

# El Cajon Valley Grapes Reputed Best Quality

(This the 20th in a series telling the history of El Cajon Valley. Herewith is related the introduction of the grape industry into the Valley.)

By W. S. Head

Many newcomers who have their first look at the Valley comment on the many vineyards, for even today, practically every open field shows some sign of the industry that really put El Cajon on the map.

The soil and climate of the Valley was recognized by the Mission Padres more than 115 years ago as ideal for the grape. As we stated in the fifth article of this series, the Padres planted and maintained some 8,000 vines as early as 1832.

Old timers of the last century like to tell this amusing story. It seems that there was the inevitable John Brown who lived in Old Town. During a spring of the 1850's, Brown came upon the Padre's vineyards. He was fascinated by the great amount and quality of fruit which would ripen soon. Being an enterprising fellow, he returned to his home and gathered up vats, presses and other such material necessary for the making of wine. He hired two Indians to assist him, then returned to the Valley.

Brown harvested the Padre's grapes and made his wine on the spot. When he returned to Old Town with his product, local connoisseurs declared it the finest wine they had ever tasted. On how long he continued to do this, there seems to be no further information.

But back to the grape story of the Valley.

After George A. Cowles had discovered that the Muscat-Alexander was the right grape for the area, the planting of grapes spread rapidly. According to an official report in the San Diego Union on January 16, 1877, there were less than 5000 vines under cultivation, with a predominate crop of wheat. But just 11 years later, in 1888, there were better than 3000 acres in grapes, with perhaps as many as 21 million vines!

There was another event in 1882

which had much to do with the rapid expansion of the grape industry here. An R. G. Clark, who it appears was somewhat of an abstainer, did not do like most of the local farmers and make his own wine. Instead he wished to keep the fruit for use throughout the entire year. He started experimenting with the processing of his grapes to raisins. Almost immediately, it was recognized that here was what the farmers wanted. The muscat grape made an excellent high quality raisin. And it is to this Mr. Clark that we must give credit for what, in the next 20 years, became a three quarter million dollar industry.

The raisin industry skyrocketed. A company was formed, known as the El Cajon Vineyard Company. A Doctor R. E. Johnson was made president and C. S. Marshall was the Sec-Treasurer. Streets in the Valley have been named after both of these men. This company built a raisin de-stemming plant along the tracks of the new Railroad, and processed the grapes for packing and shipping. In the year of 1894, better than 15 car loads of raisins were shipped out of the Valley.

There was much written of the El Cajon raisins, and much praise was made of their quality. One report from a Boston firm told of a top price of \$1.75 was being paid for a box of this fruit. (The standard price for other raisins was about \$.95) Another firm in England wrote, saying the raisins were of a finer quality than those imported from Spain and Italy.

It is more or less a fact that the raisin can be credited for the great land boom of 1888-91. When a person has read some of the reports which came out of the valley of the investment and the rapid profit realized, it was a natural that many flocked here to buy into this paradise.

Let us take for example this report of J. P. R. Hall made over a five year period. He arrived in the Valley in the spring of 1884 and purchased a 40 acre tract of land in 1886. In the Fall of that year he planted 32 acres of grapes at the insistence of his new friend Cowles. Here is a report of his gross receipts — "1889-\$300; 1890-\$1200; 1891-\$1500; 1892-\$1700; 1893-\$1500 (approximately)."

During this period, Hall did not irrigate. His yearly expenses ran to \$22 per acre, plus a total of \$25.30 for drying trays and other raisin making equipment.

When people saw such accounts that showed a profit of about \$5,000 over such a short period of time, it did not take long for every one who could afford it to make a dash for the Valley.

There is one final note on the grape story. In the latter part of the 1880's and for some time after that, the fresh grapes were being shipped out of the Valley. However, the farmer found that when the grapes had been picked and put into wagons for hauling to the processing plant, the sun would cause the sugar content to increase. This in turn would hasten the spoiling of the grape while in transit in refrigerated cars.

A solution to the problem was made by the famous horticulturist of the San Diego Balboa Park, Kate Sessions. She planted olive trees along the main roadways. They were slanted towards the road center from either side. Her contention was that they would offer ample shade in time, this protecting the fruit. However, long before these trees grew to their full usefulness, the truck had replaced the slow wagon and the grape industry had given away to the many homes here today. This accounts for the several double rows of olive trees which can be seen throughout the Valley even today.