









# The faces of us

Immigrants from around the world came to this Valley to form a mosaic of people.

By **GEORGE HOSTETTER**  
THE FRESNO BEE

**Y**olanda Hernandez Van Auken sits in a tiny office at the carburetor repair shop owned by her four brothers and explains what is unexplainable to those already comfortable with their lives.

Why do people leave everything they know, their homes and heritage and often their families, to travel sometimes thousands of miles and plant new roots in a new land called the San Joaquin Valley?

"People would ask me in Mexico, 'Why are you going?'" says Hernandez Van Auken, the shop's bookkeeper. She pauses, her eyes moist, hand pounding her heart. She is recalling the day in 1979 when she left her home in central Mexico to move to Fresno, a journey her brothers also made.

"How do I tell them there is something in me, deep in me, telling me I have to go? I don't know what is going to happen when I go. I only know I have to go," Hernandez Van Auken says. "I have to take that chance."

Hernandez Van Auken, 45, might well have been speaking for the hundreds of thousands of people who have immigrated or migrated to the Valley in the past century and helped transform this once-forgotten outpost into an empire known worldwide for its agricultural bounty.

The diversity of people who moved to the Valley reflects nothing less than the world's turbulent history in the 20th century and the miraculous power of the human spirit to thrive in new surroundings.

## Can you find it?

Symbols of the cultural diversity of the Valley:

- an African gourd thumb instrument
- an Armenian coffee grinder from 1902
- a Costa Dairy milk bottle from the 1960s
- a Chinese cookie mold
- Swedish horse figurines
- a traditional Hmong flute
- Scandinavian wooden shoes
- Russian nesting dolls
- a Chinese pottery jar and ginger jars
- a Mexican folk art tree of life



Arte Americas

MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE

**Making a home:** Ben Vue, a loan specialist with the Valley Small Business Development Corp., is a Hmong immigrant from Laos. Vue fled Vietnamese communists with surviving members of his family and moved to Fresno.

The Mexican Revolution at the turn of the century. The Armenian genocide in Turkey during and after World War I. The Okla-homa Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The Jewish Holocaust of World War II. The ravages of Jim Crow segregation on African-Americans in the American South. The aftermath of this nation's long and agonizing war in Southeast Asia.

The immigrant sweat that built this Valley and dampened its soil can be traced directly to these and so many other events in every region of the globe.

Newcomers were drawn to the Valley by its promise of opportunity, though many found prejudice and discrimination that left permanent scars on their souls. Two common themes running through the stories of many Valley immigrants are how little money they brought with them and how much resentment they endured from people already here.

But despite its faults, the Valley's social structure proved fluid enough over the long haul for folks to rise or fall on their own merits.

"The Valley is a mosaic, not a melting pot," says Kelly Hobbs, archivist for the Fresno City and County Historical Society. "A few people would come here from somewhere far away and start working. Then others followed. Why did so many follow on their own? There is prosperity here."

Such diversity is not exclusively a

20th-century phenomenon. A turn-of-the-century photograph of Fresno schoolchildren shows a mosaic already in the making: African-American, Armenian, Mexican, Basque, Japanese, German, Italian, Serbian. The children of these and dozens of other ethnic groups were already here.

Nor can the impact of 20th-century immigration overshadow this fact: The Valley's two major American Indian tribes — the Yokuts and the Monache — have lived here for thousands of years.

But it is 20th-century immigration — so often born of hope and tragedy — that gives the Valley its unique perspective as it enters a new millennium.

It would be nearly impossible to give voice to every ethnic, racial and religious group that has moved to the Valley. Where would Fresno be without the Italians? Or the Volga Germans? Or the Basque? Where would Kingsburg be without the Swedes? Where would . . .

There are just too many. It's estimated that more than 100 languages are spoken as the native tongues of children in the Fresno Unified School District. We are literally a United Nations of the soil.

Yet the beauty and value of a mosaic can be glimpsed in just a few of its parts. The stories of those who wrested wealth and joy from the Valley in the 20th century are the stuff of legend:

Helen Calderon, 81, and her husband,



# Planting new roots

Teng Yeng Xiong stands up to be counted at a 1998 Veterans Day ceremony in Fresno. Hmong soldiers rescued downed U.S. airmen in Laos during the Vietnam War.

BEE FILE



COURTESY EMIL & KATHERINE LUBISICH  
Yugoslavian employees of the Western Pipe and Steel Co. in 1921.

The human diversity of the Valley is nothing less than a reflection of the world's turbulent history in the 20th century and the miraculous power of the human spirit to thrive in new surroundings.



Vahan Andreasian in his Fresno cigar store in 1920.

COURTESY ANGEL RADOVICH



## Some highlights of 20th-century immigration to Fresno and the Valley

■ A colony of African-Americans moves to Fowler from Georgia in **1903**. The first recorded arrival of African-Americans in Fresno was on **March 31, 1888**, when 20 to 30 families came by train from Southern states to help with the grape harvest.



COURTESY FRESNO COUNTY FREE LIBRARY  
Japanese families play tug-of-war at a picnic beside the San Joaquin River in 1910.

■ The first Armenians, a group of about 35 to 40 from the community of Marzavan in the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey), arrive in Fresno in the **early 1880s**. This population continues to grow in the 20th century's first decade as survivors of the 1894-96 massacre flee to safety in the United States.

■ From **1892 to 1903**, about 100 families immigrate to Fresno from the small Italian village of Maschito. By **1905**, an estimated 1,500 Italian-Americans in Fresno can trace their roots back to Maschito.

■ The first Volga Germans — Germans who immigrated from the Volga River area of Russia — arrive in Fresno in **1897**; by **1919**, so many Volga Germans live in Fresno that their neighborhood, bounded by C, E and Inyo streets and Church Avenue, is known as "Rooshian Town."

■ The first Greek immigrants arrive in the Valley at the **turn of the century**. Greeks build a thriving business district on Fresno's west side.

■ The Armenian genocide, in which an estimated 1.5 million

Armenians are killed in Turkey from **1915 to 1923**, sparks another wave of Armenian immigration to the United States.

■ The **1920** census shows 5,731 Japanese and Japanese-Americans living in Fresno County. Many of Fresno's Japanese live in an area with the Armenians to the east, "Rooshian Town" to the west and the Chinese to the north.

■ A survey taken in **1921** shows that 94% of the people living within three miles of downtown Kingsburg are of Swedish descent.

■ Mexican farmworkers fill the void created by restrictions on Chinese and Japanese immigration from **1910 to 1920**.

■ The Filipino population in the United States jumps from 5,603 in **1920** to 75,092 by **1927**, and many come to the Valley, where they start out working in the fields.

■ **1931-1941**: An estimated 350,000 Oklahomans — the "Okies" — flee years of drought and the Great Depression to seek a better life in California.

■ Mexico opens its first consulate in Fresno in **1931**.

■ An estimated 1,000 Basques live in the Fresno area in **1938**. Basques came to the Valley in the **19th century** and quickly became renowned for their sheepherding skills.



BEE FILE

Basque shepherd Juan Azcarate at work near Chowchilla in 1980.

■ The Portuguese, most coming from the Azores Islands, are already major players in the Valley's dairy industry by the **end of the 1930s**. The Portuguese first came to California in the **mid-19th century**, settling in San Francisco to be near the whaling industry.

■ Jews fleeing Nazi persecution make their way to the Valley **before and during World War II**; more come after the war ends.

■ In **1942**, thousands of Japanese and Japanese-Americans living in the Valley are herded into local shipping centers such as the Fresno Fairground, then moved to internment camps such as Manzanar.

■ **1945**: Thousands of Armenians from the Soviet Union, freed from Nazi concentration camps, move to new homes throughout the world, and some make their way to the Valley.

■ A second wave of Filipino immigration to the Valley begins at the **end of World War II**; many are women who married U.S. servicemen.

■ Many African-Americans move here from Southern states **after World War II**, part of a much broader migration of African-Americans to states outside the South.

■ By the **end of the 1940s**, more than 2,000 Danes are liv-







DOUG HANSEN — THE FRESNO BEE

ing in Fresno County.

■ The Soviet Union crushes the Hungarian revolution in **1956**, forcing many

Hungarian freedom fighters to flee for their lives. Some find their way to the Valley, as do citizens of other countries caught behind the Iron Curtain during the 40-year Cold War.

■ The controversial "bracero" program (Spanish for "one who works with his arms"), which authorized the use of temporary Mexican workers to harvest California crops, ends in **1965**. The program started in the **early 1940s**, and an estimated 4 million to 5 million workers were imported. Many found full-time jobs and became permanent Valley residents.

■ Sikhs move to the Valley in the **mid-1960s** when quota restrictions are eased. Some 4,000 Sikh families live in the Valley by **1984**.

■ In **1975**, the first Hmong make their way from refugee

camps in Southeast Asia to the Valley. The Hmong lived mostly as farmers in the hills of Laos but were recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency to help in the U.S. fight against North Vietnam. When the United States departed, the Hmong were marked for extinction by the victorious Vietnamese from the north. Many of those who escape come to Fresno, and by the **mid-1990s**, an estimated 40,000 Hmong live in the Valley.

■ **1979**: An Islamic revolution forces the Shah of Iran to flee to the United States. Iranian students attending U.S. universities, including some at California State University, Fresno, stay in the United States rather than risk the

uncertainty of their homeland.

■ In the **1950s**, more than half of all immigrants to the United States are European; in the **1980s**, the vast majority are Asian or Hispanic. The Valley also sees an influx of immigrants from African countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa. Some come seeking opportunity while others are fleeing oppression, famine or war.

■ In **1963**, about 2,500 lowland Laotians, 2,000 Vietnamese and 3,000 Cambodians live in Fresno.

■ An estimated 6,000 Chinese-Americans live in Fresno County in **1985**, up from 906 in Fresno a century earlier. Chinese laborers helped make the bricks that went into Fresno's first



BEE FILE

Felipe Corona of Fresno at a 1999 Cinco de Mayo celebration.

courthouse in the 19th century, and a major part of central Fresno's business district continues to be called Chinatown.

■ An estimated 100 refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala, fleeing war in their homelands without legal immigration status, receive help from the sanctuary movement in Fresno in the **mid-1980s**. Refugees from Central American countries, including Nicaragua and Honduras, come to the Valley for safety and a new life.

■ Immigration from Mexico to the Valley jumps in **1985** when the Mexican government devalues the peso, causing economic hardship for many Mexicans, and again in **1986** when an earthquake devastates the Mexico City region.

■ More Africans immigrate to the Valley in the **1980s and 1990s**. Many come as students at U.S. universities and stay to become educators, professionals and entrepreneurs.

■ At the end of **1997**, 5,000 to 10,000 Muslims live in the Valley; the region's largest mosque is in Fresno.

■ American Indians, the people who were in the Valley first, make up about 1% of the region's population at the **end of the 20th century**.

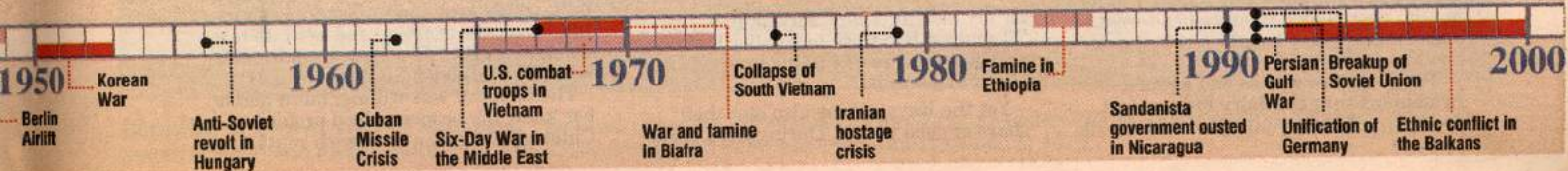
■ In **2010**, Fresno County's non-Hispanic white population is expected to be about 34%; in **2020**, Hispanics are expected to be more than 50% of Fresno County's population.

Source: Fresno Bee archives; Atlas of World History



BEE FILE

This refugee family, photographed in 1986, fled oppression in Ethiopia and came to Fresno.







**Grape harvest:** A 1901 photograph shows Armenian men and children picking grapes near Fresno. Thousands of Armenians fled violence in their homeland, and many settled in the San Joaquin Valley. BEE FILE

Manuel, 85, live in Fresno. Manuel Calderon was born in Malaga and raised in Clovis. The presence of his Mexican-born parents in the Valley in the early 1900s is a reminder that, until the mid-19th century, this region was part of Mexico.

Helen Calderon was born in a refugee camp near San Diego. Her father, Florentino Cuautle, fled there after fighting 14 years with Mexican revolutionary Doroteo Arango, better known as Francisco "Pancho" Villa.

Florentino Cuautle moved to Sanger, where he bought and rented houses. Helen Calderon recalls her father watching children walk to school. Few of those children probably knew that this nice, elderly man had fought side by side with the same Pancho Villa they read about in school.

"He was a very brave man," Helen Calderon remembers.

**M**any Armenians came to the Valley early in the 20th century, fleeing massacres by the Turks.

Haig Kayajanian, 79, of Fresno listened as a youth to stories told by his father, Jack, who was born in Armenia in 1874 and moved to Boston 12 years later. Jack Kayajanian returned to Armenia in the 1890s, but soon fled the Turks again. He and his wife, Agavney, were living in Boston when Jack's brother, who had bought a ranch near Del Rey in 1911, persuaded them to head west. Jack and Agavney bought a ranch near Fowler.

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to Fresno in 1982

for my baby brother," Kayajanian says. "My father had to go four miles by horse and buggy every day to his brother's ranch to get milk."

Yet the Kayajanians also met their share of good people. During the Depres-

sion, pioneer Fresno physician Dwight Trowbridge, who held the mortgage on the Kayajanian's ranch, refused to take it back when Jack Kayajanian couldn't make the payments.

"He told my father, 'Jack, I know you're going to make it,'" Haig Kayajanian says. "He told his assistant to mark the mortgage paid up."

War triggered new waves of immigrants. Nearly 200,000 Hmong came to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

Ben Vue was among those who settled in the Valley. As a boy in Laos, he saw his father and many in his village massacred by Vietnamese communist soldiers.

"I can still remember lying on the floor and the bullets hitting the houses," Vue says. "If we had stood up, we would have died."

Vue and his surviving family members made their way to a refugee camp in Thailand, then to Southern California. They moved to Fresno in 1982 to be near family.

"We heard about the good climate here, that it was an agricultural area very similar to what we had in Laos," Vue says. "Fresno has been a very good home to me. That's because of the people here."

The Chinese and Japanese had helped build the Valley even before 1900. Lillie Lew, whose grandparents were born in China, recalls that she and her late husband, architect Allen Lew, tried to rent a home in Fresno before World War II.

The landlord was willing, but a neighbor knew the property deed prohibited Chinese, Armenian or Jewish renters.



The Lews had to go elsewhere, but Lillie Lew holds no bitterness.

"Life is what you make of it," she says.

**M**asao Honda, 82, was born in Fowler to parents who came from Hiroshima, Japan. His father was the fifth son in a family where only the oldest son inherited the estate. Honda's father moved to California around 1890 and settled near Fowler.

Honda's parents moved back to Japan in 1923 when he was 6. In 1934, Honda returned alone to the Valley.

"I came back because I was an American citizen," Honda says. "My mother didn't want me to go into the [Japanese] army. I had a dream. You can make a lot of money in the United States. The dollar is a precious thing."

Honda spent World War II in an internment camp, yet has no regrets about leaving Japan more than 60 years ago.

"I have no hardness toward America," he says.

**S**ome Valley immigrants left homelands where crushing poverty was the norm.

Candida Contente, 78, of Lemoore was born in Manteca, but her Portuguese parents returned to their native Azores when she was 6. In the Azores, their house had a dirt floor.

At 22, pregnant with her first son, Contente traveled alone to rural Kings County, where relatives of her husband, Joaquin, were living. Her husband soon followed. Today, three generations of Contentes live on a dairy operation covering more than 400 acres.

"Here in America, you work hard and you receive money," says Contente, whose son, Joaquin Jr., interprets for her because she still speaks mostly Portuguese. "Over there [in the Azores], you work hard and not get money. That is



**A place to grow:** Roy and Margaret Graves are teachers in the Fresno Unified School District. Roy is from the Fresno area. Margaret moved from Mississippi more than 20 years ago.

DIANA BALDRICA — THE FRESNO BEE

the difference."

Many African-Americans came to the Valley to find opportunities denied them elsewhere in the United States. Col. Allen Allensworth, a former slave, founded a community in Tulare County in 1908 governed solely by African-Americans. The tiny commu-

nity of Allensworth still exists and the founder's legacy lives on at nearby Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park.

The movement of African-Americans into the Valley gained speed after World War II as they left the segregated South for new job opportunities. Margaret Graves of



TOMAS OVALLE — THE FRESNO BEE

**Making it work:** Yolanda Hernandez Van Auken runs the Fresno Carburetor Shop in Fresno with her brothers, from left, Guillermo, Jesus, Roberto and Alvaro Hernandez. The family immigrated to Fresno from central Mexico in 1979.



Fresno knew firsthand the impact of segregation while growing up in Ocean Springs, Miss.

"We knew we weren't allowed to go into white restaurants or white places," Graves says. "But that was the reality back then."

The civil-rights movement ended legal segregation in the South, but Graves still jumped at the chance when a family friend suggested she move to Fresno and start a teaching career. The year was 1977, and Graves had just graduated from college.

"Coming from Mississippi to California, that was a big deal," Graves says. "I came here, and it was the first time I saw oranges growing on a tree."

The Greeks came to the Valley in search of opportunities they couldn't find in their homeland. Sylvia Mehas, 80, of Fresno, was born in New Mexico to Peter and Victoria Gundunas, who had left Greece in search of a better life.

She married George Mehas when she was a teen and they left Nebraska, where the Gundunas family had moved, to settle in Fresno. It was an arranged marriage, which was the Greek custom at the time.

"I told my dad, 'Dad, I don't know him. I don't know what love is,'" Mehas says. "My dad said, 'Love is not a patch you can put on or take off easily. It takes a lot of hard work.'"

They learned to love each other and were married 52 1/2 years until George Mehas' death. Sylvia Mehas' parents soon moved to Fresno. She and her husband, along with Peter and Victoria Gundunas, were restaurateurs in Fresno for decades.

The Sikhs of India, like so many immigrants, left their homeland to find work. Many found their way to the Valley.

Avtar Gill, 47, is part of a Sikh community in the Valley now 30,000 strong. He was born in Chanbigarh, capital of the state of Punjab, and lives in the Fresno County farming community of Caruthers.

The Gill family has flourished in Caruthers, where they grow grapes and operate a number of businesses.

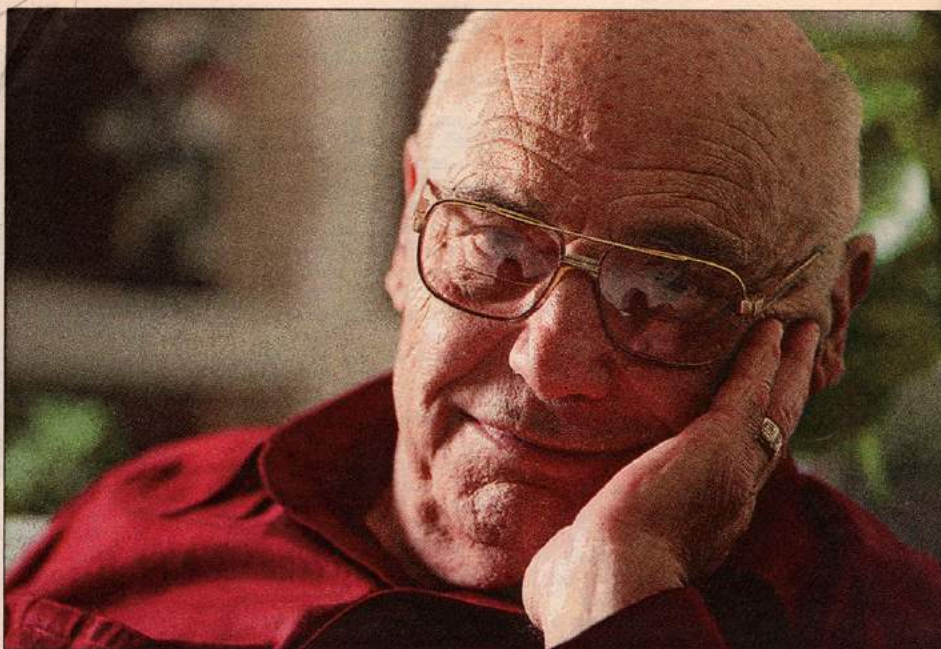
"We are a very bold people," Gill says. "Me, I came here with just \$5 in my pocket. But we took the chance, and here we are. We succeeded."

Natural disasters also have spurred immigration to the Valley. One of the best known was the 1930s drought that ravaged much of Oklahoma and Texas — the Dust Bowl. In 1942, Gladys Lee Ferguson left her home in Broken Bow, Okla., to join her husband, Willard, a civilian guard on a military base in Merced.

Reynolds traveled three days by train with two small sons and a 6-month-old daughter. It was a hot July morning when they arrived in Merced.

"I was wondering what the Valley would be like," Reynolds says. "I was hopeful. But I was afraid to be too excited. When I finally saw it, I thought, 'What am I doing here?'"

Yet Reynolds went to work — and she hasn't stopped. The 84-year-old Porterville resident still works full time, caring for two youngsters at the



MARY A. LOMMORI — THE FRESNO BEE

**Family history:** Haig Kayajianian, 79, is a longtime Fresno resident whose parents moved here from Boston in the early 1900s. His father, Jack, immigrated to the United States from Armenia in 1886.

Porterville Developmental Center.

Sometimes, leaving the homeland is a matter of life or death.

Bettylee Ginsburg Wapner, 64, of Fresno is the daughter of the late Dr. H.M. "Hy" Ginsburg, who was medical director of Fresno County General Hospital (now University Medical Center) and a three-term member of the Fresno school board.

Hy Ginsburg was born in New York City and played an active role in Fresno's Jewish community. His parents were born in Russia in the 19th century.

"The Jewish people, with the pogroms and things going on with the czars, wanted a better life," Wapner said of her paternal grandparents' decision to immigrate. "You come to America and survive."

Even someone with Hy Ginsburg's stature felt the sting of anti-Semitism in the Valley, Wapner said. But her father knew this would be his home until he died.

"He made Fresno his life," Wapner said. "He felt that if they're not going to let you in, then you become someone they can't get along without."

The Valley's opportunities don't belong only to those fleeing trouble. Ghassan AbulGhana, 36, came to Fresno from Jordan, where his father was a diplomat. He graduated from California State University, Fresno, worked in the Silicon Valley, then returned to help found a Fresno high-tech company.

AbulGhana, too, suffered prejudice when he arrived in Fresno in December 1980.

"This was the height of the Iranian hostage crisis," AbulGhana says. "I came to the United States, and the first thing I was greeted with were a lot of unfriendly

fingers. That's when I realized I was on my own."

Yet AbulGhana came to love his new home. A turning point came while he worked at a hotel owned by a Swiss-Italian immigrant. AbulGhana was surprised to hear the man say he never planned to return to his European birthplace.

"He told me, 'Once you live in America long enough, no other place will do,'" AbulGhana says. "He's right. You succeed here, and success speaks for itself." ♦

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— Avtar Gill, 47, who was born in Chanbigarh, capital of the state of Punjab, India