

## **The Citrus Industry in Orange County**

For many years, oranges and Orange County were synonymous. While never our only crop, oranges dominated local agriculture from the 1890s to the 1950s.

Dr. W.N. Hardin of Anaheim is usually credited with planting the first local orange trees in 1870. A number of different varieties were tried in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and while Navel Oranges were popular in the early days, the Valencia Orange eventually came to dominate the area. Navels ripen in the winter, while Valencias are harvested from May to November. The first commercial Valencia grove here was planted in 1875 on what is now the site of California State University Fullerton.

The market for local citrus crops was limited until good railroad connections and refrigerated cars became available. A blight that swept the local vineyards in the late 1880s prompted other ranchers to switch from grapes to citrus. By 1915, there were already over 20,000 acres of orange groves here, and by 1936 Orange County was producing one-sixth of the nation's Valencia crop, which generated two-thirds of the county's agricultural income.

Lemons, limes, grapefruit, and other varieties of citrus fruit were also grown here. Grapefruit and limes were never very successful, but lemons did well in some areas. During the 1930s and '40s, there were about 8,000 acres of lemon groves in the county, and a few packing houses were devoted entirely to lemons, including the Central Lemon Association in Villa Park.

Originally, each individual grower had to pick, pack, ship, and market their own crop, or sell it at reduced rates through commission agents representing large wholesalers. In the 1880s and '90s, growers began joining together to form cooperative packing and marketing associations to better control the industry. By the 1930s, there were more than 40 local packing houses stretching from one end of the county to the other. In just the area in and around Orange, there were eleven packing houses, including the Santiago Orange Growers Association, one of the busiest orange packing houses in the state.

Most of the local packing houses were members of the Southern California Fruit Exchange (better known by their trademark, Sunkist). Others belonged to the Mutual Orange Distributors (MOD) or other smaller organizations. Sunkist, and the other regional organizations, sponsored major advertising campaigns across the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century that helped to transform oranges and orange juice from a holiday treat to an everyday item.

Brightly colored citrus labels were part of the promotional campaign. Each packing house used several different labels to indicate the various grades of fruit. Their bright colors, distinctive designs, and large lettering made it easy for wholesale buyers to spot them at auction sales.

Oranges are susceptible to a number of insect pests and diseases, which growers had to fight in a variety of ways, including fumigation with hydrocyanic acid. Freezing temperature is another danger. On cold nights, oil was burned in "smudge pots" to keep the fruit from freezing. In later years, some growers used large fans to circulate the air and protect their groves.

But the worst citrus disease was the Quick Decline, a virus that began to infect local groves in the 1940s and killed off trees by the thousands. Orange County's rapid growth in the 1950s and '60s added other challenges for local growers, including the rising costs of land, water, and taxes. More and more groves were pulled out to make way for subdivisions.

Citrus acreage in Orange County reached its peak in 1948, with 67,263 acres in Valencias alone – more than five million trees. As of 2004, less than 100 acres of citrus were still being harvested here. Villa Park Orchards Association, the last remaining packing house in Orange County, is slated to move their operations to Ventura County in the near future. Orange County's citrus industry will soon be just a memory.