

Placer County Citrus Colony

Gary Day



Colonists used the second story of a Loomis fruit shed for Sunday services until 1896 when they constructed this Citrus Colony Episcopal Church of all Saints on Delemere, now Delmar, Avenue near Rocklin. Joel Parker Whitney donated the land.

Auburn orchardist Moses Andrews originated South Placer County's citrus industry in 1871 when he first marketed commercial quality oranges from a tree that he had started from seed in 1860.

Andrews' tree started a movement among deciduous fruit growers in the Antelope Valley, along the Rocklin/Loomis /Penryn corridor, to convert some or all of their plantings to citrus, and Placer County's citrus sales boomed during the 1870s and 1880s. Thermals rising along the upper slopes of Sierra foothill ridges minimized frost damage and promoted early ripening, so area growers were able to

profit nicely as the early fruit drew high prices in eastern markets.

To the west, on the opposite side of Boulder Ridge, Joel Parker Whitney shipped citrus from the orchard on the slopes above the vineyard at his 20,000 acre Spring Valley Ranch. But in the mid 1880s Whitney developed bigger plans for Placer County's citrus business.

Whitney traveled to and from Europe often, once famously to the 1867 Paris Universal Worlds Fair and Exhibition as an ambassador from the Colorado territory, promoting investments in Colorado mines. He met Lucy Chadwick in England in the late 1870's and brought her to the ranch, marrying her in Sacramento in 1881.

The couple's affinity for English Society inspired Whitney, in the mid 1880s, to make the ranch his home and to convert about 40 acres into an estate worthy of an English baron. He built a twenty-room mansion called The Oaks and connected it to downtown Rocklin over granite bridges, some with Roman arches in the style of bridges of the English countryside. He imported English Shire work horses, built tennis courts and a golf course, bred greyhounds for fox hunts (substituting rabbits) and otherwise brought English style living to the ranch. His next project was to bring Lucy's countrymen and their English society to the area.

In 1888 he set aside 3025 acres in the northeast corner of the ranch, including the entire four mile length of Clover Valley, and enlisted landowners in the Antelope Valley to set aside about 4000 additional acres. On April 2, 1888 the group filed for incorporation as the Placer County Citrus Colony for the purpose of selling 10 acre citrus ranches, mainly to English gentlemen. Since hydraulic gold mining was declining in the late 1880s, waterways were unclogging and Whitney made arrangements to extend the Birdsall Irrigation Ditch into colony lands to ensure that the orchards of his English friends had sufficient water.

By 1890 about twelve wealthy English families had arrived. They built fine homes and filled them with expensive furniture and art work. They cleared land and planted both citrus and deciduous fruit, mainly with hired labor.

By 1892 Citrus Colony orchard yields were bringing profits and by 1893 there were more than 125 residents in the colony.

Whitney and his friends from England wanted the social life of affluent English families, so in 1890 Whitney bought a Frenchman's granite chateau on the eastern slope of Boulder Ridge overlooking the Antelope Valley, and converted it to a clubhouse, a gathering place for the colony's Citrus Colony

Club. Members built tennis courts and a cricket field in front near Delemere (now Delmar) Avenue. The clubhouse was a place to meet informally and to play parlor games, especially on Wednesdays and Sundays. Concerts featuring music of England were popular, especially smoking concerts where the ladies allowed the gentlemen to smoke during the performances. Club members celebrated for three days in June 1897 for the Diamond Jubilee of British Queen Victoria.

The clubhouse was also headquarters for vigorous sports such as tennis, cricket, soccer, and rugby. In 1896 the club fielded a state champion soccer team. In 1895 and 1897 the colony's cricket team was unbeaten in the state.

But the good times didn't last. Fruit sales slowed significantly in late 1893 with the start of the depression of the mid 1890s, and although immigration from England continued until late in the decade, some colonists started to abandon their investments.

Tough financial times in the colony highlighted the colonists' indolent lifestyles and their lack of skill in their orchards. As fruit prices declined, they were unable to compete successfully with more established and harder working farmers outside of the Colony.

Also, by the late 1890's malaria was afoot in the area. Farmers knew of the vector but methods for control were not fully effective. By 1899 colonists were fleeing, many back to England. The water that had brought a promising future for South Placer County agriculture had also brought the mosquitoes that doomed the colony.

Gradually the few remaining colonists and local farmers returned the orchards to mainly deciduous fruit production and by 1905 the colony was defunct, dissolved by the state for failure to pay taxes.

Today much of the citrus colony area is under public use or under development with housing and businesses. The land is too valuable to justify large scale commercial fruit farming, however several gentleman farmers grow, and some profit from, deciduous fruits and frost resistant citrus like mandarin oranges.

The Citrus Colony clubhouse is now a residence on Delmar Avenue. Citrus grove terracing is still visible behind on Boulder Ridge. Terracing and a few citrus trees are still visible on the slopes above Whitney's vineyard, below and west of Rocklin's Boulder Ridge Park. A Clover Valley resident saw what might have been the valley's last colony citrus tree yield to frost in the 1970s.

Moses Andrew's tree started South Placer County's citrus industry, but from 1888 until 1905 Joel Parker Whitney and his Placer County Citrus Colony brought us one of the most colorful periods in the development of California agriculture.

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