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Armenians in the California Raisin Industry

By Berge Bulbulian



Armenians picking grapes near Fresno, around the turn of the century.
(FCCHS Archives)

This article is excerpted from a book to be published in 1999 entitled *The Fresno Armenians: The History of a Diaspora Community* by Berge Bulbulian. The article also was read as a paper at a conference on Armenians in the raisin industry at California State University Fresno, April 5, 1997, by the author.

Grapes are grown in many places in the United States. They are made into raisins, however, almost exclusively in the San Joaquin Valley, from Merced to Shafter, even though production in California started elsewhere, first as far north as the Yuba City area and as far south as San Diego County. It is not known exactly when or where the first raisins in California were produced, but in 1863, raisins were exhibited at the California State Fair. Several varieties of grapes were dried in the early years, but only the Muscat of Alexandria qualified as "raisins" with the rest labeled "dried grapes."

In 1889, Yolo County had the largest raisin production. A decade later Fresno County had the largest. Once raisin production started in Fresno County, it increased rapidly. Francis Eisen planted the first commercial grape vineyard of twenty-five acres of Muscat of Alexandria in 1873 on a section of land he owned east of Fresno between Kings Canyon Road and Belmont, Clovis and Fowler avenues. He planted them primarily for wine production, but in 1877 his mature grapes were dried on the vine by an autumn heat spell. Rather than accept the loss, he picked them and shipped them to San Francisco, of-

fering them as "Peruvian Delicacies." They sold out very quickly. That was the start of the raisin industry in the San Joaquin Valley.

By 1881 when the first Armenians¹, Jacob and Garabed Seropian, arrived in Fresno, there were already several raisin growers in the Fresno area. While Armenians were not among the first to enter the raisin business, they were one of the first ethnic groups in the Fresno area to enter the industry in large numbers.

Documents at the Fresno County Hall of Records indicate Jacob Seropian was the first Armenian to buy land in the Fresno area. He purchased a plot of land on February 8, 1883, just south of California Avenue and east of Elm Avenue. On April 14, 1883, a deed was recorded for the purchase of forty acres at the northwest corner of Elm and California in the name of Anna Minasian. A map of the area later listed the property as owned by Sarkis Minasian. There is no indication what their relationship might have been, although there is documentation they were both from New York. Minasian rented the land to the Seropian brothers, Melkon Markarian and Stepan Shahamirian to plant vines and trees for which he promised them ownership of half the land. They became the first Armenian raisin growers.

A short time later, Peter Peters (no relation to the Leon Peters family of today) bought land in the same area, later known as the Peters Addition, planted vines, and had built his own packing shed by the late 1880s.

By the early 1890s, brothers John and George Seropian packed raisins commercially. Melkon Markarian packed both raisins and figs during that decade. There is no definite starting date for either operation, but since the Seropians shipped fruit to San Francisco on a mule train they hired to challenge the Southern Pacific railroad monopoly in 1894, it is certain they had started to pack prior to that time.

The Seropian brothers first packed raisins in small facilities adjoining grocery stores they operated, and in 1898 they secured land along the Santa Fe Railroad right-of-way on Ventura Avenue for the construction of a large dried fruit packing house.

They incorporated the business in 1902 with three non-Armenians on the board of directors. While this may have appeared to be good business at the time, since it brought in additional capital to operate the business, it proved to be the eventual downfall of the Seropian packing operation. Numerous lawsuits between John and George Seropian and the Guggenheim Packing Company, and others, destroyed the business.

T. B. Khungian, in an article in the *Asbarez* newspaper

1. There is some discrepancy between the author's research and Seropian family history as to when one of the Seropian brothers arrived in Fresno. Zabelle Melkonian (Mrs. Charles Melkonian) of Visalia, a descendant of a Seropian sister, believes that Jacob Seropian came to Fresno alone in the late 1870s and that his brothers Simon and Garabed arrived in Fresno in 1881 with two younger half brothers, John and George.

in 1918, stated, "It is confirmed by truthful sources that a group of men in San Francisco met, in the presence of the president of a Fresno bank. There the success of the Armenians and means of stopping them, especially Seropian Bros., was discussed and it was suggested that a few men of means join the Seropians and thus trap them. In 1902, Cotton Bell joined Seropian Brothers and they incorporated with \$100,000 capital, and continued business until 1904. Differences arose between them, followed by endless litigation, both sides spending thousands of dollars until the two Armenians lost all their rights and the large packing house became the property of the Guggenheim Packing Company."

Nectar Davidian interviewed the sole surviving Seropian brother, George, in 1945, and in 1965 she published a small book on the Seropians. In that interview, George Seropian placed most of the blame for their losses on Fresno banker O. J. Woodward. It was perhaps the first significant act of business discrimination against Fresno Armenians, but, unfortunately, not the last.

By 1894, Armenians owned approximately two hundred acres of farm land. Their number was significant enough by 1905 that they held a public meeting to support the election of a representative to the board of the California Raisin Growers' Company, in the process of being formed at that time. The group resolved as follows: "...that we, the Armenian raisin growers of Fresno County, do endorse said John Seropian as our choice as one of the directors of said county, and request that he be elected to such position that our interests may be fully represented, and we recommend that he be appointed as one of the executive committee of said board of directors."

While there are no documents to indicate whether the group remained together or if it was *ad hoc*, another group of Armenian raisin growers met in the Fowler Grammar School on April 24, 1939, to discuss the situation in the raisin industry. It was reported at that time there were 1,200 Armenian raisin growers in the lower San Joaquin Valley.

During the 1890s the number of Armenian farmers, both as owners and renters, increased rapidly, and continued to increase through the 1920s. By 1900, Armenians operated at least 12,000 acres of farm land. The number is said to have reached 60,000 acres by the time Fresno County became the number one producer of raisins.

In 1903, Alex Lion packed raisins for the first time. He packed them in wooden boxes and jute sacks and shipped them by train to Chicago. The price of raisins dropped prior to their arrival in Chicago, so the buyer rejected the shipment. Lion went by train to Chicago and spent several weeks peddling the raisins on the streets.

His packing career was somewhat sporadic after that, according to grandson Al Lion. The first packing was done on the family farm at Kings Canyon Road and DeWolf Avenue. Later Alex Lion had a packing house on H Street and in either 1923 or 1926, he built a packing house at the present site at California Avenue and Second Street in southeast Fresno. A lumber company gave Lion an old house he tore

down himself. He used the lumber and even the nails to build his first office, still in use today although it has been remodeled and enlarged. Because he was a “jack of all trades,” he did the construction work himself.

While the city/county directory does not list the packing company until 1929, there is no doubt the company was in business prior to that because my father sold his first crop of raisins to Lion in 1927. If the 1903 date is to be taken as the beginning of the Lion Packing Company, then it is without doubt the oldest raisin packing firm in business today with the same name and under the operation of the same

family. If the latest date on which Lion might have started continuous commercial packing is considered the start of the business, it then becomes uncertain whether Lion is first or Enoch Packing Company is first. Today, Lion Packing Company is the largest independent raisin packing concern in the area in tonnage. It is second only to Sun Maid Growers.

Charles Enoch, Sr., a tailor by trade, started packing Muscat Layers in the early 1920s for a company owned by E. Y. Foley, who was married to an Armenian. Enoch’s wife, Mary, worked as a layer packer for Foley. Later in that decade, Enoch started a packing operation of his own in a shed on the present site in Del Rey, southeast of Fresno. Today, Enoch’s grandchildren operate the company, one of the largest independent raisin packers in the industry.

While some of the Armenians who went into farming had farm backgrounds, most of those who entered farming prior to World War I did not. Most of the first Armenian immigrants were relatively well educated and affluent and were craftsmen, businessmen or professionals. They had the necessary funds to bribe Turkish officials to get exit documents. Those with farming backgrounds did not have the contacts, money, or knowledge of English to face the hazards of immigration, whatever the hazards they had already faced in their homeland. Immigrants from the rural areas came later when they were forced out during the Genocide.

Many Armenians became farmers because they had few other options. At the time, working for others did not suit the Armenian temperament. They preferred being entrepreneurs. Some became tailors, grocers, barbers, shoemakers, dry cleaners, jewelers or secondhand dealers. Those who could not afford to buy land rented until they could buy.

As the opportunities in the raisin business expanded, some local Armenian businessmen invested in land as well or left their businesses to become farmers. Other Armenians came



Grape picking near Fresno, ca. 1900. (FCCHS Archives)

into the area with the specific intention of entering farming. While most Armenian immigrants who arrived in the United States prior to World War I came with less than fifty dollars, a study of a group of farmers in the area indicated Armenian immigrants brought more money to the area than was brought by any other ethnic group. Of seventeen Armenian farmers in a study, the average amount of cash brought to the area was \$2,781. Twenty-five Danish farmers brought an average of \$1,405; seventeen German-Russians brought an average of \$1,904; and thirty-four Japanese brought an average of \$494. Thus it can be seen

why so many more Armenians were able to enter the raisin business at the time than other ethnic groups.

The number of Armenian raisin growers continued to increase steadily after 1900 in spite of cyclical periods in which the volume of raisins produced exceeded the demand, causing the profit margin to become thin or nonexistent. At one time three cents a pound was the break-even point for non-Armenian farmers and two and a half cents the break-even point for Armenians, since their entire families worked in the fields.

The number of Armenian farmers began to drop in the early to mid-1920s when the heavy production of raisins, accompanied by a drop in demand following World War I, caused many farmers to lose their farms. Their income was insufficient to service the heavy debts caused by frantic buying of land at unrealistic prices when it seemed there was no limit to the profit that could be made producing raisins. Many of those bankrupt farmers left the area, causing a drop in the total population of Fresno County for a time in the 1920s. Some of them went to Los Angeles and San Francisco to start Armenian communities in those cities.

While as many as a quarter of Fresno-area Armenians left, new Armenians came into the area, preventing a major drop in the total Armenian population for more than a short time.

Land prices dropped, and those who bought land from that time on had more reasonable debts to service. Also, most Armenian families had some members working off the farm to provide outside income. In many cases, the farm income did not even cover mortgage payments.

To save their farm and make a living, many Armenian farm families earned the necessary income in a variety of ways. My family raised chickens and had a cow, and we sold eggs, milk, yogurt, and cheese. We sold vegetables from

our garden to our city friends. My father had a Model T Ford truck with which he hauled loose hay in the summer and raisins in the fall. He also did custom field work with his team of mules.

From 1929, when we bought our first farm, to the start of World War II, our family did not take a cent from the meager income from our raisin crops for our living expenses. Most Armenian farmers lived in similar circumstances but considered the hardships as challenges rather than burdens, that they might prevail rather than remain mere survivors.

The raisin industry went through a great deal of trauma in developing its marketing structure. Attempts to organize raisin growers into associations started late in the nineteenth century and went through several iterations until the organization of Sun Maid Raisin Growers in 1924. While many Armenian growers resisted joining the associations, some Armenians joined voluntarily. Other joined under duress or managed to stay out in spite of illegal efforts to force them to join.

During the 1912 effort to organize raisin growers, "night riders" drove through the raisin-producing areas destroying property and committing physical violence on the farmers who refused to join. Association president Wylie Giffen refused to accept responsibility for the acts and even denied knowledge of them. After 1916, when the membership drive riddled with violence ended, he said, "Now that we have passed the crisis, we wish to say that from this time on no

contracts will be taken by mob violence and even night riding will only be permitted in milder forms."¹ He did not explain what constituted "milder forms" nor did he indicate how it happened that he did not know about the violence but could promise it would not continue.

Violence reappeared in 1923. After many legal conflicts with the federal government relating to restraint of trade, the association cancelled all existing contracts with growers and started a new membership drive. The new drive saw a renewal of the activities of the "night riders," and the accompanying violence continued sporadically through 1925. This period is particularly remembered by some Armenians since the brunt of the violence and destruction was felt by Japanese and Armenian growers who were reluctant to join the association in view of all the past problems.

It was following the final period of violence and the establishment of Sun Maid that the industry became more peaceful. After the early Armenian packers such as Peters, the Seropians, Markarian, and any others that have escaped historians' pens left the business, others entered once it became possible for independent packers to survive under the onslaught, both legal and illegal, of the associations. The following is a list of Armenian-owned packing companies no longer in business:

Simonian Packing; Edwards Packing (Ed Karahadian, Sr. and Jr.); Madera Packing (Ron Cloud); Central California Packing (Nerces and Melvin Azadian); Pyramid Packing



Field worker spreading grapes on paper trays in raisin vineyard near Orosi. (FCCHS Archives)

Fresno County now stands the most prominent in the state in the matter of vineyards. Commencing but a few years ago, it has advanced from a barren sand plain to the leading wine and raisin producing county of California.

First vineyard planted in this county was 10 acres of mission grapes. It was planted 26 years ago on Kings River.

Years old	Planted	Number of Acres
26	1861	10
10	1877	10
9	1878	48
8	1879	108
7	1880	205
6	1881	649
5	1882	1414
4	1883	2003
3	1884	1066
2	1885	895
1	1886	976

Total 7384 acres

Another 3,502 acres of vines of age undetermined

Grand Total 10,886 acres

In 1887, 5,900 acres of rooted vines and cuttings planted. 5,690 acres were muscats, showing tendency for raisin grapes.

Overall total in grapes in 1887 - 16,786 acres.

Vinegrowing in Fresno County is in its infancy. Next year will see a greater increase in acreage than the past and so on with each succeeding year, until this whole region will be transformed into one vast vineyard.

—Selma Irrigator, August 20, 1887
(reprint from *Fresno Expositor*)

1. Victoria Saker Woeste, "Busting the Raisin Trust," *Audacity Magazine*, Summer 1994.

(Karibian and Dzerigian); Pacific Raisin (Santikian family); Tusan Packing (Karl and Dick Tusan); Tagus Ranch Packing (Mark Avedian); Clovis Fruit (Azhderian family); Paragon Packing (Koligian brothers); Sarkisian Packing; Mel-Pac (Vaughn Melikian); California Raisin Company (Sarkisian brothers); and Consolidated Packing Company (50 percent owned by John Arakelian with plants in Fresno, Livingston and Turlock). Consolidated's Turlock plant was a dehydrator, the largest in the United States at that time. During World War II, K. Arakelian, who also operated the Mission Bell Winery, operated a dehydrator and packing house in Madera. Farther outside the Fresno area were two packing houses owned by Armenians, one owned by Ed and George Arakelian and the other by the Jamgotchian brothers, who operated as the Monte Cristo Packing Company. Both companies were located in Livingston, seventy-five miles north of Fresno.

While Armenians played a major role in the development of the raisin industry in Central California, at both the production and packing levels, they also played a significant role in various important marketing organizations. Without doubt, the most important figure in the history of the raisin industry has been Arpaxad "Sox" Setrakian, the first chairman of the federal Raisin Administrative Committee and the Raisin Advisory Board. He served from the formation of the agencies in 1949 until his retirement in 1971. He was a powerful man who ran the agencies with an iron fist. Most farmers loved him, and most packers hated him. Few who knew him had neutral feelings about him.

Ernest Bedrosian followed Setrakian as chairman of the RAC for two one-year terms. John Pakchoian served three terms, and Richard Garabedian served two terms. Bedrosian also led the successful effort to organize the Raisin Bargaining Association in 1969.

Dick Markarian served in a number of key leadership positions in the raisin industry as well as in a number of other commodity groups in Fresno County. He served on the California Raisin Advisory Board for thirty-five years, of which he served as chairman for more than twenty years. Gerald Chooljian followed Markarian as board chairman and served until the board was disbanded.

About the Author

Berge Bulbulian, a native of Mexico, grew up on a farm in the Del Rey area southeast of Fresno. After graduation from high school, he served two years in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Upon return from military service, he attended Fresno State College for one year and graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles with a B.A. degree in philosophy.

Bulbulian returned to the family farm which he operated for the next forty-two years while maintaining a high level of activity in a number of political and public service organizations. For many years he pursued writing as an adjunct to his organizational activities. In 1990 he was a guest editorial writer for the *Fresno Bee*. He has published articles in a variety of publications and for several years was a columnist for the *International Travel News* magazine.

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