

Chapter 8

The Maturing Years

For the decade and a half after the delivery of water to the lands of the Modesto Irrigation District, growth was phenomenal in every way.

In 1903, even before irrigation water finally arrived, land prices started to climb. When cattle dominated Paradise Valley's agriculture 30 years earlier, land went begging at \$1.25 an acre. Now it began to sell for \$35 or more per acre, and this was only the beginning. Within a couple of years when large wheat ranches were divided into 40-acre tracts, they were sold for \$100 an acre. Between 1900 and 1920 land values increased by 549 per cent in Stanislaus County, a pace faster than in any other county in California.

The long, troubled wait for water after the 1887 creation of the Modesto Irrigation District took its toll on property values. By the end of the century, MID assessed valuations were less than half of what they were 13 years earlier. The recovery once the water arrived was spectacular. In just the first year after irrigation began, property values doubled. By 1915 MID assessed valuations had increased more than 300 percent, even though they now were computed only on the value of the land. Assessed valuations on buildings and other improvements were ended in 1911.

For tax assessment purposes, the MID fixed the land values at \$80 per acre, a figure which the Irrigation District Bond Commission a few years later estimated to be about half the true market value. For nearly a half century, until irrigation taxes were canceled outright in 1959, the assessed value of land was not increased even though property values skyrocketed.

Although some farmers had helped themselves during 1903 when water first was turned into the main canal and laterals, the official start of irrigation came in 1904. Oramil McHenry, who had done so much to get the district back on its feet; George Covell, who in 1909 became an MID director, and T. H. Kewin received the first water.

From the outset it was recognized that earthen ditches were, at best, subject to erosion and provided a fine playground for gophers. If disastrous breaks were to be avoided, constant patrolling was essential. Thus originated the job of ditchtender.

At first ditchtenders were concerned primarily with preventing breaks. Dick Funk of Roberts Ferry was the first MID ditchtender, hired as soon as water began to flow in the main canal.

At 5 o'clock every morning Funk would mount his horse and ride down the canal bank for about 10-miles, cross over and return on the other bank, arriving home by noon. After lunch and a change of horses, Funk would ride two miles up the canal to La Grange and return.

Funk's son, Iver, who succeeded him as ditchtender in 1949, recalls in the early days of unlined canals that the hazards were squirrels, gophers and the 11 troublesome wooden flumes. By the time Iver Funk retired 1975 – father and son had served as MID ditchtenders a total of 71 years – automobiles, radios and modern equipment allowed him to patrol the entire distance from La Grange Dam to Modesto Reservoir with ease, in much less time and much more efficiently.

It soon became apparent that the ditchtenders serving irrigated areas had to be more than patrolmen. They also had to control and allocate the use of water.

The enthusiasm for irrigating was such that some farmers used as much as 10 acre feet of water, four times that needed. Many applied water just to just drown gophers or to settle their newly-leveled lands. Farmers often helped themselves by raising gates to let the water flow. Only a few days after the start of the first irrigation season, things were so bad that ditchtenders put locks on the canal gates.

In June, 1904 the board of directors found itself forced to adopt a stringent set of rules.

Each irrigator would be notified 24 hours in advance when to start and stop taking water. He took it or lost it, whether it came night or day. Irrigating was limited to a maximum of one-and-a-half-hours per acre of land. The water was to be furnished in rotation, commencing at the lower end of each lateral or ditch. Only district personnel were allowed to open or shut the gates. Violations resulted in the denial of water. The whole system and its operation were under the control of a water superintendent appointed by and responsible directly to the board of directors.

That wasn't the only operational problem the MID faced.

George Hughes of Waterford was hailed into court in January 1904 for damming the district's lateral No. 1. Hughes contended that the district failed to deliver. When his team got stuck in the mud, he took matters into his own hands and put a dam across the canal over which his team could cross comfortably.

As the large grain farms were broken up into smaller parcels – the 2,400 acre Wood ranch, for instance, in 1904 was divided into family farms of 30 to 45 acres – the population of the county increased by 10 per cent each of the years 1904 through 1906.

The subsequent population growth in the district is reflected in the rapidly increasing number of assessment payers during the first 15 years after the arrival of water. By 1920 there were 4,146 on the assessment rolls, five and a half times the number when the district organized.

Almost immediately, alfalfa became the dominant crop. Although specific crop acreage statistics were not kept by the Modesto district until 1908, it is generally accepted that dairying was to become a major factor in the region's agricultural economy in that first year of irrigation. Modesto already had a creamery in operation and alfalfa was a quick, profitable cash crop to produce.

And Modesto district farmers had the example of their counterparts in Turlock to follow.

In 1904 the San Francisco Bulletin reported from Modesto the economic advantages of growing alfalfa, claiming that as a result of irrigation, 20 acres, yielding one-and-a-half tons per acre per cutting, could support 30 cows. Milked by one man earning a salary of \$35 a month, the herd would return from \$4.50 to \$7 per cow per month, with all the skim milk being returned to the dairyman. He fed this to his hogs and calves, the raising of which covered his daily operating expenses. The acquisition of livestock and land and readying it for irrigation amounted to an estimated \$350 per cow, an investment which could be amortized easily within a few years.

The acreage served by the Modesto district jumped 52 percent in its second year of irrigation with a total of 10,500 acres receiving water. Another 21 percent gain in irrigated acreage was recorded for 1906, a year in which many farmers began thinking about crops other than alfalfa. Stanislaus County statistics show that 1.5 million grape vines were set out and another 2 million were planted in nurseries that year. Also set out were nearly 200,000 fruit and nut trees – 80,000 peaches, 40,000 apricots, 30,000 figs, 20,000 almonds, 15,000 oranges and 10,000 other types of fruit.

In its first edition of 1907, the Stanislaus Weekly News looked back on the just-ended year with great enthusiasm, commenting:

The great wheat fields have been gradually diminishing for several years but last year was marked by a wonderful change. Like magic the wheat fields of a year ago have been transformed into great vineyards and orchards of fruit of all kinds, both deciduous and citrus...

The past year has been one of the great activity in land division; many large tracts have been subdivided and populated by new people...

One of the most significant results of the year is the great increase in diversified farming...Orchards and vineyards now dot every portion of the county, and are yielding such handsome profits that some farmers have decided to plant their entire acreage to fruit.

By 1907 the irrigated acreage had increased to 15,527 acres, two thirds of which were planted to alfalfa.

Many vineyards and orchards now were producing, however, having been planted earlier in anticipation of the delivery of water and irrigated by various means, including windmills. A crop pattern which ultimately would prevail throughout the district was established.

As early as 1902, for instance, McHenry's Bald Eagle Ranch was described as including 10,800 French prune trees, 2,500 Adriatic fig trees, 2,000 apricot trees, 72,000 muscatel grape vines and 4,000 pear, apple, olive, peach, almond and walnut trees.

As these and other orchard and vineyards came into production, a canning and packing plant was opened in Modesto in 1908. For the first time, Paradise Valley's fruit need not be exported to other areas for processing.

The Salida Colony, an extensive small farm subdivision of 30 to 60 acre parcels, was established in 1907 in the northern portion of the Modesto district.

In the winter of 1907- 08, two special rail coaches traveled throughout the nation displaying fruits grown in the Modesto and Turlock Irrigation Districts. They also carried a full complement of real estate agents promoting small farm and residential developments.

Irrigated acreage increased by 19 percent in 1908 and again 1909. Land sales boomed as local developers sponsored railroad excursions from Los Angeles to promote the sale of family farms in the Modesto and Turlock Irrigation Districts. The 1,500-acre Paradise ranch five miles west of Modesto was

divided into 40-acre parcels and sold for \$100 per acre. The same thing took place in 1910 at the 5,000-acre Root Ranch a short distance east of Modesto.

In 1909, 22,137 acres were irrigated, 16,307 of which were in alfalfa. The following year Stanislaus County became one of the leading dairy counties in California. The dairying industry had doubled in just five years, shading the dominance of wheat, once the king of crops. The census that year recorded 2,687 farms in Stanislaus County, an increase of 183 percent over the total 10 years earlier. The gain in the number of farms throughout the state in the first decade of the 20th Century was only 22 percent.

The population of Modesto – and the county – had doubled during the decade and the county seat was in the midst of a great building boom, installing sewer systems and even paving some of its streets. Residents were demanding that the city install street signs.

Modesto, which two decades earlier had a Barbary Coast reputation with such a murder record that San Francisco papers had reported the town “served up a man for breakfast every day,” developed culture. A choral society and an orchestra, which a couple of years later would offer selections from grand opera, were organized. And there was talk of starting a free library for the county.

In 1910 the Modesto and Turlock districts were joined by Modesto’s neighboring Oakdale and South San Joaquin Irrigation Districts and Fresno County’s Alta Irrigation Districts Association of California. Today that organization, now known as the Association of California Water Agencies, represents more than 300 districts which are responsible for approximately 85 percent of all water delivered in California to municipal and industrial consumers as well as agricultural users.

“Water, Wealth, Contentment, Health” became the theme of Modesto in 1911 when businessmen of the city installed the steel arch over I Street.

That also was the year in which the Modesto and Empire Traction Company started operations, connecting the Santa Fe Railroad line in Empire with the Southern Pacific tracks in Modesto to provide better rail access for shipping Modesto’s agricultural products to all areas of the nation.

A Southern Pacific rail depot was built in Modesto and the city council was negotiating with Tidewater Railroad a franchise that would permit Tidewater to lay tracks along 9th Street.

A 20,000-acre increase in irrigated land was recorded between 1910 and 1913, again with alfalfa responsible for virtually all of that gain. By that time, 41,716 of the 48,269 acres irrigated were planted to alfalfa.

The late Paul Christian, who for years taught history at Modesto Junior College and specialized in the history of the local irrigation district, described 1913 as the year “when irrigation gained the upper hand...it was no longer a period of trial and error.” More than half of the tillable land in the district was under irrigation. The land served by the MID had increased by 160 percent during the previous five-year period.

In comparison with today’s high-technology high-investment farming, a University of California economist advised in that period that with a capital investment of \$16,000, a farm should gross \$4,000 a year, \$2,000 of which would cover operating expenses, \$800 would pay interest on the investment and the remaining \$1,200 would be net income.

Before the end of the decade, Borden’s was to establish a major plant in Modesto and the Milk Producers Association, which grew to be one of the largest dairy cooperatives in the nation, was organized here.

As the second decade of the 20th Century ended, Stanislaus County had become the 27th largest producer of crops and livestock in the nation. Boasting some 4,000 automobiles, according to the county assessor’s report, Modesto was the fastest growing community in the San Joaquin Valley. Stanislaus County was second only to Los Angeles County in the pace of growth.

The county seat took great pride in having a most active Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, Progressive Businessmen’s Club, Women’s Improvement League, five grammar schools and a new high school. Soon one of California’s first junior colleges was to open and the city had just voted funds to develop a “modern aviation landing field.”

As Modesto entered the new decade of the 1920s, the building boom continued with 350 homes under construction. The Modesto and Empire Traction Company had developed a 100-acre industrial tract in the southeast section of town with 35 major industrial plants and packinghouses. Agriculture-related industries employed more than 2,000 people in the city and a new cannery was about to be built by the Tri/Valley Growers Association.

In 16 years nearly 60,000 Modesto district acres had been brought into irrigation; barely 6,000 acres were left in grain, which had covered 80,000 acres 20 years earlier. The agricultural economy had changed from dry farming of wheat on huge acreages to family farms producing a variety of products. The district had achieved worldwide recognition and a procession of foreign agricultural experts and other visitors began arriving to learn how it was done.

The opening of the decade of the 1920s was another turning point for the MID. The transition from primarily alfalfa to fruit, nut and vine crops, which already had approximately 20,000 acres in production, was gaining momentum.

The *Modesto Evening News* then described Modesto as having “grown out of the countrytown class and rapidly approaching the development of a large California city with a distribution center paralleled by a few San Joaquin Valley towns.”

The Modesto Irrigation District and the Paradise Valley which it served had reached the age of maturity.