

THE TRANSPLANTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS AND COTTON
CULTURE TO CALIFORNIA'S RURAL SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY DURING THE
NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIESⁱ

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ABSTRACT

By the 1880s, white farmers, with roots that ran directly to the Cotton Culture of the American South, owned many of the large agricultural concerns of Central California. San Joaquin Valley agricultural labor contractors began recruited and relocated large numbers of African Americans from the fields and farms of the American South to provide a steady workforce to these large agricultural concerns. Originally, recruited to replace Chinese agricultural labor, blacks were considered more suitable for this type of employment. Waves of African Americans came to Central California in boxcars, old busses, and flatbed trucks hoping to escape the economic and social repression of the South. Often what awaited these immigrants differed little from the conditions they left behind in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, or the Carolinas.

For several decades, following the 1920s, African Americans competed with migrant Hispanic field labor for low paying seasonal employment in the cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley. This practice continued until shortly after the introduction of mechanical cotton-picking machines and the widespread adoption of defoliant after World War II. This paper sheds light on recruitment efforts, the growth of Cotton Culture, and some of the results of eighty years of migration from the South to California's great inland valley. Utilizing oral-history interviews, newspaper clippings, census records, and other primary sources, this paper begins to uncover the impact of African Americans on the rural landscape of the San Joaquin Valley.

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With the collapse of Reconstruction, many African Americans sought a new life in the West.¹ An 1880 Congressional commission identified several causes of the outward migration of blacks from the south, including the failure of the crop lien system and the resulting debt-servitude, the boosterism of Western expansion, and Jim Crow and hooded Klansmen.² During the four decades following 1870 labor recruiters and promoters blanketed the south with literature enticing blacks to "Go West!"³ By 1970, more than half a million blacks from the south lived in California: with almost 12 percent of the state's total population claiming roots to the South.⁴ Geographer James J. Parsons described these southern roots when he described parts of the San Joaquin Valley as "a land of chicken-fried steaks, biscuits and gravy, okra, greens, and black-eyed peas. It is also the land of drag

¹ For information about the Great Migration, see James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005). and Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).. For information about the Exoduster movements, see Walter L. Fleming, "'Pap' Singleton, the Moses of the Colored Exodus," *The American Journal of Sociology* 15.1 (1909). and Roy Garvin, "Benjamin, or 'Pap,' Singleton and His Followers," *Journal of Negro History* 33.1 (1948).

² Thomas Knight, "Black Towns in Oklahoma: Their Development and Survival," Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 1975, 56.

³ Eleanor Mason Ramsey, "Allensworth-a Study in Social Change," Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1977, 36.36.

⁴ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*.

racing, southern country music, and religious revivals. Fundamentalist Protestantism predominates.”⁵ Many of Central California’s African Americans trace their roots to the efforts of nineteenth and twentieth century agricultural labor recruiters, and the development of so-called Cotton Culture, in California.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the San Joaquin Valley saw steady population growth (see Table 1). Fresno (including Madera), Kern, and to a lesser degree, Tulare (containing Kings) Counties all experienced marked increases in black populations between 1880 and 1900.

Table 1. Black population, totals and as a percentage of the total population of each county 1860-1900⁶

| County | 1860 | | | 1870 | | | 1880 | | | 1890 | | | 1900 | | |
|-------------|-------|-----|------|-------|-----|------|-------|-----|------|--------|------|------|--------|------|------|
| | Total | Blk | % | Total | Blk | % | Total | Blk | % | Total | Blk | % | Total | Blk | % |
| San Joaquin | 9435 | 126 | 1.34 | 21050 | 223 | 1.06 | 24349 | 328 | 1.35 | 28629 | 353 | 1.23 | 35452 | 332 | 0.91 |
| Stanislaus | 2245 | 0 | 0.00 | 6499 | 4 | 0.06 | 8751 | 20 | 0.23 | 10040 | 61 | 0.61 | 9550 | 61 | 0.64 |
| Merced | 1141 | 23 | 2.02 | 2807 | 36 | 1.28 | 5656 | 59 | 1.04 | 8085 | 47 | .58 | 9215 | 31 | 0.34 |
| Madera | | | | | | | | | | | | | 6364 | 51 | 0.80 |
| Fresno | 4605 | 3 | 0.07 | 6336 | 15 | 0.24 | 9478 | 40 | 0.42 | 32026 | 457 | 1.46 | 37862 | 399 | 1.05 |
| Tulare | 4638 | 23 | 0.50 | 4533 | 39 | 0.86 | 11281 | 80 | 0.71 | 24574 | 207 | 0.84 | 18375 | 73 | 0.40 |
| Kings | | | | | | | | | | | | | 9871 | 76 | 0.77 |
| Kern | | | | 2925 | 4 | 0.14 | 561 | 4 | 0.07 | 9808 | 130 | 1.33 | 16480 | 208 | 1.26 |
| Totals | 22064 | 175 | 0.79 | 44150 | 321 | 0.73 | 65116 | 531 | 0.82 | 113162 | 1255 | 1.11 | 143169 | 1221 | 0.85 |

One of the most important factors that drew large-scale migration of African Americans was the development of large-scale agriculture, or *agribusiness*, in the San Joaquin Valley. Valley farmers accumulated vast amounts of arable land into large, diversified holdings. Crops included grains, citrus, grapes, and vegetables. Vast expanses of rangeland supported massive cattle herds.⁷

⁵ James J. Parsons, "A Geographer Looks at the San Joaquin Valley," *Geographical Review* 76.4 (1986): 377.

⁶ *American Factfinder*, US Census Bureau, 2008. <http://factfinder.census.gov> (accessed December 2007).

⁷ Robert Glass Cleland, *From Wilderness to Empire: A History of California*, ed. John Russell McCarthy (Los Angeles: Powell Publishing Company, 1962) 178.

One of the earliest crops grown in the valley, and one that would become extremely profitable was cotton. Harvey Skiles, a former southerner, may have planted the earliest stand of cotton on Kern Island (site of the modern city of Bakersfield) as early as 1862.⁸ In 1865, Solomon and Philo Jewett initiated one of the earliest commercial attempts to grow cotton in Kern County. Using seed imported from Tennessee and Mexico, the first crop was ginned on-site with the resulting cotton fibers sent to a mill in Oakland.⁹ The initial labor force for the Jewett brothers consisted mainly of Chinese laborers who earned a monthly salary between twenty-two and thirty dollars. An “experienced superintendent from the South” supervised these Chinese farm laborers.¹⁰ Although this early venture into cotton culture produced a commercial crop, the supply of cheap, efficient labor remained a problem. A Visalia newspaper reporter wrote that it was a “pity we do not have the labor and capital necessary to make this crop a success.”¹¹ In 1871, farmers planted a thousand acres of cotton in Kern County; however, the crop failed to yield a profit due to “high production costs and a labor shortage.”¹² The 1872 report of the California State Agriculture Society stated:

California was naturally a cotton-raising state. Indeed, if California had not been admitted to the Union as a free state, there can be no doubt that long ere now we would have had large numbers of cotton plantations, worked by slaves brought here from the Southern States by men who were able to discover the superior advantages of our soil and climate for cotton culture. The only question that remained in their minds was whether its culture would be profitable, considering the condition of our labor supply and the rate of wages.¹³

⁸ Annie R. Mitchell, The Way It Was: The Colorful History of Tulare County (Fresno, CA: Valley Publishers, 1976) 97.

⁹ Mitchell, The Way It Was.

¹⁰ Mitchell, The Way It Was.

¹¹ Visalia Weekly Delta June 1, 1867.

¹² Mitchell, The Way It Was 98.

¹³ *Transactions of the California State Agriculture Society (1872)*, 249.

Over the course of the next few years, stands of cotton were planted in the counties of Kern, Tulare (including what is now Kings County), and Fresno; however, labor shortages continued to plague farmers who planted this labor-intensive crop.¹⁴ By 1881, several planters experimented with cotton production in Kern County. Howell & Sons farms claimed that they were able to produce cotton comparable to any grown in Georgia with just one application of irrigation water.¹⁵

To address the labor problem, almost sixty black laborers from Memphis arrived on the train in Bakersfield in March 1884.¹⁶ Their employers, Haggin and Carr, had experimented with cotton for four or five years by this point.¹⁷ A second trainload of approximately two hundred immigrants arrived in June.

By November, hundreds of southern African Americans worked Kern County cotton fields owned by Haggin and Carr.¹⁸ F. W. Ownbey, on behalf of these Kern County planters, recruit additional southern blacks, specifically to replace Chinese workers in the fields. By Thanksgiving at

¹⁴ Mitchell, *The Way It Was* 98.

¹⁵ "More Cotton Growers," *Kern County Californian* November 12, 1881.

¹⁶ *Kern County Californian* March 22, 1884.

¹⁷ "Our Cotton Crop," *Kern County Californian* November 12, 1881.

¹⁸ Mitchell repeatedly refers to Ownbey's employers as Haggin and Carr, however, some newspaper articles, from the period, list them as Haggin and Tevis. J. B. Haggin and William B. Carr subdivided and sold large tracts of land in Kern County, in the 1890s. For more, see George Gilbert Lynch, "Rambling Rosedale," *Historic Kern: Quarterly Journal* Fall 2006: 1.. Lloyd Tevis, a railroad grant trustee, sold Haggin and Carr large tracts of railroad land. Tevis was a partner in the Haggin and Carr enterprises. See Paul Wallace Gates, *Land and Law in California: Essays on Land Politics* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002) 277. The Carr-Haggin Land Company was later known as the Kern County Land Company. See Diane Ogden, "History of Blacks in Bakersfield," (Bakersfield, CA: California State College, 1973), vol., 2.

least two hundred and twenty-five African Americans had migrated from the South to work in Kern County.¹⁹ An article in the *New York Times* stated that Haggin and Carr...

...have tried the plan of employing negroes on their farms instead of Chinamen. The Chinamen cost about \$25 a month, and the negroes are employed at \$12 a month and board, the women at \$8, and the boys at \$6... A lot of cotton was successfully raised the past year as an experiment. Mr. Ownbey says that since the success of the negro plan he expects a great many California planters to adopt it, and thus drive out the Chinamen, who cause more trouble than they are worth.²⁰

Some of the first arrivals jumped their contracts once in California, however, improved recruiting techniques by Ownbey and others resulted in lower turnover rates.²¹ It was reported in the local press that African American labor would ensure a successful conversion to Cotton Culture in Kern County and eliminate the reliance on Chinese labor:

Those now at work give good satisfaction. Their position is the same as that of other laborers... They belong in this country; they are citizens and far more desirable to have among us than the Chinese whom they will displace and drive away... There are thousands of colored men in the South who would be glad to come out here and work for \$15 a month and their board.²²

One newspaper summed up reasons why some blacks sought other employment during the early years of this labor experiment:

When they left their first employers, [they] secured work elsewhere and have been working steadily ever since, to the satisfaction of their employers... they could make more elsewhere. It is not reasonable to suppose that because a man is negro that he would be satisfied to work for \$12 per month when the current wages of the country are from \$25 to \$35... They want as much for their labor as they can get, and if one man pays them only \$12 per month and another man offers them \$30 they are likely to accept the offer.²³

¹⁹ "The Colored Immigrants," Kern County Californian November 22, 1884.

²⁰ "Negroes Replacing Chinamen," New York Times November 14, 1884.

²¹ "The Colored Immigrants."

²² "The Colored Immigrants."

²³ Kern County Californian February 6, 1886.

During 1884, Ownbey allegedly transported up to eleven hundred blacks from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Kern County, while seeking up to ten thousand workers to pick cotton and fruit crops.²⁴ That same year, approximately four hundred African Americans left Columbia, South Carolina, en route to Fresno County.²⁵ Another seventy blacks left Charlotte, North Carolina, in January 1886, with a similar promise of a monthly salary of twelve dollars.²⁶

In 1888, over four hundred black men, women, and children migrated to work on farms in the Fresno and Fowler areas. At least forty-five of these migrants went to work in the six-hundred-acre vineyard belonging to A. B. Butler near Fresno.²⁷ In this case the wages were slightly higher, as the “men were to receive \$15 per month, the women \$10, and the children, able to work, \$6 per month, with comfortable quarters and provisions.”²⁸ The first contingent of nineteen men all came from Hickory Station, North Carolina.²⁹ Carroll Watkins of Fresno reported that new arrivals, like his mother, initially lived on the premises of the Butler Ranch.³⁰

²⁴ "Colored Labor for California," Cleveland Gazette November 29, 1884.

²⁵ "John Abernathy Interview with Vivian J. Jones," (Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977). Abernathy indicated that his grandfather arrived from Biloxi Mississippi, in 1884 as a contract worker. His father joined his grandfather, in 1902. See also "Carloads of Negroes Emigrate," New York Times December 4, 1884.

²⁶ "Negroes Going to California," New York Times January 17, 1886.

²⁷ "Negro Labor," Fresno Morning Republican July 20, 1888.

²⁸ "Negro Labor." These comfortable quarters were, by all accounts, nothing more than typical Central California work camps: a collection of small, poorly built, shanties.

²⁹ "At the Butler Vineyard," Fresno Morning Republican July 20, 1888.

³⁰ "Samuel Hannibal and Carroll Watkins Interview with Vivian J. Jones," (Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977), vol.

Fresno farmers hired these African American laborers specifically to replace Chinese labor in the fields and vineyards of Central California. The following excerpt from a *New York Times* article describes the situation:

Recently the Fresno vineyard men, not satisfied with the cheap dignity of Chinese labor, have tried the experiment of importing negro field hands from North Carolina and other States... [T]he Fresno papers have published the triumphant announcements of some of the large vineyard owners that the negroes are even cheaper than the Chinese. It appears that the colored women work in the vineyards equally as well as the men... Thus is the dignity of American labor upheld by the millionaire vineyardist!³¹

Both men and women were contracted for fieldwork. In some cases workers abandoned their contracts for higher paying jobs, while others fulfilled their contract before leaving for other work.³² In those cases where workers did opt out of their labor agreements, the *Republican* elected to lay blame on the labor recruiters:

This is most probably the fault of the agent in the south who negotiated the contracts. The colored people who...jumped their contracts, are not the kind of people the agent should have selected... If the agent employed to engage colored help will exercise discretion, there will be no trouble in finding thousands of good, faithful hands, anxious to come to this country, and we believe that it will prove so much better than Chinese labor that Mr. Chinaman will have to hunt other countries besides California to find employment.³³

Many African Americans who arrived to work the fields and vineyards of Central California used that experience as a foundation upon which to build a new life. Most found ways to exit the cycle of migratory, or seasonal, farm labor for life in the cities and towns of the valley. These workers brought trades or training with them beyond the skills needed to work in the fields where

³¹ "The Raisinmaker's Cry: The Vineyards of California Do Not Need Protection," New York Times May 20, 1888: 13.

³² "Negro Labor."

³³ "Negro Labor."

African Americans often remained only as long as necessary before branching out into more lucrative and stable employment or business.

In many smaller towns, African Americans established businesses or secured employment. They participated, to varying degrees, in the economic and cultural growth of these mixed, although occasionally segregated communities. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Hanford resident Alex Anderson owned and operated the Seventh Street Stables—the largest livery stable in Central California.³⁴

Between 1900 and 1920, the total African American population of the San Joaquin Valley doubled to over twenty-five hundred. Over the course of the next two decades, that number doubled every ten years to almost twelve thousand. By 1950, those figures doubled every five years, bringing the total number of African Americans in the valley to over forty thousand by the 1950 census.

By mid-century, cotton acreage accounted for large areas of Kern, Kings, and Tulare Counties. With the increased planting of cotton, the black populations of Kings and Tulare Counties increased almost ten-fold between 1920 and 1950.

Labor contractors now required direct payment from migrants to defray the costs of transportation to California where workers were housed in rural labor camps, often segregated by race. Throwing off the yoke of generations of sharecropping debt for a California labor camp was not always an improvement:

During the Depression, farm worker wages were among the lowest of any industry... Employees were housed in shacks during the picking season, frequently without the benefit of

³⁴ Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1919) 153. See also Michael L. Smith, *The Edna Wade Project*, Available: <http://ednawadeproject.com/Overview.html>, March 2008.

electricity, plumbing, or cooking facilities, and despite the low standards, farmers usually deducted the cost of the housing from workers' paychecks.³⁵

African Americans often worked in the fields with Mexican Braceros, Mexican Americans, and poor whites, especially during the period of the Dust Bowl. In 1933, after many years where "California agriculture was based on a white, corporate farming structure and an ethnically diverse labor force... riddled with reports of racism... exploitation... and political exclusion," farm workers in the cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley organized and went on strike for better conditions.³⁶ Both Robert Torres and Alicia Rivera have pointed out that one reason for the brief success of the strike was the solidarity maintained between the three groups of striking farm workers and the inability of the growers, regardless of their efforts, to divide and conquer them individually.³⁷ A *Visalia-Times Delta* editorial from late October suggested that

Perhaps white sheeted Knights might throw the fear of the devil into those whom neither state nor federal authority was able to throw the fear of god. The mystery of what is under a sheet is sometimes a powerful influence.³⁸

The Klan seldom resorted to racially motivated violence in Central California because the threat was sufficient to control minority groups, especially southern blacks. Klan members held positions of political and economic power in many communities.

³⁵ Robert Torres, "The 1933 San Joaquin Valley (California) Cotton Strike," MA thesis, California State University, Fresno, 1994, 2.

³⁶ Torres, "The 1933 San Joaquin Valley (California) Cotton Strike," 3.

³⁷ Alicia Judith Rivera, "Solidarity in the San Joaquin Valley, California Cotton Strike of 1933," MA thesis, California State University, Fresno, 2005, 63-66.

³⁸ "Editorial," *Visalia Times-Delta* October 27, 1933.

The largest inward migration of African Americans into the valley occurred between 1930 and 1950 driven by the Dust Bowl, wartime manufacturing (and the subsequent loss of those jobs at war's end), and an increase in production of San Joaquin cotton.

Although many who came to the state during this time headed to the Bay Area and Southern California for high paying manufacturing jobs, many preferred to live closer to the land.³⁹

With the loss of jobs in the wartime manufacturing centers in Southern California and the Bay Area, many Southern African Americans sought out family members who already lived in the San Joaquin Valley rather than return to the South.⁴⁰ As one person who grew up in one of the black townships of the San Joaquin Valley explained:

The rest of the family was all out here... so, they proolly told my dad they could find him something to do—find him work. Plus, at the time, his dad was providing him with a place to stay. So, now you have a place to stay while you find work... and so you ain't just totally coming out just totally blind. You got somewhere to go. You got a house to put your family up in... and then, you got relatives all up and down the street.⁴¹

Following the Second World War, between thirty and forty thousand African Americans migrated to the San Joaquin Valley. Approximately seven thousand of them arrived in the Tulare Lake Basin (southern Kings County).

Three of the men who contributed to this migration were Walter Irons, a white sheriff in Oklahoma; his younger brother Gus, who ran a labor camp in the Tulare Lake Basin; and a bus driver named Robert “Boots” Parker. Gus Irons was a labor contractor who promised a steady stream of

³⁹ Several sources demonstrate this preference on the part of some African Americans who relocated to the San Joaquin Valley. See, for example, Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: Land of Hope Is Sown with Tragedy," Los Angeles Times August 26, 2002. or "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger," Cookseyville Oral History Project (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007), vol.

⁴⁰ Arax, "Land of Hope," A18.

labor to the largest Central California landowners like the Boswells and the Salyers.⁴² His brother, the sheriff of McCurtain County, Oklahoma, guaranteed safe passage to blacks from his county who wanted to get away from the never-ending debt in which they were trapped as part of the long-standing sharecropping system that replaced slavery after the collapse of reconstruction. Thirty-five dollars was the fare to the San Joaquin Valley. Thirty-two times, beginning in 1948, Parker, a former black bootlegger, picked up groups of African Americans on the steps of the county courthouse to begin the fifteen-hundred-mile trip. Under the cover of darkness, he picked up other escaping sharecroppers across Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma at secret rendezvous in fields or wooded areas or under bridges.⁴³ Other labor contractors like Mozell Stokes, Cowboy Williams, or Bubba Lee transported large numbers of African Americans to the San Joaquin Valley from Oklahoma on flatbed trucks, the migrants riding fifteen hundred miles sitting on homemade benches that had been bolted to the truck bed.⁴⁴ Eventually, “Boots” Parker, like many of those he transported across the country, settled in a rundown shack in Teviston, a “a glorified squatters’ village on the outskirts of Pixley.”⁴⁵

Two events ultimately limited the demand for black farm labor. In the 1940s and 1950s, the United States government implemented a *Bracero* program that allowed valley farmers to hire seasonal guest labor from Mexico. The number of Mexicans working in California fields more than

⁴¹ "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger," vol.

⁴² Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, The King of California: J. G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003) 258.

⁴³ Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises," Los Angeles Times August 25, 2002: A24.

⁴⁴ Arax and Wartzman, The King of California 262.

doubled from thirty-six thousand to over eighty-four thousand.⁴⁶ At the same time, mechanized cotton harvesters and chemical defoliant eventually eliminated the demand for human cotton pickers. In 1958, mechanical cotton harvesters picked less than 40 percent of the San Joaquin Valley cotton. By the mid-1960s, almost no cotton was picked by hand.⁴⁷ When the largest numbers of African Americans arrived in the San Joaquin Valley, the farm work that many of them sought was disappearing or being redirected to populations who accepted lower wages and poorer working conditions. In the Plantation South that was recreated in the San Joaquin Valley, the labor force was to be low-paid, foreign-born, Spanish-speaking migrants, not African Americans.

For eighty years, Central Valley agriculture recruited African American labor from the American South to work the fields and orchards of California. Originally recruited to replace Chinese labor with a work force that white Californians considered less *foreign*, mechanized cotton pickers and Hispanic laborers eventually replaced blacks. The majority of the African Americans who arrived in the San Joaquin Valley to work the fields were able to abandon them for life in Central California cities and towns.

⁴⁵ Arax, "A Lost Tribe's Journey."

⁴⁶ Arax and Wartzman, The King of California 264.

⁴⁷ Arax and Wartzman, The King of California 277.

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ⁱ This paper was originally presented at the 29th Annual Conference of the California Council for the Promotion of History, October 22-24, 2009, in Monterey, California.