JAMES PORTEOUS
Fresno's Forgotten Inventor

by Maria Ortiz

"Devoted as he was to his family, his community and his inventions, James Porteous might well take a prominent place in an agricultural hall of fame."
Fresno Republican, July 5, 1925

(1848-1922)
The agricultural history of Fresno County has been the subject of numerous studies. The development and diversification of crops, the construction of irrigation systems and the contributions of enterprising farmers have long been recognized. But the inventors of agricultural implements—the men who enabled the agricultural revolution to progress—have remained obscure.

James Porteous receives brief mention in only one of the three standard works on the history of Fresno County. Yet he was responsible for agricultural development that had world-wide impact. His Fresno Agricultural Works not only provided local farmers with the newest and most modern equipment, but also served as an outlet for his own inventions. As Porteous confidently stated in a book from the 1890's—"any required machine he cannot buy he will invent."  

James Porteous was born in 1848 in Haddington, Scotland. His father, William Porteous was a wheelwright who not only built and repaired wheels for carriages and wagons, but also repaired farm implements for the local townspeople. It was in his father's shop that James learned the basic skills of a wheelwright and a blacksmith.

The reason that James Porteous left Scotland in 1873 is unknown. His daughter, Agnes, said that her father went to the ticket agent in Haddington and asked for a ticket to the New World. When the agent asked for his destination Porteous replied that he did not know. The station master had just sold a ticket to the Shields family for Santa Barbara, California and suggested that he travel with them. James Porteous agreed and was off to the New World.  

Porteous arrived in Fresno in 1877 and established a small wagon shop at Mariposa and J street. As his business increased, he decided to purchase five lots on the corner of L and Tulare in December 1879 across the street from Fresno's first county Courthouse and park. It was in this year that Porteous became a citizen of the United States. He prospered through the manufacture of buggies and heavy mountain wagons which had the capability of carrying from five to eight tons. In 1880 blacksmith John Elijah Tuttle became his partner, but the partnership was dissolved one year later.

As Porteous developed a close working relationship with Fresno farmers, he recognized that the valley's dependence on irrigation necessitated the efficient construction of canal systems. Therefore, a critical challenge was to devise an effective method of digging irrigation ditches that was specifically suited to the region's soil. At that time railroad slip scrapers, developed for the rocky ground of the eastern states, were used. However, in the sandy soil of Central California this type of scraper proved inefficient. Porteous knew that a better method of moving large quantities of earth was desperately needed.

A number of farmers and blacksmiths were experimenting and constructing dirt scrapers (each individual improving on his fellow inventor's scraper). Porteous constructed and patented his first scraper on July 25, 1882. "My invention relates to the class of dirt-scrappers...commonly known as "buck scrapers"...in which the power of horses is applied to drag along the ground a vertical or slightly inclined board, which scrapes the dirt and carries it before it to any required place, said boards being usually provided with a tail-board, upon which the driver stands."  

Porteous outlined the buck scraper's three major problems in this patent. Because the tail board was rigidly secured to the front board, the means of dumping the accumulated dirt was a laborious process of flipping the front board to allow the tail board to swing up into the air. As Porteous stated: "an operation found to be inconvenient, as it requires power, and also the removal of the driver from his position."  

The third serious difficulty resulted from the buck scraper's rigid construction. The accumulated dirt was carried along in front of the scraper, "requiring considerable power to transport it any distance." Porteous' answer to these problems was to hinge or journal the scraper's tail-board to its front board, which allowed for several different alternatives for disposing of the soil.

In the following year while working on the Herndon Ditch, Henry Hawn built a buck scraper of wood with runners on each end, similar to a heavy drag, that was drawn by four horses. Though
cumbersome, it was an improvement. James Porteous saw Hawn's improvement and decided to add wheels.14

Porteous' second dirt scraper was patented on April 3, 1883. At that time he stated, "the object of my invention is to provide a simple, light, and effective scraper for leveling land."15 Unfortunately, this version of the dirt scraper was a failure because the addition of wheels prevented the load from being tipped while in action.

Using a heavy sheet of metal for the base instead of wood, Porteous patented a third scraper on November 27, 1883 which proved more successful. A crucial improvement on this model (which retained wheels) was its capability to adjust to specific earth-moving needs. By a series of holes in a key stop-bar, the bowl of the scraper could be positioned "to provide for discharging the load more or less quickly in a heap or spread over" a large area.16 The Fresno Expositor of April 9, 1884 reported that Porteous had made over 350 scrapers in the previous 18 months and had shipped them to all parts of the state.

Simultaneous to Porteous' development of the dirt scraper, two Selma blacksmiths were making further improvements on the scraper. William Deidrick patented his version in 1883 which had a deep bowl and adjustable sled-like runners. In 1889 he sold one-half interest in this model to Porteous.17 Abijah McCall, with his financial partner Frank Dusy, developed a scraper with a long bowl, arc-shaped runners to facilitate dumping dirt, and wheels attached by an axel apparatus. The product of their efforts was patented in 1885. Porteous later purchased the rights to this patent from McCall's sons and Frank Dusy.18 Through trial, error and constant improvement; using Deidrick's and McCall and Dusy's models, and his own patented scrapers, Porteous perfected the dirt scraper. The culmination of his ingenuity was the "Fresno Scraper" manufactured and sold at the Fresno Agricultural Works.

The Fresno Scraper, often simply referred to as "a fresno," was to have not only a national but a world-wide impact. The manufacture of "fresnos" by Porteous transformed the back-breaking labor of land leveling, ditch digging, and road...
building into an efficient construction process. The “fresno” was shipped to South America, India, the Orient, South Africa, Australia, and Europe. The Imperial Valley in southern California owes its fertility to the fresno’s work on the great dam that provides the fields with water today.18

During World War I “buck” skinners and army mules worked hundreds of scrapers for the U.S. Army on the European front.20 By 1941 the Fresno Scraper, attached to the Caterpillar tractor had become known as the “bulldozer,”21 and went to war again in the South Pacific. The Fresno Scraper also played a vital role in the most ambitious construction project of the new century—the building of the Panama Canal.22

The Fresno Scraper was not to be Porteous’ only accomplishment. He was continuously working on plans for new tools which he invented to fill the needs of his farmer clients. The prolific inventor patented two machines in 1887: the Fresno weed cutter for clearing weeds from the vineyard rows and cutting underneath the vines, and a raisin stemmer which could stem and grade from ten to fifteen tons of raisins per day. The following year he developed a five-gang vineyard plow which had narrow blades arranged to plow close to the vines; a raisin-grader in 1890; and a raisin and fig press, a cultivator and a vineyard-brush burner (large v-shaped bin used to clear out and burn brush and prunings) in 1891.23 It is apparent that Porteous was closely involved with the evolution of the region’s agriculture. A list of his customers from his account ledger reads like a “who’s who” of Fresno County early history; Frank Dusy (ordering scrapers at a cost of $25 each), Miller and Lux, the Eisen vineyard, the Fresno Water Company, William Helm, the Fruit Vale Winery, and many other farmers.24

Total concentration on his work made basic necessities such as eating and sleeping incidental, and also made him oblivious to social appointments. Included in a friend’s wedding as best man, Porteous was working busily in his shop on the day of the ceremony and had to be reminded of the event by a messenger just ten minutes before the appointed hour. The wedding, however, took place without the best

Porteous’ enthusiasm for invention extended to the entire staff of the Fresno Agricultural Works. When the horseless carriage made its first appearance in Fresno at the turn of the century, Superintendent J. H. Burnett shut up shop at the Porteous foundry and took the entire crew of 20 men to inspect the wonder of the age. The men were still talking about the vehicle when plans were made for the Fourth of July parade in 1900. In her newspaper column “Fresno Memories” Ernestine Winchell described subsequent events.

“The foreman of the implements made a daring proposition. There were consultations and experiments and, constructed of disassociated fragments as was the Frankenstein monster, the first motor-driven vehicle of Fresno came into being . . . . Next to the ever popular fire engines in the parade this automobile received enthusiastic applause, and for several blocks thundered along to the joy of the human crowd and the distress of the horses. The spectacular progress was doomed, however . . . . the boys had underestimated the miles per gallon and . . . . the engine sputtered and died . . . . finally the helpless car was ignominiously towed home by a team of dependable horses.”

Con’t. on Page 6
FRESNO CANAL AND RAILROAD SCRAPER.

This Scraper has now been in use seven years, and there has been, no alteration or improvement made on it for four years, except making the parts interchangeable. And for moving earth a short distance in canals or embankments, it has neither equal nor superior.

Price ........................................... $45.00

The following testimonials from men well known on the Pacific Coast will give a better idea of its efficiency, both as regards capacity and durability, than anything we could say:

FRESNO, CAL., November 1, 1889.

Mr. James Portwood, Fresno, Cal.

Dear Sir: We have used your Canal Scraper for five years; for the last four years exclusively in the construction and maintenance of our canals, except when we had to hire teams, and in such cases we always figure the amount of earth handled by your Scraper as the basis of a day's work, or insist on them using the same Scraper.

L. B. Church,

Supt. Fresno Canal and Irrigation Co.

FRESNO, CAL., November 1, 1889.

I hereby certify that I have averaged on small ditches, say six feet wide on bottom and three feet deep, one hundred and twenty yards per day; and we averaged on the East Side Canal, forty feet wide on bottom, seven feet deep, and nineteen miles long, one hundred and twenty yards per day.

L. C. Worthington,

Supt. Madera Canal.

PRO BONO PUBLICO.

FRESNO, CAL., October 29, 1889.

I have used the Fresno Canal and Railroad Scraper in sand, adobe or gumbo, clay, gravel, and rock after blasting, and consider it the best and cheapest tool in use, and cheerfully recommend it to the public.

Hamilton W. Gray,

Contractor.

HERNDON, CAL., November 2, 1889.

Fresno Agricultural Works, Fresno, Cal.

Gentlemen: The Canal and Railroad Grading Scrapers made by you for us have given us entire satisfaction, both as regards durability, ease of handling and amount of work done, and cheerfully recommend the Scraper to any one having ditches or grading to do.

Yours Respectfully,

J. Q. Drake.

FRESNO LEVELING and DITCHING SCRAPER.

This Scraper is made more expressly for ranch work, and is the best Scraper on earth for leveling or ditching, the result of seven years experience in the center of irrigation. It will scatter the dirt in layers from one to twelve inches deep, and will follow up any bank the horses can climb without losing any dirt, and is so thoroughly balanced that a boy can work it. It is made most of boiler iron, with solid steel bottom, all parts interchangeable. It is so well proportioned and strong that it will stop any team attached to it without breaking.

Price, 4-horse .................................. $77.00

2 or 3-horse .................................. 32.00

2-horse ...................................... 28.00

TESTIMONIALS.

FIREbaugh, CAL., (Paso Farm), November 8, 1889.

Mr. Jos. Portwood, Fresno, Cal.

Dear Sir: In answer to your letter of the 5th inst., will say that I have found your new style four-horse Scraper the best all-round Scraper I have yet tried.

Respectfully yours,

J. W. Schmitz,

Supt. Miller & Lux.

Traver, CAL., May 18, 1888.

Mr. Jos. Portwood, Fresno, Cal.

Dear Sir: Enclosed please find draft in payment for the Scrapers. I can speak very highly of your Scraper. It is a cheaper, stronger, and every way better Scraper than those I bought elsewhere. Yours truly,

W. C. West.

MANUFACTURED BY THE

FRESNO AGRICULTURAL WORKS,

2102-2119 Tulare Street,

Fresno, Cal.
man and the wedding party stormed the Porteous shop to express their displeasure. To their surprise, they found him in bed, sound asleep. Once awake, he explained that he never came upstairs except to sleep, and in pulling off his shirt he had forgotten the wedding when an idea for a new centrifugal pump occurred to him. Finishing the design, he went to bed and to sleep.

In 1895 Porteous became the talk of the town when he and Jenny Ritchie decided to elope. They had been engaged ten years earlier, but a disagreement postponed the wedding. When Agnes asked her mother what they had argued about her mother could not remember.

Jenny and James Porteous had six children. Two children, William and Mary were born in their first home on P street. The rest of the children; Agnes, Margaret, James Jr., and John, were born in the family's second home at 1041 T street.

From their T street home the Porteous family moved in 1916 to the stately home on 1095 North Van Ness which is now the valley headquarters for the Boy Scouts of America. He moved in with "a wife, six children, a German Shepherd, two cats and a bowl of goldfish."

Modern inventions were incorporated into the daily life of the family. Porteous was a camera buff and also owned the first electric car in Fresno. When the first sounds of an aero-plane could be heard the

The Porteous home at 1095 North Van Ness Avenue.

Jenny Ritchie Porteous with her children — William, Mary, Margaret, Agnes, and James Jr. Photographer: Maxwell and Mudge.
children would all scramble to the back balcony of their Van Ness home to view the plane. Their father, sighting the plane, would pile all of them into the car and they would meet the pilot as he landed on a dirt strip in the Fig Garden area. While the children inspected the flying machine Porteous talked with the pilot. Later that evening, when the family gathered around the dinner table, Mrs. Porteous asked her husband to tell the children about the plane he had invented. When they began to giggle, Porteous predicted that one day aero-planes would carry at least 100 people. This statement only brought further laughter from the children.27

In addition to his devotion to his family, Porteous also participated in the civic life of Fresno. He was one of the founders of the Y.M.C.A. and continued his generous support throughout his life. As a charter member of the First Presbyterian Church, he was active in church life until his death on March 29, 1922. After his death, his family discovered that he was also a writer. They uncovered a volume of poetry he had written entitled Death and the Reporter.28

James Porteous' imagination, initiative and tireless energy resulted in over 50 inventions patented in his lifetime.29 The once small blacksmith shop became the largest agricultural implement business in California outside of Los Angeles and San Francisco.30 The Fresno Scraper, the raisin stemmer, the Fresno Centrifugal Pump, the Fresno Power Sulphur Duster, the Fresno Weed Cutter, and the rotary harrow were just a few of the inventions that the Fresno Agricultural Works produced. The contributions of James Porteous were destined to lighten the farmer's burden, increase the productivity of the San Joaquin Valley, and benefit world-wide agriculture.

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The Fresno City and County Historical Society Archives is grateful to Mrs. Agnes Porteous Walker for donating her father's collection of patents, photographs, literary journals, letters, and glass negative plates. This manuscript collection can provide a base for further research on the development of farm machinery and the role it played in the agricultural history of Fresno County.

Porteous captured many scenes of his children at play with their toys, such as the two photographs pictured above.

The formal portrait of the Porteous children below was taken by Maxwell and Mudge.
FOOTNOTES

1There is no reference to James Porteous in L.A. Winchell, History of Fresno County and the San Joaquin Valley (Fresno, 1933) and Paul Vandor, History of Fresno County, California, with Brief Biographical Sketches, 2 vols. (Los Angeles, 1919). He is briefly mentioned in Ben Walker, Fresno County Blue Book (Fresno, 1941), pp. 21, 146.


3Porteous' father and uncle were the proprietors of the "largest agricultural implement works in Scotland" (ibid.).

4Personal interview with Mrs. Agnes Porteous Walker, February 26, 1976.

5Pen Pictures From the Garden of the World, p. 562. There are two other conflicting dates. The July 5, 1925 Fresno Republican dates his arrival to 1874 in an article celebrating the "50th" anniversary of the Fresno Agricultural Works; and the business' 1906 catalog states his first blacksmith shop was established in 1876. However, his daughter, Mary Porteous Weeks believes that her father arrived in Fresno in 1877.

6Ibid.

7Act of Naturalization of James Porteous, July 11, 1879. Porteous had filed a Declaration of Intention for citizenship on February 7, 1877. Both documents are from the James Porteous Papers, Manuscript Collection No. 10, Fresno City and County Historical Society Archives.

8Article of Copartnership Between James Porteous and Elijah Tuttle, December 21, 1880. Porteous dissolved the partnership with Tuttle for the sum of $240, Porteous and Tuttle Assignment, May 11, 1881. (James Porteous Papers)

9The Fresno Bee, "Patent Shows Selma Partners Invented Scraper" (January 30, 1944), p. 2-C.


11Ibid., line 40.

12Ibid., line 45.

13Ibid., lines 50-55.

14Wallace Smith, Garden of the Sun (Los Angeles, 1939), p. 456.


18The Fresno Bee (January 30, 1944), p. 2-C. Frank Dusy sold his half interest in Porteous for ten dollars. Assignment of Patent, Frank Dusy to James Porteous, Improvement in Dirt Scrapers, February 7, 1891. (James Porteous Papers)

19The Fresno Republican, "Fresno Scrapper Is Sent To All Points Of World" (July 5, 1925), p. 2-E.

20Ibid.

21Feasibility Study on Rehabilitation of the Old Administration Building At Fresno City College As An Agriculture Museum, Researcher, June English (Fresno, Ca.: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977), p. IV-66.

22Ibid.

23The patents for these inventions are part of the James Porteous Papers.

24Account ledger, Fresno Agricultural Works, January 1, 1886 to May 30, 1887. (James Porteous Papers)

25The Fresno Republican, "James Porteous Inventor, Helped Build Community" (July 5, 1925), p. 1-E.

26Heritage Fresno Homes and People (Fresno, Ca.: Historic Homes Committee Fresno Branch American Association of University Women, 1976) p. 47.

27Personal interview with Mrs. Agnes Porteous Walker, February 26, 1976.

28Original manuscript of Death and the Reporter and correspondence concerning its publication located in James Porteous Papers.

29The Fresno Republican (July 5, 1925), p. 2-E. Thirty-four patents for original inventions and other patents for implements that Porteous invented with a co-partner are located in the James Porteous Papers. Including his own inventions, Porteous held 200 patents. (Feasibility Study on Old Administration Building, p. IV-66.)

30In the early 1950's the Fresno Agricultural Works ceased manufacturing and a former employee, John Rosetta, purchased the hardware department of the company. As a hardware and building supply business, Fresno Ag is located today at the corner of Blackstone and Ashlan in Fresno.

FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
STATEMENT OF RECEIPTS AND DISBURSEMENTS
FOR THE PERIOD OCTOBER 1, 1980
THROUGH SEPTEMBER 30, 1981
UNAUDITED

RECEIPTS

Fresno County Dues $15,501
Publications 14,887
Kearney Mansion Admissions 11,522
Interest 10,229
Insurance 5,646
Donations 4,595
Fresno City 4,339
Miscellaneous 3,334
TOTAL CASH RECEIVED 71,788

DISBURSEMENTS

SALARIES $34,270
Publications 7,264
Membership Expense 3,928
Fund Raising 3,788
Archives 3,165
Office Expense 2,423
Insurance 2,247
Payroll Taxes 1,727
Newsletter 1,455
Past and Present 1,352
Maintenance 1,081
Exhibits 921
Preservation Committee 866
Auto 691
Telephone 489
Miscellaneous 979
TOTAL DISBURSEMENTS 66,646

Excess of Receipts over Disbursements $ 5,142
Fund Balance at Beginning of the Year 59,887
Fund Balance at End of Year $ 65,039

Fund balances have grown this past year due to delays in spending projects. Approximately $10,000 is to be used for Kearney Mansion interior restoration. The remaining funds are to be used in part for fixtures, shelving and archival material at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum of Art, History and Science. Progress is being made towards start of these projects but commitment dates have not yet been received from the outside agencies involved.

George Beem, Treasurer
GIFTS TO THE SOCIETY IN 1980:
(IN ORDER OF RECEIPT)

HOWARD, Margaret — One oil lamp, five kitchen implements, jar of Indian salt, hot water bottle and cover, four men’s grooming items, woman’s coin purse, framed print of country scene, ten pine needle baskets, family books, papers and sixteen black and white photographs.

MORADIAN, Frank — Copies of two official notices of co-partnership, Kutner-Goldstein, 1878.

KERRICK, Robert — One newspaper article from The Fresno Bee, 1931, and one framed photograph of Fred A. Kerrick, founder of Kerrick and Co., Inc.

ANONYMOUS via Dan Pollard — Copies of twenty-five photographs depicting Kearney Mansion, surrounding buildings and acreage.

DIXON, Bernice — Two photographs of early Fresno.

STRATTON, Dr. Kenneth — Royal vacuum cleaner with pump handle, ca. 1900.

HALL, Robert P. — Wooden sign, “Rielly & Boyce Wood & Coal”, used on a coal delivery truck, ca. 1918, wire spool top, large orange crate and assorted lumber.

WAGSTAFF, Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur — 1970 Ambassador automobile for Society use.

GINSBURG, Mrs. Margaret — Twenty-eight pieces ladies’, men’s and children’s clothing.

McQUONE, Mrs. Louise “Bobbie” — Two metal gas cans, ca. 1920s.

FRESNO LDS GENEALOGY LIBRARY — Obituary file (newspaper clippings), Fresno, 1955 to 1975.

NARGIS, James — GAFA 500 copy machine for Society use.

CAMPBELL, William — Mexican chocolate stirrer.

MAGAZINE, Julie — Pump organ, ca. 1850.

HOPPER, Mrs. James A. — Brown opera cape worn to the Fresno Barton Opera House in the 1890s.

MINNICK, Nelle — Book, Navelencia History — Memory Book.

VERMILYA, Marion McCrdle — Postage stamp with Fresno city cancellation mark, 1887.

MOBILE PUBLIC LIBRARY — Postcard of an artesian well in Hanford, California 1911.

WILKINSON, David — Business and personal papers and assorted artifacts from state of Curtis Hess.

FRESNO LDS GENEALOGY LIBRARY — Fifty-two studio portrait photographs.

COBB, Michael — Direct current generator, ca. 1918 and Ward’s gasoline engine, ca. 1918.


HOKE, Mrs. Mary — One German beer stein and an ivory box of miniature dominoes.

GRAINGER, Laura M. — Horsehair blanket purchased in Fresno County in the early 1900s.

MITCHELL, Mr. and Mrs. G.C. — One ivory satin wedding gown, trimmed with lace and pearls, 1907.

WARD, Audrey — Three-shelf metal utility cart with wheels for Society use.

GRIFFIN, Mrs. Frank — One handmade white cotton wedding nightgown, 1894.

PERZ, Mr. and Mrs. Jack M. — Book, Pot Luck — Episodes in the Life of W. Parker Lyon by Ed Ainsworth, pub. 1940.

ROSENSTIEL, Dr. Henry C. — Large metal cart for Society use.

KAY, Mrs. Thelma Lyon — Two Kearney photograph albums, 1890 - 1894 and 1896.

McFARLAND, J. Randall — Book, Centennial Selma - Biography of a California Community’s First 100 Years by donor, 1980.

SATHER, Courtney J. — Oil painting of Shaver Lake by M. H. Smith, June, 1888.

GORNIT, Ralph — One photograph entitled, “City and County Boys of Fresno, Calif. - off to fight the Kaiser in the World War, May 1, 1918.

TRABER, Mrs. Lois Smith — Two pieces of ladies’ clothing, ca. 1870s and seven photographs of Fresno city and area.

RIGGS, Mrs. Dorothy Duncan — Photographs and newspaper articles relating to Duncan and Ward families of Fresno, and one quilt.

BEAL, Jo Nell — Newspaper, Daily Evening Expositor, 1882 and brochure, “Sticky from Stanford”.

ORNDOFF, Helen — One brown metal desk lamp for Society use.


NAPPE, Ilena J. — One fur piece made up of four beaver marten fur skins.

WHITE, Garvin H. — Two volumes of Associated Growers: 1920 and 1921, four photographs and eighty negatives from the home of Chris Jorgensen.
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*Includes a copy of *Imperial Fresno, Evolution of Fruit Vale Estate*, or Evans and Sontag.

Fresno City and County Historical Society
7160 W. Kearney Blvd.
Fresno, Calif. 93706

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