MANTECA: CITY IN TRANSITION

By Howard Shideler

This interesting city is in the heart of the greatest agricultural country in the world, it surely seems. With our good soil, excellent climate and abundance of water, its destiny as a prosperous farm center was foreseeable from the beginning. There was little activity in Manteca not related to agriculture until World War II, and even since then the changes have been slow. But today Manteca is shedding its old image with new high-tech industries developing, and it is also becoming a "bedroom community" for the industrial centers west of the Altamont Pass.

Let's take a look back to Manteca's beginnings. There were relatively few Indians living permanently in this area because of the extreme summer heat and the scarcity of useful vegetation on the sand plains. Yokut Indians, at first lumped together with others in the eyes of newcomers and carelessly called "Diggers," were concentrated along the San Joaquin River to the west. In 1980 a major Indian burial ground was uncovered during the construction of the Highway 120 Bypass. Work was held up for two weeks while the graves were examined and recorded carefully, and then covered up and construction resumed.

It is speculated that Jedediah Smith, the famous pioneer explorer, passed through this area on one of his trips. French Canadian trappers of the Hudson Bay Company traversed the area also, mainly along the river, from their seasonal base at French Camp.

The first permanent settlers came as the gold rush subsided. On the first, large landholdings, the principal production was of grain and cattle. Originally the best crop was wheat, but after a few years barley became the favorite. The area's sandy, less compact soil did not hold moisture well enough to grow a late summer crop. By 1888 the average production per acre had fallen to sixteen bushels, and even less when there were diminished rains and withering, dry, north winds. Being able to grow only one crop every other year, and therefore letting the ground go fallow during the alternate years, produced conditions perfect for blowing sand and dust storms.

By the early 1900s many miles of bamboo windbreaks had been planted. Later, as irrigation and varied farming methods were developed, most of the cane breaks were removed, but even today we have some dust storms that lower visibility drastically and carry our thoughts back to years when they were much more common.

The Central Pacific (now Southern Pacific) Railroad line from Lathrop through Manteca to the Stanislaus River was completed on November 8, 1870. This opened up the territory for smaller farms of twenty to forty acres, and gave access to very profitable markets in the San Francisco Bay area. These farms were sufficient to provide full employment for one family and even a meager profit if some irrigation from a well were available.
1988 photo: Relics of the past, part of the future? The "Manteca" sign was removed from the Southern Pacific depot (built 1911) when it was demolished in the early 1970s. Cliff Parr tried to rally support to save the building for use as a city museum, but could not generate enough interest. The wood-stave pipe was installed by Bacilieri's Manteca Water Works, likely during a major renovation of the water system in 1917 when some 4900 feet of wood line were laid for domestic use, for the Manteca Canning Company, and for nine fire hydrants. The wood-stave pipes in diameters of 4, 6 and 8 inches operated with a working pressure of 140 pounds per square inch. The other self-described relic, Howard Shideler, was born in Petaluma enough years ago to have graduated from the University of California-Davis in 1934 and gone to work for the ensuing thirteen years on El Solyo Ranch at Vernalis. Moving to Linden and then Manteca in 1947-1948, he has entertained himself since then by raising turkeys, alfalfa, sunflowers, and other such articles. He thanks Glenn Kahl especially for lending old Manteca photographs for this publication, and for printing the modern photos. Thanks also to Donald Tinnin for early-day farm scenes and to Richard Shideler for 1960s street scenes, and to the following for useful information: J. Clifford Parr, William Perry, Lucas Hat, Walter Keppel, Stewart Anderson, and Ray Honodel. The Manteca Bulletin opened its historic files most usefully and generously, also.
The Joseph Fassler Dairy at the west end of Louise Avenue. This photo was taken in 1913 when the new barn had just been completed. Eight milkers took care of 250 Holstein cows. By 1916 they were shipping 600 gallons of milk daily to San Francisco. Fassler had 230 acres of alfalfa, all sub-irrigated, which was cut four times yearly.

The typical farm had six to ten milk cows, six to eight acres of alfalfa, three to four acres of trees, some grapes, and a vegetable garden.

The main cash income was derived from milk delivered to the Cowell Siding Skimming Station. The cream was shipped from here by rail to the bay area, and the skim milk returned to the farmers for feed at home.

There was a confusion in name between this Cowell Station and a "Cowell Siding" south of Tracy, so the name of the former was changed to Manteca. The Southern Pacific Railroad included this new name in the June 1898 Official Railroad Gazette. Manteca was cited as having fewer than 100 residents, 98 miles from San Francisco, from which the railroad fare was $1.65. (At that time Lathrop had a population of 577, French Camp 300, and Tracy 362.) There is some question in my mind over how the population of Manteca was counted, as it was not incorporated and did not have definite boundaries until 1918. All of the area that is now in Manteca was served before then by the post office at Lathrop.

The skimming station was the first business, even before there was a recognized town. The activity created by its growth helped to promote the railroad business so that by 1911 the Southern Pacific had built a new depot for both freight and passengers. Before 1911, when Manteca was still only a flag stop, Irma Larson remembered flagging the train and riding with her mother to Lathrop to buy groceries and dry goods.

Cheap, reliable irrigation was essential for the development of the area. It was slow in coming but finally, in 1909, an election was held to form the South San Joaquin Irrigation District and authorize a bond issue. The first directors were C.M. Carlson, B.A. Goodwin, C.T. Wiggin, Fred Kincaid, and Walter J. Woodward.

The bonds were issued in 1913, the first being payable in 1931 at 5% interest. But the bonds were not salable on the market for par, and California's Wright-Bridgeford Act provided explicitly that they could not be sold below par and had to be sold for cash. The construction work was put out under the subterfuge of letting the contractors bid for the bonds,
Pumpkins -- "The Kind We Raise in Manteca." This postcard was mailed from Manteca in 1911. Pumpkins continue to be a major crop in the area, supporting a Pumpkin Festival even today.

"Vines Do Well in Manteca" -- 1911 postcard picture. These grapes grown before irrigation produced a high quality but low volume of wine. The widespread use of stakes and wire in vineyards arrived several years later in the Manteca area.
Ed Powers, "The Watermelon King," wears bib overalls in the center of this postcard photograph of approximately 1916. He shipped five hundred tons of melons in that year, when Manteca was the self-acclaimed "Watermelon Capital of the World." Powers was a director of the First State Bank of Manteca, the first president of the San Joaquin County Farm Bureau, and was active in forming the first high-school district. He also developed a productive sunflower which he called "The Manteca." He furnished seed to local farmers for share-crop production. The present author grew seventy acres for him under contract in 1956.

The contractors bid for the bonds at cash value, but they added extra costs to the work they were performing. The district Board of Directors prevailed upon the legislature to amend the act to allow a district to sell its bonds for less than par, subject to the vote of two-thirds of the electors. Finally, on December 13, 1913, the successful vote was obtained and the Board of Directors gained authority to sell the bonds directly to investors, even at considerable discounts. They now could get real competitive bidding and make cash payments on the contracts.

The irrigation water was diverted from the Stanislaus River about eighteen miles northeast of Oakdale. The diversion dam and the first three miles of the canal were in very rugged terrain and cost more than $1 million. The next four miles were a series of cuts and fills, and included thirteen tunnels varying from 400 to 3600 feet long, with a total length of more than two miles. The main canal was concrete lined the first year for seven miles, and subsequently all canals were lined or piped. The district built all the lateral ditches and prepared to deliver water to every forty-acre tract.

Gopher damage caused many ditch breaks with resulting flooding. Hubert H. Bancroft, in his History of California (7 volumes, 1884-90), pointed out that gophers were the second most destructive pest in the state. They damaged the roots of all newly planted trees, vegetables and root crops. Southeast of Manteca on one occasion a gopher-hole-riddled ditch allowed the railroad right of way to flood, slowing the train traffic. All of the irrigators from the surrounding fields had to leave their work and shore up the banks.

One of the first manufacturing interests in this area was a gopher trap plant in Lathop. Milo Wolfe patented a box device which he foresaw as solving many of the gopher problems. He bought
The Manteca Winery building, photographed in 1914, the year it was taken over by the Manteca Cannery. This is the only building remaining in 1988 from the cannery complex. The rear of the pictured structure is shown at the right in the 1915 Canning Company picture.
$2,500 worth of machinery from the Geiger Foundry in Stockton to start up. He continued manufacturing the traps as late as the mid-fifties. Many of the box traps are still in use today.

Unimproved land in the district sold in 1914 for $125-$200 an acre. For instance, the 125-acre ranch on the corner of Louise Avenue and Airport Way (where the Manteca Union High School office and High School farm are now) was offered at only $125 an acre. Most of the small farms south of Manteca were purchased by Swedes and Danes. There was a Scandinavian church where Nile Garden is located now. West Colony, a 2,820-acre area southeast of Manteca, was the first area to be subdivided. It was opened up in 1906 by Frank West of the family which gave its name to West Lane, north of Stockton. The largest holdings were the Central Vineyards, the Moreno Vineyards, and those of Achille Bacilieri of the Manteca Cannery.

Nile Garden Farms was an 1,820-acre tract taken over by C.B. Hubbard of San Francisco, to subdivide. By 1914 there were 437 acres of sunflowers, 427 acres of Egyptian corn, 321 acres of alfalfa, and smaller acreages of diverse crops. Only 16 acres were in orchard and 2 in vineyard. More than forty homes and barns were built in this area in 1914, and the building activity kept up. Attendance at Rustic School was a good index of the growth. At the beginning of the year there were one teacher and four pupils. At the close of the year the roll exceeded fifty -- but we find no record of another teacher being hired.

To the northeast of town there was a dense settlement of Russian immigrants and even today that area is known as the Russian Colony. There were also some Sikh settlers, most noteworthy being the groups that formed the Punjab Cattle and Land Company and the Atlantic Cattle Company.

In the pre-World War I period of prosperity there was extensive industrial growth. The Manteca Cannery was formed and started putting up canned tomatoes in August 1914. Eighty-three cartons of two dozen cans each were put up the first day. Forty women were employed as peelers,
1906 photo: Joe Morgan threshing barley in the black lands northeast of Manteca on Castle Road. Because this was a dry year the barley crop was poor "shoe peg" quality and the straw was light. Only twenty-two horses were used on this Stockton-built Holt Harvester. Note that the header was controlled by a lever rather than the wheel used in later models.

1916 photo: The Lester Oney harvester working on Nels Jorgenson's barley crop in the McMullen tract. Oney is the second man from the left; third from the left is Joe Tinnin who farmed 160 acres on the corner of Tinnin Road and Woodward Road. Jorgenson had the third ranch south of Tinnin's and also farmed in the McMullen tract. The 1916 crop yielded more than ten thousand 100-pound sacks shipped at the Garrison Station, Western Pacific Railroad.
Achille Bacilieri at a rental home in the southwest part of Manteca in 1915. The tenants are not identified. At this time survival was of the essence and landscaping was not. In the next three years the Manteca Canning Company built a number of homes in this area for their employees.

working by hand. The first tomatoes were brought by rail from Woodbridge because the local crop ripened later. The plant was also geared to handle peaches and pears, but war conditions made the canned fruit business problematical. The price of sugar, for instance, went from five to eight cents a pound in the last two months of the war.

Adjoining the cannery was the Manteca Winery owned by Achille Bacilieri. He foresaw disaster if the proposed U.S. constitutional amendment for prohibition of alcoholic beverages passed, and so sold his building to the cannery. The original winery building is still standing in 1988, used now by the Celpril Seed Company.

By 1917 the Manteca Cannery was producing a quarter of a million cases of tomatoes annually, and also canned string beans and pork and beans. The trade name "Manteca Lady" was on all of their products. Most of the production was for the armed forces. The plant closed down in 1964 after fifty years.

The Nile Garden Cannery started operation and packed more than fifty thousand cases of tomatoes in 1917, but ceased production soon after the war ended. The Manteca Packing Company built a plant in the northwest part of town on the Tidewater Southern railway line. This firm also specialized in tomatoes and other vegetable products, packing a hundred thousand cases in 1917. The California Tomato Paste Company employed twenty-five people in 1917, making a specialty of tomato paste. They had to curtail plans for expansion because of a shortage of women to hand-peel the tomatoes.

Libby McNeil Libby took options on land and had plans under way to erect a large cannery in time to handle 1919 crops but they pulled out with the end of the war. In three more years only the Manteca Cannery remained. As early as 1914 the Spreckels Sugar Company had started to look for a site in the Manteca area to take care of the increasing sugar beet production. Major consideration was given to a site at Mossdale, where river barges could bring beets from the Delta and the railroad could
1962 photo: The Lindberg School built in 1927. These early schools were of all-brick construction, fireproof but not earthquake proof. This building was condemned by state authorities for not meeting earthquake safety standards. It is currently being used for adult education, conveniently located at North Lincoln Avenue and East North Street. All of the schools built in the period around 1930 had a unique character of their own, contrasting sharply with newer schools.

1928 photo: From a mile north of a tank house and bunkhouse.

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car this totaled 916 tons. At an average ton the crop rep$200,000 for local for 1918, the fir

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By 1922 the sugar depleting by 1918 national price of 22 percent, and the
deliver local beets. Manteca growers persuaded the Tidewater Southern to build a six-mile line from Turner Station to the beet plant site, and this clinched the deal.

By January 1917 there were three hundred men working on construction and forty-five were building storage rooms and bunkhouses. The first ten cars delivered by the railroad carried lumber for the plant, and the road was lined with teams and wagons delivering other materials. The plant was out in the country more than a mile from town.

In October, with the plant still far from complete, Spreckels shipped 690 railroad cars of beets from the Manteca area to their plant at Salinas. At forty tons per car this totaled almost thirty thousand tons. At an average price of six dollars per ton the cropt represented more than $200,000 for local farmers. The estimate for 1918, the first full year of local production, was more than $500,000. In addition to beets the plant also used some raw products from the Philippine Islands.

By 1922 the sugar beet crop was badly depleted by curly leaf disease, the international price of sugar had dropped fifty percent, and the cost of handling the Philippine raw product was excessive, so Spreckels had to shut down. By 1932 the U.S. Department of Agriculture had introduced a disease-resistant beet. When local production increased sufficiently, the Manteca plant opened once more and operated until 1941 when labor shortages forced closure again. During World War II the U.S. Navy took over the machine shop and used all of the warehouses for storage. Since 1946 Spreckels has operated continuously. None of the beet supply is now grown in the Manteca area, but most is grown within trucking distance.

Pressed by population growth in the pre-World War I period, the Board of Trustees of the Union Grammar School recognized the need for a new school uptown. The Union School at the corner of Louise Avenue and Reynolds (now Union) Road was two miles from the center of town. The new school was on Yosemite Avenue and was appropriately named Yosemite School.

The Board of Supervisors was petitioned to macadamize and curb the roadway to the west end of the school property. Property owners on each side of the street paid for curbs and gutters.
The switchboard room of the Manteca Telephone Company in 1928. The company had been started in 1913, with Ed Powers as manager, as the Manteca Telegraph and Telephone Company. For connection to the town circuit and switching service, then, the fee was 75¢ per month. You could either build your own line and furnish your own telephone, or pay the company to rent an instrument and to install your line. Lines were strung casually on trees, extensions of fence posts, corners of sheds and buildings, etc., in the earliest days, resulting in frequent interruptions of service.

The new school was of the most modern design in central California. Special attention was given to the heating, ventilation, and sanitary systems. On ground level were the assembly hall, manual training area, play and lunch rooms, toilets, and heating plant. On the second floor were ten classrooms, the principal’s office, teachers’ room, and library. The construction costs exceeded $17,000 for this all-brick building. It burned in August 1948. The second large brick elementary school, the Lindberg School, was abandoned in the early seventies because it did not meet state earthquake safety standards.

By 1923 a High School District had been formed and a new building was built on East Yosemite Avenue. As early as 1910 there had been talk of building a high school in Lathrop because it was then a larger town, but there was major dissension about it in Manteca. High school students went then from Manteca to Stockton by train. The pressure for a local high school increased as the population expanded.

An acute housing shortage developed during the World War I industrial expansion. Manteca’s population doubled in the first nine months of 1917. Spreckels had their own construction camp and mess hall. The Manteca Cannery built some temporary homes south of the cannery. There was a new two-story brick Hotel Waukeen that afforded every modern convenience. Some local citizens offered room and board for as many as ten workers in a single home.

A major sanitary problem was created by the lack of a sewer system. Septic tanks and cesspools were running over so commonly that the State Department of Health threatened condemnation by

September 1917 was not developed. The sanitary district was incorporated but it took two years to build a sewage plant, at a cost of $40,000. The Palomar Sanitary District was organized on Airport Way, south of Yosemite Avenue, and the Y-Cross Clubhouse was built on the site of the old school.

Manteca’s growth was sharply in the 1910 period the population doubled. Several new schools were built on Yosemite Avenue. A sewage treatment plant had been built in the 1920s and there were plans to expand the plant. The 1930s saw a decrease in population as the Wall Street crash and the Great Depression took their toll on the small-town economy. The Manteca Cannery was closed in the 1940s and the cannery area was developed for residential use. The town continued to grow and develop in the 1950s and 1960s, but the economic climate was not as favorable as in the previous decades.
September 1917 if a sewage system were not developed. The alternative to forming a sanitary district was to incorporate, and so by May 28, 1918, the City of Manteca was incorporated. Soon afterwards a contract was let for a sewer line and plant, but it took two years to complete. The sewage plant, at the present site of the golf course clubhouse, was replaced by a larger plant south of Yosemite Avenue, west of Airport Way, in 1970.

Manteca's growth rate diminished sharply in the 1920s. In this ten-year period the population went from 1284 to 1614. Several new brick stores were built on Yosemite Avenue, and a new bank building and two new schools, but otherwise the growth was gradual and conservative. The loss of employment and income from the closure of Spreckels and three canneries hurt the economy of the whole area.

The 1930s started in a fairly upbeat manner as Spreckels reopened and the small-town economy was not hit at first by the Wall Street crash and other early events of the Great Depression. By 1934, nevertheless, unemployment was becoming a major problem. Some farms were being foreclosed and sold for taxes. One well known store was publicly sold at a foreclosure sale. Vacant city lots that had been purchased for $150 or $200 in 1916 went for $18 at 1930s tax sales.

The Kraft Phenix Cheese Company built a new plant in the 1930s, however, and other new small businesses also helped the economy. But by the end of this decade the population had increased by only 350 people and was still less than 2000.

The year 1940 can be considered the beginning of a new era. The World War II economy brought full employment in non-agriculture-related industries for the first time. Starting with the Sharpe Army Depot and the Kaiser Magnesium Plant, the city has enjoyed a great inflow of business and population. Manteca's population is now approaching 39,000, and the 95336 Zip Code Area includes a total of some 50,000. Manteca keeps busy today trying to create a new image as a full-employment industrial city, and at the same time to hold onto the cherished old-home values.
Downtown Manteca in 1916: Yosemite Avenue and Main Street, looking west toward the Southern Pacific tracks. This later became the main intersection of all north- and south-bound traffic on U.S. Highway 99, and all east-west traffic on California Highway 120. During World War II the military police would stop all traffic to let army convoys pass through, creating major congestion. By the late 1970s the congestion became extremely bad but it was relieved by the relocation of Highway 120 a mile south of town. Highway 99 had been moved two miles east in 1952.
Downtown Manteca in 1962: Yosemite Avenue looking east from the Southern Pacific tracks. The store fronts have changed very little now, in 1988. The names are different, often, and the signs; but only the service stations are all gone in this area.
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