



EDITOR'S COLUMN

"I know of no pursuit in which more real and important services can be rendered to any country than by improving its agriculture, its breed of useful animals, and other branches of a husbandman's cares" - George Washington

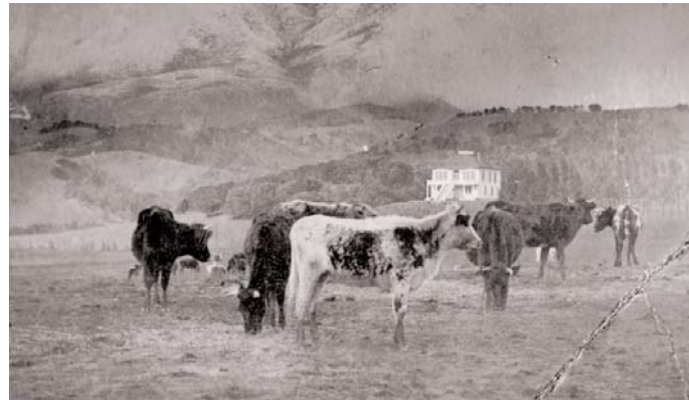
Two hundred and fifty years ago our first president made the above comment. A hundred and fifty years ago agriculture as we know it began its long journey here in Marin County. You can still find a few old-timers around who can remember some of this history from their grandfathers or grandmothers, and this history is the bedrock of our traditional family farming community.

Researching our agricultural heritage sparks a few observations. The first is that there is a long-standing theme of grass, cows, milk, and livestock, from the first Mexican cattle raised for hides and tallow, to today's specialized dairy and beef breeds. The second is a theme of ever-changing diversification, innovation and experimentation. History itself demands change and adaptation. For instance, our farms and ranches supported a wider range of crops and practices until World War II,

"Editor" continued on page 4

Marin County Agriculture: 185 Years of Family Farming

Our agrarian landscape in Marin is changing, with some operations actually thriving. Most operators work their own land, and leases are usually between friends and family, rather than on a corporate model. Virtually all of our farms and ranches can be called family farms. The United States Department of Agriculture defines "family



By 1860, dairy, beef, and crop farming was being undertaken by Easterners who came West for the Gold Rush and were soon joined by Irish, Swiss and other immigrants.

farm" as a farm that earns no more than \$250,000 annually. There are no factory farms. All of our row and tree crop farms are certified organic. We produce some of the finest shellfish anywhere. Our dairy herds spend months on pasture producing superior fresh milk and milk products. Our beef operations are known for their quality genetics and health, and we are becoming known for our innovations and overall sustainability. Support for agriculture is widespread, with programs like the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, Marin Organic, and the Marin Farm Bureau. We work closely with the county Agricultural Commissioner's office on programs like Marin Organic Certified Agriculture, the Grass-fed Livestock Certification Program, and the Livestock Predator Protection Program. We also work with the Marin Resource Conservation District and producers to preserve and restore waterways. In short, producers and agricultural support organizations are working hard to keep our farming landscapes viable and productive. Challenges exist, no doubt, but progress is under way. How did we get here?

Miwoks, Spanish and Mexican settlers

The first stewards of the land were the Miwok, who "cultivated" wild plants through burning and harvesting. They cleared underbrush through ecologically wise management to enhance the grasslands for the large population of ungulates. Around 1820 the Spanish founded the missions and the first cattle ranches, recruiting the Miwok as vaqueros. In 1830 the Spanish began granting land to Mexican settlers, and more cattle began to graze alongside the native deer and elk on the lush grasslands of Marin. Then came the Gold Rush, and a change in our agriculture. Marin ranchers

"Farming" continued on page 2

185 YEARS OF FAMILY FARMING

"Farming," continued from page 1

drove their cattle, which were used for hides and tallow, to the Sierra to feed hungry miners, thus depleting the cattle population. In the early 1860s a California drought decreased available forage, causing the death of approximately 300,000 cattle.

Swiss, Irish, and Portuguese bring dairy



Sweetser and DeLong planted 44,000 fruit trees and 8,000 vines in Novato.

Then, from the east, came entrepreneurs who added crop farming and dairy to the new mix. In 1856 Joseph B. Sweetser and Frank DeLong planted 44,000 fruit trees and 8,000 grape vines in Novato.

Irish, Portuguese, and Swiss immigrants found their way to Marin and began to develop the fledgling dairy business, milking small herds by hand, and traveling miles over bumpy roads to get their milk to the "stations," which turned the white gold into butter and cheese. The entrepreneurs were on a roll and realized that dairying was the future. By 1860 Marin was the largest dairy producer in California, providing one-fourth of the state's butter.



The Northern Pacific Railroad station in Point Reyes Station, circa 1870, one of many stops along the north coast.

Trains, schooners, butter, and potatoes

More Irish began to arrive at this time and brought with them potato farming. In 1860 Marin was fourth in the state for spud production. As usual, innovation followed. The need to transport the potatoes, butter, and other foodstuffs spurred the development of the schooner fleets into Drake's and Tomales bays to get product to the lucrative San Francisco market. In 1870 the North Pacific Railroad, with stops in Tomales and Point Reyes, began connecting coastal towns to the city, moving diverse agricultural products. In

185 YEARS OF FAMILY FARMING

1875 aquaculture was introduced with an oyster operation at Millerton Point on Tomales Bay. By 1890 dairying became the principal agricultural activity. Virtually every farm was a dairy, with hogs and row crops for ranch use.

Farming spreads around the county

The turn of the century brought the first agricultural support organizations. In 1920 the University of California sent M. B. Boissevain to Marin as the first farm advisor, and the



800 acres of peas were grown above Drake's Bay in 1938.

Farm Bureau was established in 1921. The first agricultural commissioner was already on board.

From 1920 to World War II, crop farming spread and flourished in all parts of Marin. Farming was in its heyday, with silage, corn, apples, and vegetables dominating the crop reports of this period. The central part of the county supported silage growing, with the principal crops being corn, sunflowers, peas, and barley. Potatoes remained a popular crop in the Tomales area, along with winter barley. In the Novato and San Rafael areas, tree fruit and grapes covered 600 acres. By 1938 West Marin and the Point Reyes Peninsula were harboring 900 acres of dry-farmed artichokes and 800 acres of peas.

The first agricultural commissioner was already on board.

World War II, diminished cropping and development

The war and a changing agricultural landscape put an end to most of the row crop farming in Marin. Some tree fruit and poultry remained in Novato, but suburban growth soon consumed the orchards and chicken houses, and row crops fell away.

By 1950, dairy was still the predominant form of agriculture with 200 dairies in production. The creation of the Point Reyes National Seashore in the 1970s and market forces influenced the switch from dairy to beef cattle operations, as our agricultural diversity declined. By the 1950s, field and row crops disappeared entirely from the crop report.



By 1950, with improved refrigerated hauling technology, dairy was king in Marin, as the population increased.

Dairy, beef, and sheep filled the landscape.

Organic farming, dairy and cheesemaking, and conservation land policy

In 1971 Warren Weber began farming organically in Bolinas, and Star Route Farms became the first organically certified farm in California. This same year the county adopted A-60 zoning to protect farmland from development, and in 1980 the Marin Agricultural Land Trust was formed to respond to the growing need for farmland conservation. Dairies continued their



Albert Straus and milk products from the Straus Family Creamery.

decline, with more and more operators switching to beef production.

In 1994 Albert Straus pioneered organic dairying by converting his herd to become the first certified organic dairy west of the Mississippi, and creating the Straus Family Creamery. This bold act set the stage for processors like Cowgirl Creamery to produce specialty organic cheeses and the Giacomini Family to create



Bob Giacomini and the family's farmstead cheese.

Point Reyes Original Blue Cheese, thus completing a circle, echoing Bob Giacomini's words "what goes 'round, comes 'round."

Diversification and innovation

Unusually low prices for beef and milk at this time caused producers to look for ways to continue farming. Russell Sartori transformed his fourth-generation dairy into organic strawberries. The Doughty dairy planted vines and began making wine. The Gale Ranch began to experiment with grass-fed cattle. Randy Lafranchi from



Three acres of organic strawberries bloomed on the Sartori Ranch in 2002.

Nicasio planted six acres of organic vegetables and strawberries.

Organic farming began to expand in West Marin, and in 1999 Marin Organic was formed by a dedicated group of local producers with assistance from Ellie Rilla from U.C. Cooperative Extension. In 2001 the Agricultural Commissioner's office, with Stacy Carlsen and Anita Sauber, became the first civic government accredited certifier of organic agriculture in the United States.



Stacy Carlsen and Anita Sauber

Today and tomorrow

Today, farm diversification is well under way. Rancher Kevin Lunny has certified 1600 acres of his pasture and ranch organic, runs 150 organic and grass-fed cattle along with his conventional herd, has planted four acres of organic heirloom artichokes, and has taken over a sustainably managed aquaculture enterprise. Liz Griffin and Don Bagley are experimenting with grass-fed hogs, pastured organic eggs, and grass-fed beef. David Evans from historic H Ranch continues to bring grass-fed beef to the local community. More row crop operations are opening up, along with processed food enterprises. Producers are realizing that previous generations sometimes had to go outside the box to stay viable, and are following suit.

The next generation

Today we are entering another period of change. Smaller,



Jolynn Mendoza

high-value operations are springing up to service an increasingly hungry Bay Area populace. The larger, traditional family farms are beginning to diversify. Dairies and beef operations are certifying pastures as organic, perhaps readying for a complete herd transition and diversification. Talented and dedicated young farmers like Jolynn Mendoza, Julie Evans, and others are staying on the farm and prospering.

The experience and boldness of previous generations help us to envision the future. Those before us also faced challenges and obstacles, and their courage and inventiveness can help guide us into another phase of history in the legacy of Marin County agriculture.

"Editor" continued from page 1

when the peas, artichokes, fruit trees, corn, and sunflower silage and hog businesses declined, and we entered the post-war "tri-culture" of dairy, beef, and sheep. The crop reports from this period don't even mention field crops.

Crops and products once long gone are suddenly returning. Cheese, butter, artichokes, row crops, hogs, and poultry are again grown on our farms and ranches. The innovations of the past are returning to life.

Looking at the agricultural timeline of Marin reveals that we have gone through periods of expanding innovation and diversification - and also contraction. Today we are on the threshold of another burst of diversification and change. Consumers are becoming more aware that the food produced here in their own backyard has value beyond the economic marketplace. The food from the farm or ranch down the road is connected to their lives.

Our agricultural community is well-placed to meet these changes and shifts; indeed, it's in our history.

- Steve Quirt, Editor

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News from Marin County Farms, Ranches and Producers

- ☞ UC Cooperative Extension and the Renewable Energy Team from Marin County government will be organizing a workshop for agricultural operators interested in renewable energy systems. The talk will cover available renewable energy systems and incentives. Go to www.growninmarin.org for more information.
- ☞ Liz Milazzo, farm manager at Green Gulch Farm, is leaving her position and looking for an opportunity to manage an organic farm or garden in Marin, or partner in the diversification of an existing operation. Contact her at (415) 381-5121 or Lizmilazzo@yahoo.com.
- ☞ Chinese Medicinal Herbs, an organic farm and nursery, is seeking intern applications for 2006. The applicant should have some knowledge of Chinese herbs and their cultivation. Non-monetary exchange.. Contact Peggy Schafer, pschafer@sonic.net or (707) 765-9611.
- ☞ Straus Family Creamery would like to invite you to participate in an online survey about organic foods and organic dairy products, to help better understand the organic marketplace. To participate in this survey click on the link below.
<http://v2.decipherinc.com/survey/sfc/sfc05001?list=2>
- ☞ UC Cooperative Extension is organizing a workshop on raspberry and blackberry growing on March 30, 2006, from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m at the Dance Palace Community Center in Point Reyes Station. More information will be posted on the website, www.growninmarin.org soon.

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