

History of Butte County's Citrus Industry and the Mother Orange Tree

Joseph H. Connell, UC Cooperative Extension Citrus Farm Advisor

The Mother Orange tree was planted east of Oroville in 1856 near the Bidwell Bar suspension bridge by Judge Joseph Lewis who purchased three sweet orange seedlings from Jesse Morrill in Sacramento. The tree was moved from the north end of the bridge to the south end due to the threat of high water in 1862. Following the success of the Mother Orange, the Butte County Assessor's figures showed that by 1863, 75 acres of orange trees had been planted in the county.

The first navel oranges were planted in Butte County in 1880. The Thermalito Citrus Colony was founded in 1884 followed by the Oroville Citrus Association in 1886. Butte County won first prize in 1885 for the best exhibit in the First Annual Citrus Fair held in Sacramento and Oroville hosted subsequent Annual State Citrus Fairs in both 1887 and 1888. Oroville later hosted an Orange and Olive Exposition in an exposition building built at the site of the current Oroville Municipal Auditorium.

On April 28, 1888, the Chico Weekly Chronicle reported that 50,000 orange trees had been planted in Oroville, 20,000 trees in the Palermo/Thermalito area and another 10,000 near Oroville (approximately 900 acres).

Butte County won first prize once again in 1892 for the best exhibit at the State Citrus Fair held in San Francisco. On December 12 of that year, Butte County growers shipped their first railroad car of oranges out of the state.

According to the Butte County Historical Society, there were 3,300 acres of citrus in Butte County by 1900 and the Oroville Mercury reported that 435 rail cars of citrus were shipped that year. The Butte County Citrus Association was organized in 1905 and by 1912 the Oroville Daily Mercury reported that Butte County's production of oranges was about 800 rail cars per season shipped from four packing houses in the area. This acreage and production appears to have continued until the area was struck by a severe freeze in 1932.

By 1947 the Butte County Agricultural Crop Report indicated that navel oranges occupied 2,200 acres in the county while the Butte County Historical Society reported that a "huge citrus crop" of 172,326 boxes had filled 373 freight cars.

By 1967 the Agricultural Commissioner's Agricultural Crop Report indicated the local industry had declined to 376 acres of oranges and 37 acres of Satsuma mandarins. The citrus marketing order also contributed to the local industry's decline when our small district was included in the "prorate" system in 1969. The last packing house in Butte County located in the Palermo area closed in 1971.

Table 1. History of the citrus acreage in Butte County.

Year	1863	1888	1900	1947	1967	1977	1987	1997	2007
Oranges	75	900	3,300	2,200	376	284	236	220	162
Mandarins	-----	-----	-----	10	37	55	55	56	60

The decline in the local citrus industry has continued through the four decades since the 1960's hastened by severe freezes in 1972 and 1990 followed by a milder freeze in 1998. Today, our local

citrus industry is small but persistent. Navel oranges are picked and trucked to the San Joaquin Valley for packing while the Satsuma mandarins (primarily Owari but some Dobashi beni and Okitsu wase) are processed through on-farm packing operations and sold to the public through direct sales, mail order, and through farmers markets.

In its long life, the Mother Orange tree has been threatened by fire, flood, and has also suffered decline related to severe freezes. Following the 1990 and 1998 freezes the tree was in such tough shape that its survival was in question.

Working together in the fall of 2001, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Butte County Historical Society and Butte County Cooperative Extension collected budwood from the Mother Orange tree and shipped it to Dr. David Gumpf at U.C. Riverside who had agreed to propagate the tree. John Bash of the Citrus Clonal Protection Program propagated four new trees on Carrizo citrange rootstock using these buds from the Mother Orange. Two of the trees were retained in the U.C. Riverside Citrus Variety Collection and the other two trees were planted in March 2004 in Butte County. One tree was planted by the City of Oroville Parks Department in the orange grove next to the Lott home in Sank Park. The second tree was planted next to the Butte County Historical Society Museum in Oroville. An additional tree locally propagated at the same time on Carrizo citrange rootstock was planted at the Far West Heritage Association's Patrick Ranch on the Midway south of Chico.

With additional care from the partners mentioned above, the Mother Orange tree has been recovering from the freeze damage of the 1990s and today the tree is in much better shape. Through careful irrigation and fertilization its canopy is filling out and it is producing oranges once again. Extra efforts are now made to protect the tree from winter freeze damage. In May 2006 on its 150th anniversary the Mother Orange tree of Butte County was officially granted status as California Registered Historical Landmark No. 1043. With continued care, this forerunner of our modern citrus industry will live on indefinitely providing an opportunity for citizens to marvel at one of our early pioneers.

