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# La Peninsula

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**Agriculture in San Mateo County**

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**Front Cover:** Cows at the Millbrae Dairy, 1915. Photo by A.G.C. Hahn.

### **Our Vision**

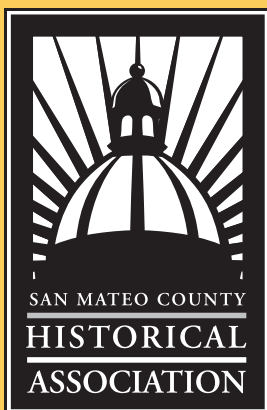
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# Agricultural Developments in San Mateo County

by William H. Moebus



Harvest time at Asa Hull's farm in the San Carlos area.

I. G. Knowles founded one of the first dairies on the Peninsula in 1853, where Daly City is now located; he was the first dairyman to ship milk to San Francisco. By 1858, with the market demands growing, more dairies were started, and the San Mateo region came into prominence as a milk-producing county.

An incident which took place in San Francisco is quite typical of the type of dairying carried on in the early '50s, and is also typical of how some of these businesses were founded. Jacob Wright Harlan, who crossed the plains and arrived in California in 1845, started his milk route in San Francisco in 1850. In his book, *California, '46 to '88* he tells the following story: "My uncle...came to the city about March 15, 1850. He bought two lots on Green Street, between Stockton and DuPont Streets, from Henry Williams and others and agreed to pay seven thousand dollars for them. These lots had some improvements on them. Afterwards he could not make the payments and Joel and I took the property off his hands and paid the price to Williams and his partners. The old gentleman had brought to the city some fine cows which he had driven across the plains in 1846. There were few such cows in California then. I suggested to Joel that we should buy eight of these cows and engage in selling milk in connection with our livery business. To this he agreed, and we bought the eight cows for eight hundred dollars and employed Charles Gough to sell the milk for us, paying him one hundred and fifty dollars a month.

## Editor's Note

William H. Moebus wrote this history of agriculture in San Mateo County for a class at San Mateo Junior College in June of 1942. It was awarded second place that year in the Kirkbride Contest. Sponsored by Charles Kirkbride, the second president of the San Mateo County Historical Association, the Kirkbride Contest awarded prizes for outstanding research papers in San Mateo County history. The student papers submitted for the Kirkbride Contest became part of the Association's collection.

The paper has been edited for this publication to focus on post-Gold Rush history. The complete research paper is available in the Association's Archives.





Green Oaks, Isaac Steele's dairy, was located at Año Nuevo.



Mill used at the Sneath Dairy to grind grain for the cows. By the time this photo was taken c. 1942, the building was in disrepair.

"Gough fitted himself for this business with an old one-eyed, grey horse and a rather rough looking saddle. Upon the cabeza he hung two two-and-a-half gallon tin cans, one on each side, and also three tin measures. When he started on his milk-selling expedition on his own skeleton of a horse, and with his tin cans and measures jangling about him, Gough was a comical sight. But it paid. When he had exhausted the milk in his cans he would return and fill up again. We did not water the milk, but sold it strictly as it came from the cows. On the evening of his first day when he returned home he counted the money which he had collected for the milk. It amounted to fifty dollars. We had been selling the milk for four dollars a gallon. This showed that we had struck into a new road to money making, and we followed it up." This story shows that dairying in the early days provided quite an incentive for the farmer who had enough capital to engage in the business.

As dairying grew in the Bay Area, milk-producing methods were improved. In fact, we find some elaborate dairies in operation, and a good percentage of them in San Mateo County. In 1857, the Steele Brothers, Isaac and R. E., were engaged in dairying at Point Reyes, but in 1862, they founded a dairy on land near Pescadero which they rented from Clark and Coburn, partners of Horace Gushee and Charles Wilson. Later, in 1864, while another brother was fighting in the Civil War, the Steele Brothers made a huge cheese which weighed about two tons, and which, after being exhibited at San Francisco, was auctioned off for \$2,820. The proceeds from this cheese were donated to the Sanitary Commission, now the Red Cross.<sup>1</sup>

The R.G. Sneath Dairy illustrates the improvement of the Peninsula's dairies by the 1870s. The Sneath Dairy, of today's San Bruno, ranged about four by three and one-half miles in size, comprising about 2,500 acres. Natural springs provided waterpower which was harnessed to operate a large grinding mill. Wind was also used for power, and a steam engine was kept for emergency use in case both water and wind power should fail. A barn, 248 by 48 feet, three stories high in the center section, housed the milking operations and an ample supply of hay. There was also a well-equipped blacksmith shop, a cooling house where the milk was cooled after straining and a storage space where it was kept cool until it was delivered. This dairy also possessed a separate work area where the milk-can washing and sterilizing took place. The milk from the Sneath Dairy was hauled to San Francisco to a plant at 835 Howard Street by a six-mule team, and then taken out on the milk routes in the city. It is also interesting to note that "Cloudy," a Jersey calf, has the distinction of being California's first registered purebred animal and

was born on the R. G. Sneath dairy in San Mateo County in 1873.<sup>2</sup>

Another dairy of prominence during this period was Millbrae Dairy, which is still operating today [1942], and has been, at all times, one of the largest in the county. Millbrae Dairy has long been noted for breeding fine purebred Holstein Cattle and for shipping them all over the world. Other dairies of importance in the late '70s were: Willowside Dairy Farm, located north of Pescadero, and owned by R. H. Brown; Baden Dairy, between Colma and San Bruno, where the Baden Kennels are now [today's South San Francisco], founded in 1871 by Robert Ashbury; these important dairies were engaged in supplying San Francisco with a good percentage of its milk.

Dairying is still carried on to quite an extent in San Mateo County, and it rates as one of the leading industries in agricultural income [1942]. In 1930, there were 17,533 head of livestock in the county, which was an increase of 5,500 head over 1920. Of the first figure, 9,612 head were dairy cattle. From the 1940 crop and livestock report, it is shown that there are 13,576 head of dairy cattle in the county, which indicates that the intensity of the industry is still on the increase [1942]. There is also a marked improvement in the type of dairy cattle being raised, which is evident in the figures that represent the value of the dairy products marketed (\$911,168) according to the 1940 report.<sup>3</sup>

With the coming of the San Francisco & San Jose Railroad in 1863, and later with other improved transportation facilities, small crop farming or truck farming became another industry of importance in San Mateo County. In 1868, Henry Dobbel of Alameda purchased 907 acres in the vicinity of Purisima on the San Mateo County Coastside and is said to have erected the finest house in the settlement. In 1878, he planted 900 acres of potatoes, and, although it is recorded that the venture was an unsatisfactory one, it was no doubt one of the first attempts at truck farming in the county.<sup>4</sup> Later, about 1890, Dante Dianda of El Granada, grew the first artichokes for commercial purposes.<sup>5</sup> This was the start of an industry which is still a thriving source of agricultural income for San Mateo County. The artichoke industry is one we may well feel proud to have in the county since the "chokes" will only grow in land and climates especially suited to their needs. Market conditions, at first local and then national, prompted the spread of the raising of "chokes" all along the Coastside of the county – a trend which has had a lasting effect. Today, [1942] there are about 3,000 acres near Half Moon Bay given over to growing artichokes.<sup>6</sup>

The soil found in San Mateo County, coupled with the cool damp climate along the coast, make possible the growing of many other



Millbrae Dairy, located on the Mills estate, was for many years one of the largest milk producing institutions in California noted for its up-to-date equipment. Cows next to the barn, 1915. Photo by A.G.C. Hahn.



Uccelli's vegetable farm in South San Francisco.



Millbrae flower growing hot houses of "King" Dal Don, 1929. Photo by Ted Dal Don.

### 1940 Crop Statistics

Crop	Acreage	Value
1. Peas	5,351	\$401,325
2. Lettuce	1,430	\$352,275
3. Artichokes	2,356	\$309,225
4. Brussels Sprouts	2,071	\$260,169
5. Cabbage	1,038	\$196,182

Total value for the five leading vegetable crops was \$1,519,176. This total represented only about one-half of the total income from vegetables (\$2,454,438). This indicated the wide diversification of truck-farming in the county, since miscellaneous crops made up nearly half of the two million dollar income from vegetables.

*Agricultural Crop Report 1940* (San Mateo County: San Mateo County Department of Agriculture, 1941), 1.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Nellie Van De Grift Sanchez, *Spanish Arcadia* (Los Angeles: Powell Publishing, 1929), 71-72.

<sup>2</sup> *History of San Mateo County* (San Francisco: B. F. Alley, 1883), 176 & 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Agricultural Crop Report 1940* (San Mateo County: San Mateo County Department of Agriculture, 1941), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Mildred Booker Hoover, Hero Eugene Rensch and Ethel Grace Rensch, *Historic Spots in California* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1937), 405.

<sup>5</sup> *Half Moon Bay Review*, October 26, 1939.

<sup>6</sup> San Mateo County Chamber of Commerce, *Peninsula Passport* (San Mateo: San Mateo Times, c. 1940), 2.

<sup>7</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 28, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

varieties of vegetables. A glance at the 1940 crop report [shown left] indicates that San Mateo County may boast of crop diversification in vegetables, equaled by few if any other counties in the state.

Another agricultural industry of more recent origin has been developed in San Mateo County – namely the floral industry. The founding of this industry dates back to 1884, when Enomoto Brothers of Redwood City grew the first chrysanthemums to be grown in America. A trial period followed. Many varieties were experimented with under glass, and it was not until 1904 that H. L. Goertzchain of Redwood City introduced cheesecloth cultivation. This method was at once recognized as superior to any heretofore employed, and in 1907, Enomoto Brothers began an extensive cultivation of chrysanthemums under cheesecloth in Redwood City for the sole purpose of starting a shipping business. In was in 1913 that Sadakasu Enomoto astounded the flower world by successfully shipping a carload of Turner Chrysanthemums to New Orleans for the famed All Saints Day Celebration. This was the beginning of San Mateo County's most important agricultural industry. In 1940, the floral industry brought an income of \$2,712,223, to lead easily all agricultural production in San Mateo County.<sup>7</sup>

As a final step in illustrating San Mateo County's agricultural standing, or wealth, one may note the total value of all farms is \$157 per acre [1940], which rates San Mateo County sixth in the state – a quite favorable position.<sup>8</sup>



Chrysanthmums at the San Mateo Floral Fiesta, c. 1940



# Agriculture Trends: Past, Present and Future

by Fred Crowder



Farmland in the Colma Valley, 1915. Photo by A.G.C. Hahn

It is difficult to look at the dense housing on the Bayside of San Mateo County and imagine farms once dominated the landscape. The San Mateo County History Museum's agricultural exhibit, *Plowing Ahead*, has many pictures that show a San Mateo County Bayside that was once open landscapes with farms and ranches, broken by an occasional house, small community, or a tall line of wind break trees.

Historically, agriculture was central to every community's well-being as perishable fruits, vegetables and meat were locally produced and purchased or grown by residents themselves in home gardens. Agriculture provided jobs in the fields and was an economic driver in the community, and often agriculture provided the fiscal foundation for merchants, groceries, tradesmen, skilled laborers, service industries, banks and construction.

In the years of 1940 through 1950, San Mateo County was one of California's most productive agricultural regions. The easy terrain, mild climate and fertile soils allowed San Mateo County farmers, nurserymen and ranchers to produce not only a variety of food and flowers for locals, but proximity to San Francisco and other rapidly growing Bay Area communities provided significant markets as well.

The Agricultural Crop Report for 1940 documents 16,033 acres

## Fred Crowder

Fred was appointed as the San Mateo County Agricultural Commissioner and Sealer of Weights and Measures in March of 2010. Fred came to San Mateo after serving as the Assistant Commissioner and Assistant Sealer of Weights and Measures for both Napa and San Francisco Counties, and as the Deputy Commissioner / Sealer for Marin County. Fred started working in the county agriculture system in 1985 as an Agricultural Biologist in Santa Barbara County.

After earning a Bachelor's of Science degree in Plant Pathology from UC Berkeley, Fred has 28 years of regulatory experience in agriculture and weights and measures programs. He is committed to building strong relationships with growers and partners to ensure San Mateo County continues to be a viable, productive and healthy agricultural community. Leading a department staff of 40, the focus of department activities are protecting agriculture, the environment and the community through local implementation of agricultural and weights and measures regulatory programs.



Harry and Dorothy Regan had a large garden behind their Burlingame home, c. 1910. At that time, vegetables were locally produced.



Upper Picture: The Gottlieb Furrer family poses on Millbrae Hill in 1894. Barns and farmland are visible in the distance.  
Lower Picture: The same view in 1955 shows major development.

of vegetables, 26,926 acres of field crops, 594 acres of fruit and nut crops, 13,575 dairy cows, and 311,196 head of beef, poultry, and hogs. There were also 1,023 acres of floral and nursery stock with flower sales accounting for almost one-third of the value for agricultural crops produced in San Mateo County. There were 44,576 acres being actively farmed and the diversity of crops being produced was so great that then Agricultural Commissioner Max Leonard commented that he didn't believe there was a county in California that produced a greater variety.

Today, San Mateo County is very different and some time with a map would be required to find a nursery on the Bayside, and there are no farms. Though nursery and floriculture crops have maintained a Coastsides presence with a reported 875 acres in the 2010 San Mateo County Agricultural Crop Report, vegetable and fruit crops and livestock have not fared well. The 2010 report documents 2,004 acres of vegetables, 1,014 acres of field crops, 238 acres of fruit and nut crops, no dairy cows, 2,848 head of beef, poultry and hogs. There is not nearly the diversity of vegetables as there was in 1940. High value crops such as Brussels sprouts, leeks and peas predominate. The actively farmed acreage has dropped to 4,131 acres, and California's Agricultural Statistics Report ranks San Mateo thirty-fourth out of fifty-eight California counties for agricultural productivity in 2010.

So what happened to convert San Mateo County from a leading, diverse agrarian community to one almost exclusively located on the Coastsides and narrowly focused on specialized high-value crops? When farmland is accessible, flat, comparatively cheap and located near cities with a need for housing, houses sprout up on it as fast as the crops they once yielded.

The population of California grew dramatically after World War II, and San Francisco literally spilled over its borders. San Mateo County not only became San Francisco's bedroom community, but commercial and industrial expansion brought business as well. As development converted agricultural properties, the remaining farmers found it harder to continue growing as agricultural support infrastructure such as farm supplies and related services disappeared. The demand for property and corresponding rise in land prices significantly increased property taxes such that growers found it difficult to pay them.

It was a time when it seemed like there was always more land somewhere, and many were of the opinion that the highest and best use of land was that use which provided the greatest economic return. This philosophy would be easily adopted by local governments as housing and development pushed up land values and tax revenues. Eventually,



a tipping point was reached where the taxes, unavailability of land, loss of farm infrastructure and farming on an urban interface resulted in an environment where it was no longer economically feasible or even desirable to continue to farm.

About the same time, the Central Valley Water Project began to achieve its goal of controlling flooding and providing irrigation and municipal water to California's Central Valley. This resulted in a significant increase in agricultural production where previously it was too dry or too wet to reliably produce crops. Concurrently, the expansion of improved roads, truck access and portable refrigeration units made it possible to transport perishable crops almost anywhere. The result for growers was greater competition in the marketplace, and for consumers, both a greater variety of produce, fruits and vegetables and lower prices. San Mateo County producers with higher production costs, could not compete and, with development literally pulling the ground from beneath their feet, many left the land. This was a trend nationwide, as nationally the number of people employed in the farm sector in 1947 was 7.9 million and by 1998 there were only 3.4 million people still employed in farming.

This transformation may be seen in comparing the Annual Crop Reports for 1950 and 1960. The 1950 report documents 7,376 acres of vegetables, 26,106 acres of field crops, 358 acres of fruit and nut crops, 10,488 dairy cows, 36,578 head of beef, hogs and sheep, 329,800 head of poultry and rabbits and 1,471 acres of floral and nursery stock. The floral industry was growing, adding nursery stock acreage and a respectable 33,311 acres was actively farmed.

The report for 1960 documents 4,653 acres of vegetables, 18,533 acres of field crops, 350 acres of fruit and nut crops, an estimated 8,250 dairy cows, 27,074 head of beef, hogs and sheep, 12,802 head of poultry and rabbits and 1,028 acres of floral and nursery stock. The total acreage being actively farmed in 1960 was 24,564, almost half the acreage of 1940. Today, it is about 20,000 acres.

The remaining agricultural operations in San Mateo County were pushed to the Coastside where land was more affordable and where farmers could take advantage of improved roads and transportation. Economically the nursery industry was in position to make the transition and mostly did, however, the move was not feasible for most bayside farmers who went out of business. The vegetable growers who managed to continue farming on the coast found themselves producing regionally specific crops that were popular and would not grow in other areas – Brussels sprouts, artichokes, leeks and peas. Growers received



Farming in Half Moon Bay. Photo by Robert Toren.



Harvesting artichokes at Muzzi Ranch, 1987. Photo by Renee Lynn.



Brussels sprouts harvest near Pescadero, 1985. Photo by Renee Lynn.



Packing plants at Bay City Flower Company in Half Moon Bay, 1984. Photo by Renee Lynn.

a premium for these crops and as a result were able to continue to pay the taxes and whatever remained on the note for the land.

After relocating to the coast, the nursery industry has had ups and downs, but it has established itself as San Mateo County's largest agricultural segment with over eighty percent of the County's total agricultural value. It rode the wave of the indoor house plant craze (that may be coming back) and, alternatively, was hit hard by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the emergence of the Columbian flower industry. Over the last forty years, there have been more business consolidations and bankruptcies than openings of new greenhouses, but the industry has proved itself to be dexterous and resilient.

Recognizing the impact urban development was having on prime farm land, the California State legislature passed the Williamson Act in 1964. The Williamson Act allowed the taxes of farmers who committed to keeping their land in agricultural production, to be based on the value of the commodity produced, rather than the property's potential development value. This was an effort to stem the loss of prime farmland as farmers adjacent to urban communities were being forced off their land because they literally couldn't afford to pay the taxes.

In addition to the Williamson Act, the California Coastal Commission was formed by voter initiative in 1972. Though intended to restrict



development and privatization of coastal lands, an objective of the Commission is preservation of agricultural land in the coastal zone – an area where development pressures were greatest and farmers were hit the hardest. Community planning departments have similarly enacted zoning ordinances to protect prime agricultural properties, and many communities have private land trusts that also support and preserve farming interests.

Farmers themselves have increased viability by pursuing regulatory changes to allow direct sales to consumers and other end users such as restaurants via local farmers markets, community supported agriculture and farm stands. Many local farmers depend entirely on direct sales; for many, direct marketing can at least make the difference between finishing the year in the red or blue. Similarly, many growers produce “value added” commodities like pre-packaged greens, cheese and wine. Some rely on agro-tourism, the activities that bring visitors to the farm, for additional revenue so they can continue to operate. Locally some growers also look to alternative crops or cropping methods such as aqua-ponics and greenhouse vegetables. Someday we will likely see the local production of bio-fuels such as algae, as entrepreneurial growers take advantage of opportunities presented by these developing markets.

It is too late for San Mateo County to turn back the clock and reclaim acreages lost. There are efforts to protect farms and preserve local agriculture, but restrictions on water, increasing competition through free trade agreements, shifting markets, innumerable regulations and the weather continue to challenge farmers and farming’s status quo. But San Mateo County growers still have a huge market next door and a public interested in reconnecting with their food and local farmers. Just what local food is, is a worthy discussion at the dinner table, but there is a growing appreciation for farmers and support for agriculture at the local level, something that was hard to find fifty years ago, but bodes well for our growers today.



Packing blue pines for the holidays at the Nurseryman's Exchange near Half Moon Bay, c. 1980s. Photo by Joe Melena.



Selling fruit at the Redwood City Farmers' Market.



# The Peninsula's Bright Gems:

## Roderick McLellan and His Acres of Orchids

by JenniferAnne Morrison



Rod McLellan's Acres of Orchids in South San Francisco, c. 1960s. At one time, the greenhouse shown on the left was the largest in the world.

### JenniferAnne Morrison

JenniferAnne Lorraine McLellan Morrison holds a Bachelor's degree in history and psychology from Williams College. As a descendant of San Franciscans and a native of Reno, Nevada, she enjoys the exploration of western American history. She is a granddaughter of Roderick McLellan.

When picturing the city of San Francisco, one mentally conjures sourdough bread bakeries, a history steeped in mining and crime, and vibrant cultural diversity. Just south, the Peninsula evokes a calmer yet no less rich image of suburbs and the natural world. Redwoods and estuaries sit comfortably alongside small communities with their own particular histories. But San Mateo County is also renowned for its flower industry, and for orchids in particular. This business, seemingly minor, romantic, and only relevant during holidays or for the wealthy, in fact helped shape the county economically and socially. Roderick McLellan of Burlingame was one of the most prominent figures in this business. The Rod McLellan Company and its Acres of Orchids in South San Francisco was an important feature of the community from the 1940s through the early 2000s. Roderick's children Joan Taylor, Lynn McLellan and Sandra McLellan Behling were practically raised in the orchid nurseries and then in turn worked for the company. Their memories, obtained from interviews with the three women, evoke clearly the importance and impressiveness of their father's work. The McLellan women describe a man who was humorous, creative and

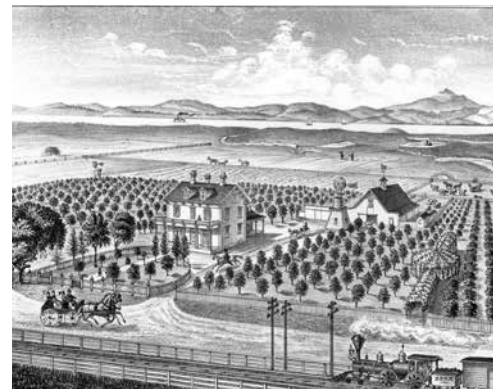
above all passionate and dedicated. Their father taught them the importance of good business, of the natural world, and most of all, of flowers. They remember the company as being a vanguard not only in technology and floral innovation, but also in equal opportunity practices and as a symbol of appreciation for natural resources. Roderick was an early conservationist and true entrepreneur. His business helped the Peninsula to come into modernity, in the best sense.

The Rod McLellan nurseries have a history deeper than their founder. Roderick was a native Californian who was born with an appreciation for flowers in his blood. His grandfather, David Springer McLellan, emigrated from Maine to California during the Gold Rush. He established a farm, which his fifth son Edgar took over, expanded, and named the EW McLellan Company. According to family lore, David grew flowers as a hobby; he would leave clients flowers with their milk delivery. This friendly businessman's gesture, meant to encourage paying the bill, led to wholesale cultivation and served as a foundation for Roderick's interest in orchids and other flowers. Roderick grew up among the greenhouses his father built in which to cultivate the blooms. His experience was not unique. In the Bay Area many Italian, Chinese and Japanese families were involved in agriculture, and in floral production in particular. To live in the Peninsula was to know how to run a farm.

Roderick was unique in that his heritage included more than just a gene for a green thumb and appreciation for agriculture. His parents were children during the Industrial Revolution, a movement that affected California a little later than the rest of the country. While big industry was blooming on the East Coast, immigrants were just starting to arrive in the Bay Area, where they immediately set about building, producing, and manufacturing. Roderick's mother, Mary Garratt, came from a family that epitomized the innovation of the era. Her father, William, was a metal worker who traveled from the East Coast to San Francisco in 1850, at the age of twenty. He established the William T. Garratt Foundry in the city, which grew to be the largest brass manufactory west of the Mississippi.<sup>1</sup> William forged the famous fence surrounding the Flood mansion on Nob Hill, now the Pacific-Union Club, as well as the Golden Spike that completed the First Transcontinental Railroad. His enterprise was truly a legitimate industrial success. When his daughter married Edgar McLellan, they formed a union symbolizing the merging of industrialization and agriculture in the Bay Area. Their granddaughter, Lynn McLellan, claims the two were a "love match;" it was practically



Roderick McLellan with new orchids to be named, c. 1958. Photo by Staggs Studio.



In 1878, the David Springer McLellan farm consisted of 93 acres at today's south San Mateo. Image from a Moore & DePue lithograph, artwork by Britton & Rey.

## A Truly Diverse Species



McLellan in the nursery, 1958. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.

Only about a third of orchid species are found in the tropics. They also grow in tundra forests, such as those found in the Andes or on Macquarie Island, along the coast and in semi-deserts. Mainly they germinate on other flowers or trees, but also in soil and even underground.

Orchid species can have extreme variations in size and color. Blooms can be the size of a nickel, or weigh up to a ton with petals as long as thirty inches. Blossoms can show every color except true black.

Dian Jukofsky, "Orchid (Orchidaceae)," in *Encyclopedia of Rainforests* (Connecticut: Oryx Press, 2002), accessed August 30, 2013, [www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org).

their son's destiny to make a true enterprise out of growing flowers.

Roderick Irving McLellan made his introduction to the world in 1903, on the second story of his family's home in Burlingame. He was the fifth son. He spent much time on the family's farm, apparently getting into trouble quite often. His daughter, Lynn, recalls a story about Roderick blowing up his father's woodshed with a quarter stick of dynamite when he was thirteen, "because it was fun." He attended San Mateo High School in San Mateo, where as a senior he put the principal's Model T on a flagpole. He then attended college at Stanford, where he ran cross-country. According to his daughter, Sandra, once during running practice the sorority girls stole his underwear and strung it out in front of his house. Although embarrassed, he himself loved practical jokes. He maintained a lively sense of humor through his whole life.

In contrast to his mischievous and lighthearted side, Roderick always appreciated the value of hard work, dedication and responsibility. Throughout his youth he helped his father with the family business. Once able to drive, he would fetch truckloads of manure from his father's dairy for fertilizer in the greenhouses. At a younger age, as Lynn recalls the story, her father accidentally allowed a horse to back into a blade for tilling the soil. The animal cut its tendon as a result, maiming it. Edgar made his son put the animal down. It was a horrifying experience, practically unthinkable in today's world, "but it taught him a lesson about being responsible."<sup>2</sup> Responsibility and respect for labor no doubt aided Roderick at Stanford, where he earned a degree in botany in 1926.

Stanford's botany department opened up a whole new world to the young man from Burlingame. He was very studious. His daughter, Joan, recalls he was known as the "Christer," meaning he was someone who always followed the rules and for whom everything must be just-so. It was in his classes that he learned about orchids for the first time. As Sandra explains, at Stanford, Roderick discovered the uniqueness of the orchid family. Orchids are "like wine,"<sup>3</sup> in their slowness to mature. It takes seven years for a seed to germinate, then for the plant to bloom and finally for it to propagate its own seeds. There are over 20,000 species; they are found in every habitat excepting glaciers, on every continent except Antarctica, including above the Arctic Circle. Roderick viewed each flower as "a puzzle, as to how you could keep it growing... how to keep it alive and how to make it bloom."<sup>4</sup> They held his interest, presented a challenge that fascinated him and that he wanted to share with others.

Even as he was discovering a whole new botanical world, Roderick





Gardenias in the "B" Nursery, EW McLellan Company.

was known for more at Stanford than academic aptitude. According to Joan Taylor, "in those days they used to say the handsome men went to Stanford and the beautiful women went to Cal." Apparently her father was considered a very handsome man; Joan describes him as a cross between Errol Flynn and Ronald Coleman, with a "mustache, with the white teeth, and the slim body." Lynn always thought he looked like Sir Laurence Olivier. In either case, he was undisputedly attractive; Joan remembers her friends' mothers flirting with her father, and him being overwhelmed by the attention. Her mother, Vivian Goddard, a Cal woman, was Roderick's first wife. Joan was born in 1928. Roderick spent much time teaching her to appreciate flowers, plants and the natural world.

While starting a family, after graduating from Stanford, Roderick continued to work for the EW McLellan Company. When Edgar died in 1938, the business passed into the hands of Roderick and his brother Wakeman. They each gave their brother Edgar a 1% share in the company, to include him. The arrangement worked well for a time. But Roderick's fascination with orchids continued to develop, and in turn, problems arose. In 1946, Roderick traveled to South Africa with his fourth wife, Lorraine, and Joan. There he became acquainted with new varieties and learned more about the growing process. Though appalled



McLellan with his daughter, Joan, to his right, in one of the nurseries. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.



McLellan and his wife, Lorriane, look at flowers at Horizon House Nursery. The couple visited nurseries around the world to see orchids. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.



McLellan exhibit at the Sacramento Fair, 1958.

with apartheid, the orchid industry captivated him. At that time orchids were considered a luxury only the rich could afford. But new research on the flowers coupled with advances in technology, such as electric indoor heating, meant that anyone might be able to buy and cultivate the flowers. Roderick saw the potential in the plants. He wanted to devote the majority of EW McLellan's time, energy and financial resources to orchids.

Unhappily for Roderick, Wakeman wanted nothing to do with the venture. The two brothers had very different management styles; the former was a risk taker and more creative, whereas the latter wanted to stick with what had worked in the past. Because each man held 49% of the company stock, neither had a controlling voice. Edgar was the swing vote, and he always sided with Wakeman. Initial disagreement turned into a complete falling-out. In the early 1940s, a court decision dissolved the partnership. Wakeman and Edgar kept the property that lay in Hayward, San Francisco and Half Moon Bay. They retained the EW McLellan name. The settlement awarded Roderick the land in South San Francisco. He named his new enterprise the Rod McLellan Company.

This new business changed everything for Roderick, for the orchid industry and for the South San Francisco area. San Mateo County is known for its floral industry. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Peninsula was covered in "truck gardens" that supplied the city with flowers, taking them to farmers markets and to flower markets by truck. The microclimates in the Bay Area make the region suitable for a variety of agricultural endeavors. The "fog belt" specifically has moist air that is hospitable to flowers. San Francisco has had a large demand for flowers since the Gold Rush; thanks to the gold and the development boom, the city had enough wealth to indulge in items valued only for beauty. But while the floral business had been prosperous in San Francisco since its beginnings, the surrounding farms that cultivated flowers did not reach markets beyond the city.<sup>5</sup> What is more, a flower such as an orchid, expensive and difficult to rear, was almost completely absent from the market. Because of their difficult nature, those who could afford orchids had mainly used them in corsages. They were rarely kept as houseplants. Generally, only those on the East Coast in the United States were interested in the plants at all. Roderick had embarked on a business completely novel and quite bold in nature.

As an entrepreneur, Roderick was dedicated to changing the status quo. He recognized a great opportunity and was able to acquire large amounts of orchids from England during World War II. Due to the war,





McLellan inspecting flowers in the nursery.

British gentlemen could hardly heat their homes for their own comfort, much less to raise exotic flowers. So Roderick purchased plants from overseas and built greenhouses for them, with the intention of making them affordable for the layman.

The greenhouses were quite impressive in their own right. One had the largest acreage under glass in the United States at the time. The houses had raised beds with walkways running between them and had electric heating. The walkways could be raised as the plants grew, keeping the tops accessible. Roderick eventually switched from glass to plastic greenhouses, made of wood and polyethylene. These were just as effective, but not as expensive to build. This design allowed him to make the most use of a piece of land, while still allowing for expansion and development. Most importantly, this greenhouse design allowed for both the cultivation of orchids and expansion into other areas. The facilities and technology served as a framework with which Roderick could constantly innovate, experiment and grow his business.

The glasshouses had many kinds of flowers and plants. The nurseries were home to a larger variety of gardenias than seen before. Roderick developed a new type of presentation for corsages using this flower. Workers picked the buds and opened the petals by hand, leaving a rosebud center, and put the leaf backing behind. The corsages were



Gardenias ready for shipment.





McLellan with an arrangement of roses and eucalyptus.



McLellan and his daughter, Sandra, lead an open house tour, 1967. Photo by Staggs Studio.



McLellan tours with the Sultan of Selangor, 1972.

packed in boxes and sealed in cellophane, so that they could be shipped as ready, finished products. Joan worked for some time in the greenhouses washing the leaves. Other workers at first hand-sewed the buds and leaves into the arrangement, but they soon began using sewing machines, speeding up the process. The nurseries also housed heather to sell as cut flowers for bouquets, along with carnations, roses and eucalyptus. Baby blue and true blue silver dollar eucalyptus was a new product to America. The company marketed it as filler for florists. Lynn had a job sending out flyers nationwide, promoting the new addition to arrangements. Besides these products, Roderick would test out others periodically, constantly revising the inventory. For example, in the 1970s the nurseries started featuring the type of plants popular in fern bars. Whatever niche existed, Roderick attempted to fill it in the greenhouses.

As the company's methods for growing and packing had positive results, national demand grew. The company began shipping flowers by plane, which was entirely original. He flew flowers down to southern California for the Rose Parade and even supplied orchids for President Dwight D. Eisenhower's second inauguration. Even while the company provided blooms for impressive and large events, Roderick accomplished his goal of reaching the average public consumer. Orchids did indeed become an affordable plant for everyone, and many Bay Area inhabitants did have the chance to enjoy the plants in their own homes. The "Acres of Orchids" in South San Francisco became a well-known landmark. Roderick would give tours of the greenhouses frequently, a tradition that continued after his passing. All three of his daughters recall these tours as being incredibly entertaining. Roderick was a good storyteller and, as mentioned above, loved telling jokes, despite the fact that he was somewhat shy. Lynn says he was better entertainment than television. The tours were certainly a huge success. Many people became avid collectors or even active members of an orchid society just because they had visited the company and bought one plant.

The company was not only successful in the area of flower production. The company survived for so long because of Roderick's never ending creativity. He constantly assessed the public's desires and imagined ways to fulfill those wants efficiently and in a manner that exceeded expectations. For example, because Roderick recognized that ensuring proper water and sunlight levels could be difficult for those without a green thumb, the company offered "orchid boarding." People could hand over their plants to the Roderick



McLellan at a Red Cross blood drive during World War II. Photo by Staggs Studio.

McLellan boarding department, where workers cared for them until they bloomed, whereupon they were sent home. Perhaps Roderick's greatest brainchild was Supersoil. The company introduced the potting mix in the 1950s; it earned its name from Superman's current popularity. Roderick took a soil formula that Cornell University had originally developed and tweaked it to suit orchids specifically. He used it in the nurseries where it proved to be a successful medium. Orchid enthusiasts began asking if they could have the soil mixture used at the company. The company initially sold it on a small scale, really only to informed hobbyists who visited the nurseries. As interest increased, they expanded, selling to grocery and hardware stores nationwide.

Beyond commercial triumph, as a prominent local business, the company had a large impact on the Peninsula. Roderick employed a great number of people. Many were immigrants, and most were female. The company's main years of development coincided with World War II. Women whose husbands were off at war worked at the nurseries to supplement their husbands' incomes during those leaner times. Joan remembers those workers often expressing gratitude to Roderick. Many of them had never worked outside the home before, and they learned a great deal about efficiency, income management and independence.



Opening of the Supersoil plant in Bakersfield, 1975.





McLellan serving tea to Mrs. DuPont and other Orchid Society members, c. 1940s. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.



McLellan at Vernal Falls in Yosemite, 1961. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.



McLellan and his wife, Lorraine, receiving a plaque honoring his efforts towards soil conservation, 1946. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.

Lynn and Sandra, who were born in 1948 and 1953, and who spent much time during their childhoods accompanying their father at the company, remember the work force as being very ethnically diverse in addition to including many women. Lynn explains, “He was always very fair to his employees. He wanted everyone to be involved.” To Roderick, what mattered most was that employees “be as excellent as they could.”<sup>6</sup> As long as a job was done, and done well, he didn’t care about background. Lynn believes that if Roderick were alive and running a business today, he would certainly be a proponent of equal opportunity. He was never unfair to anyone who had good character and values. Such leadership was rare in that era. It set a standard that modern businesses should emulate.

The company had an effect on others in the community besides workers. Roderick was involved with many organizations, both professionally and recreationally. Because he was such an important figure in the floral world, he took his role seriously, and his actions held a lot of weight. He was a very active member of the American Orchid Society; he and Lorraine hosted the first association trustee meeting on the West Coast. Through this organization he promoted orchids as popular houseplants. A couple dozen orchid societies have sprung up in and around the Bay Area since then, including the Peninsula Orchid Society and the Gold Coast Cymbidium Growers in San Mateo. Many current presidents, favorite speakers and passionate members of these organizations say they bought their first orchid at the Acres of Orchids greenhouses.

Significant for the Peninsula, but also for the entire state of California, Roderick was as interested in conservation as he was in orchids. He loved California; he enjoyed driving through the state, admiring the coast or the mountains. He especially loved Yosemite. Joan, Lynn and Sandra all accompanied their father to the park many times throughout their lives. When Joan was young she and her father would stay in the Camp Curry tent cabins, and they would go on long hikes. As a one-time collegiate runner, he liked to cover immense distances, exploring the beautiful area. When Lynn and Sandra went with him, he would play golf and go fishing, but still loved to spend much time on the trails. In one day he hiked the Happy Falls, Angel Falls, Vernal Falls, the top of Half Dome and went back down to the valley—he completed twenty-one miles or so round trip. Joan said Roderick considered Yosemite the most beautiful place in the world.

Considering this appreciation for nature, it is no surprise that he was an early, and active, conservationist. Roderick was a large supporter of



the California Soil Conservation Service. In the early 1950s, Governor Earl Warren appointed him president of the San Mateo County 5<sup>th</sup> Conservation District of the Soil Conservation Program. He then went on to be president of the entire California Soil Conservation Association. During this time he also worked closely with Representative J. Arthur Younger, the congressman from San Mateo who also was a large supporter of the program. Roderick recognized the uniqueness, economic value and beauty of the Peninsula. Understanding the terrible Dust Bowl of the 1930s from afar, he knew California needed to be protected, for the future use and enjoyment of all.

Roderick died in 1974, at the age of seventy-three. Lorraine assumed leadership of the Rod McLellan Company, serving as vice-president. Joan, Lynn and Sandra served as board members. In 1998, the family sold the Acres of Orchids greenhouses in South San Francisco to a housing developer and concentrated the business in San Mateo. At that point in time, much as now, housing land was far more valuable than anything that could be produced agriculturally. In 2000, the entire floral part of the company was sold to the Taiwan Sugar Company. Supersoil remained in the family's hands until 2005, when Scotts Miracle-Gro acquired it. Although the glasshouses of orchids are no longer a fixture of the community, people still remember the beautiful flowers. Many have relatives who worked there and recall the man who started it all. Joan, Lynn and Sandra are still introduced as "Rod McLellan's daughters." Many florists, hobbyists and others involved in the industry or in an orchid association know the name well. There are many others who have enjoyed only a single orchid plant in their living room, tending it with care. They may not know their plant's history, but they and all others can keep a piece of living paradise for themselves thanks to the revolutionary Rod McLellan Company.



McLellan with Congressman and Mrs. Younger, c.1950s. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The Bay of San Francisco: the Metropolis of the Pacific Coast and Its Suburban Cities: a History, Vol. 2* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co, 1892), 535-537, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nrmelton/sfbgarr.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn McLellan, interview by JenniferAnne Morrison, Reno, NV, July 23, 2013.

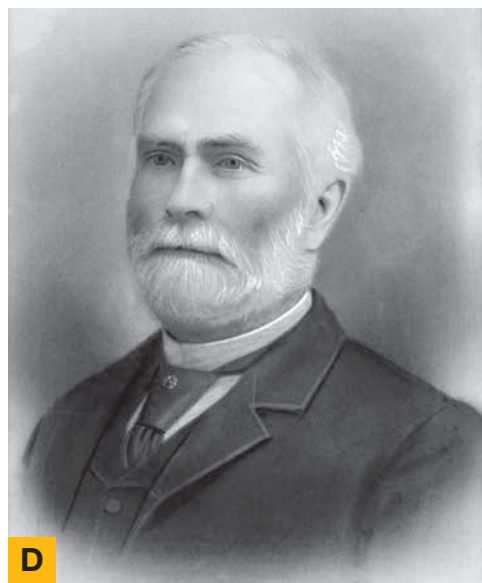
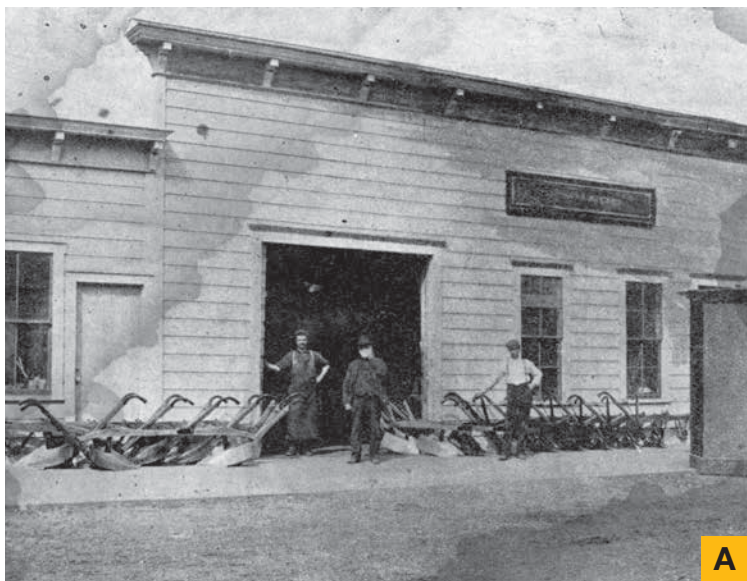
<sup>3</sup> Sandra Behling, interview by JenniferAnne Morrison, Burlingame, CA, July 27, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Behling.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Kawaguchi, *Living with Flowers: The California Flower Market History* (San Francisco, CA: California Flower Market, Inc. 1993), viii-x.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn McLellan.

# Knapp Side-Hill Plow



R.I. Knapp of Half Moon Bay invented the reversible side-hill plow (patented 1875). At the end of each row the farmer would pull and twist the pin between the handles, releasing the blade so it could swing underneath the beam and be secured on the other side. This invention allowed farmers to expand their potato, grain and hay fields from marine terraces onto steep coastal hills.

**A** H.G. Knapp & Sons Plow Factory, Half Moon Bay, 1905.

**B** Plow factory interior.

**C** Knapp Side-Hill Plow on exhibit in *Nature's Bounty* at the San Mateo County History Museum.

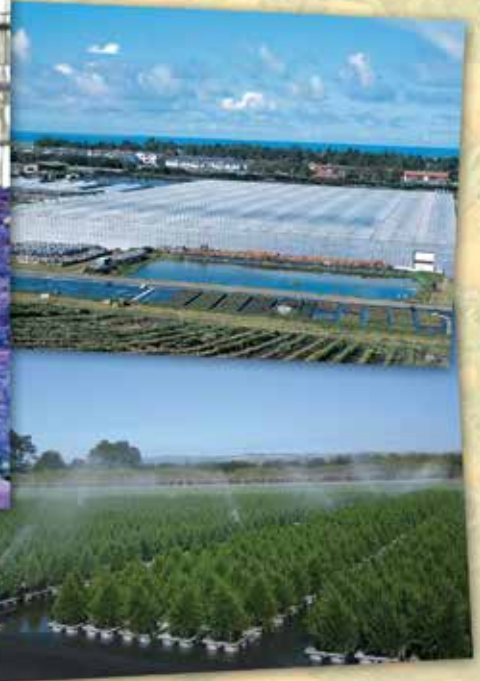
**D** R.I. Knapp.



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Rod McClellan examining orchids with General Manager Bob Jones at Acres of Orchids, early 1960s. Photo courtesy of Lynn McLellan.