of the bayous, the grits and greens of the rural South, or the stews, vegetables, and mashed potatoes of working city-dwellers—a detachment from nutritious food that was respectfully grown and carefully prepared. The excessive amounts of corn-sweetened products—indeed, the array of packaged and processed foods that in many of our supermarkets take up to two-thirds of shelving space—do not fall into this category, nor do the medical results of a steady diet on these products. In the nineteenth century, agricultural writers touted their belief that the products of California—citrus, deciduous fruits, vegetables, nuts, raisins—would produce a healthier and happier population, not only in California but across the nation, once the proper delivery system was achieved in the refrigerated railroad car; indeed, many of these products—oranges, for example—were consumed mainly by elites before the rise of California agriculture. By the 1920s, however, Americans were consuming toward fifty oranges a year and their children were packing boxes of Sun Maid raisins in their school lunch bags thanks to the deliberate marketing and promotion of these products. From this perspective, one can anticipate an increased interest in such issues on the part of UC Davis and the Giannini Foundation.

Then there is the all-pervasive question of growth. There is an increasing awareness in the environmental movement, I believe, that successful agricultural landscapes constitute a form of preserved open space to be ranked alongside wilderness preserves and park lands in any program of environmental protection. Take a look at the classic landscapes of Italy, Greece, and Spain as examples, integrating as they do all of these elements along with residential density. The nineteenth and early twentieth century agricultural thinkers envisioned agriculture not just in terms of economic development but in terms of creating integrated and sustainable landscapes of practical, preservationist, and aesthetic dignity.

Our dependence on foreign oil is another agriculturally related question in that its inner intellectual content—dependency upon a foreign source for a necessity—would apply to American agriculture as well, especially here in California, if we continue to pave over our productive fields. We Californians, with the help in many instances of the federal government—meaning the people of all of the United States, have invested billions of dollars in creating the water and transportation infrastructure that brings food to our tables at astonishingly low prices in comparison, say, to Europe or other First World countries. Were we to experience fluctuations in food prices as we are experiencing in gas prices, there would most likely be rioting in the streets. But that means that land must be kept available for agriculture—which means that agriculture



must remain profitable in our current economic system. That means that foreign markets must be open to us, just as we are open to them. From this perspective, agriculture is on the cutting edge of the challenge of growth. We will have some fifty-five to sixty million people in the state by 2040. Where and how will they live and work, how will the environment be preserved amidst such growth, and how will the society continue to feed itself?

Which brings us to the question of world hunger. The internationalization of California agriculture in terms of products and markets involves a paradigm of the people of this planet being able to feed themselves and hence to sustain life. How do we deal with political systems that employ systematic starvation for purposes of genocide? How do we assist developing nations to develop their agriculture if we ourselves are becoming increasingly addicted to a quick-burn practice of financial investment that moves money here and there and everywhere at electronic speed? For all its faults, for example—and they were legion—United Fruit constituted an ongoing commitment to agriculture in Central America even if that commitment depended upon the occasional presence of U.S. Marines. Are we behaving any better, we might ask, when we mask our imperialism behind near-invisible financial instruments operating in a global economy? As the populations of China and India increase in prosperity, Professors Johnston and McCalla tell us, they will constitute an expanding market for California agriculture. But the very development of these mega-nations has involved their increasing ability to feed their own populations. Sustained populations, in other words, move upwards in their food preferences. Starving populations do not form stable markets and there are just too many starving populations on the planet these days. Will the social and cultural historian of a future California be able to chronicle that in its time the agricultural sector of California helped think through and push forward programs for the alleviation of world hunger comparable to the Marshall Plan in their success?

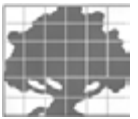
Such a challenge constitutes political and economic solutions on a global scale, true, and hence is somewhat beyond our immediate reach. Yet California today is the fifth or sixth largest economy on the planet and agriculture remains a lead element in this economy. That is a major platform and possibly powerful point of leverage to be thinking about such matters.

And who can do such thinking better than a great university and a great Foundation such as the University of California and the Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics? We cannot, in short, just solve our own problems, as important as they are, without reference to global conditions, be they positive or negative. Nor can we contemplate the future of the planet without reference to its agriculture. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the agricultural thinkers of our great state helped create first a regional and then a national agricultural culture. In one sense, the agriculture of California went national in terms of its products, operating paradigms, and the new varieties of food it put on the American table. In the late twentieth century, the peoples of the world flooded into California, as did agricultural products from across the world and, alas, some disturbing agricultural pests from elsewhere. In the twenty-first century, historians of the future will hopefully one day be able to write that the agriculture of California, having thought through and organized itself, established a model for a planet desperately in need of sustainable paradigms.



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