



Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Murrieta Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.

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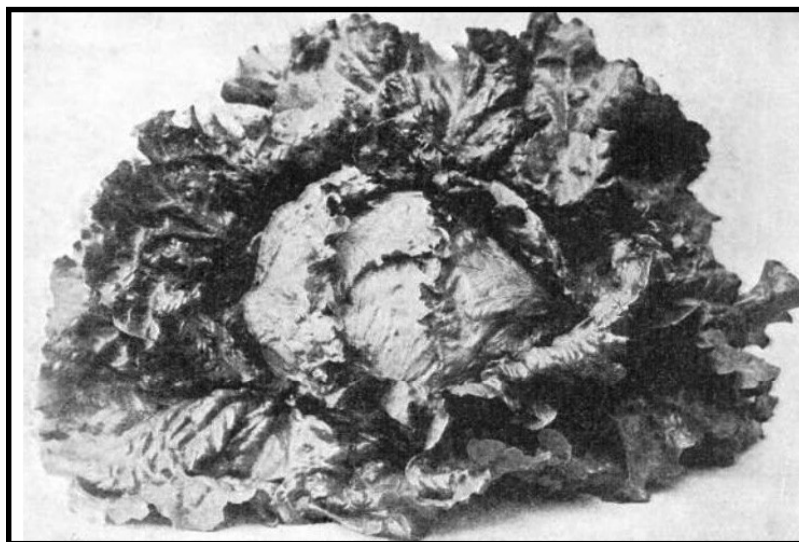
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A specimen of New York Lettuce, the main variety shipped from California. (Jones, 1925)

The Murrieta Lettuce Company by Jeffery G. Harmon

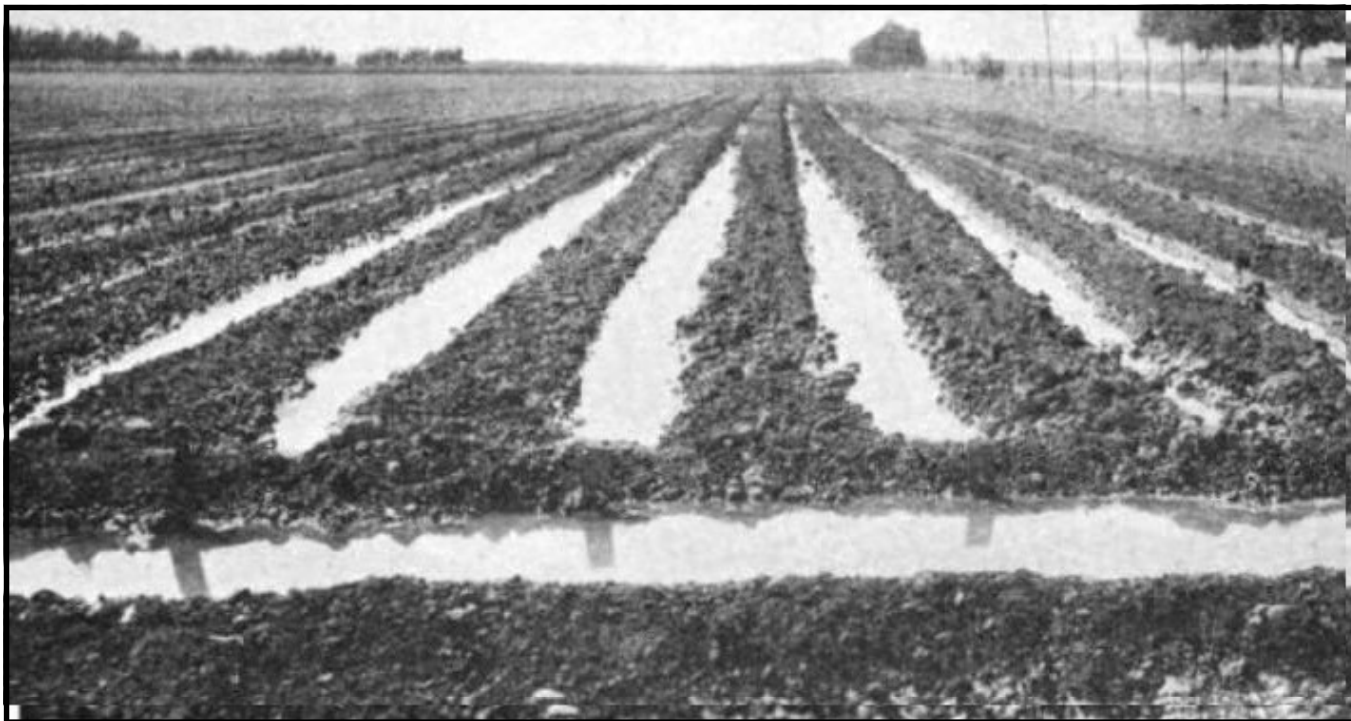
Murrieta was a large dry farming community since its founding. With little water to conduct large scale irrigation, it was difficult for farmers to plant crops that were dependent on a constant source of water. When electricity was established in the valley in 1923, farmers had a new source of power to draw more water to the surface. This provided an opportunity to plant new types of crops.

In the 1920s, lettuce was in high demand. The East Coast planted lettuce, but when the winter came, customers had to look for

new sources. The Imperial Valley in California provided a rich source of lettuce especially during the winter months. Thousands of acres of lettuce were planted in the valley and each year the farms expanded.

The Imperial Valley depended on water from the Colorado River to irrigate the fields of lettuce. However, in 1924, there was a shortage of water and it appeared that the farmers would be too late for the winter market.

Southern California business men and farmers saw the Imperial Valley's misfortune as an



Irrigating lettuce beds in the Imperial Valley. Water enters the furrows from the head ditch through small conduits. The pieces of shook beside the opening is used to regulate the flow. (Jones, 1925)

opportunity to join the lettuce market. The first lettuce crop to be planted in Riverside County was on 98 acres in Nuevo. When the crop began to sprout, birds descended on the fields and devoured 47 acres. Then in January 1925, cold weather did serious damage to the crop. One month later, two hundred head of lettuce was shipped to the Mission Inn in Riverside. The Nuevo experiment proved that lettuce could be grown in the area.

Lusk & Myers had been raising crops in Winchester and later in Oceanside. They were interested in planting lettuce in Murrieta and established the Murrieta Lettuce Company. They discussed their business proposal with Miles W. Thompson, who owned land just north

of the town of Murrieta on Washington Avenue. Lusk & Myers leased the Thompson land and began making preparations.

Thompson contracted W. A. Borden of Oceanside to drill a well on his property for \$5,000. A 413 foot well was dug and lined with cement. An electric pump was installed to draw water out of the well for irrigation. Three tractors were used to prep the land for the planting of lettuce. Lusk & Myers purchased the former Globe Mills warehouse in Murrieta at the intersection of B Street and present day New Clay Avenue. The warehouse had been used for grain storage for over thirty years, but with the grain elevator in operation, the warehouse was no longer needed.

The first five acres of lettuce was planted in Murrieta in August 1925. Once a week, workers would plant an additional 10 acres. This planting schedule would allow a steady supply of lettuce going to market. Within two months, there were 160 acres of lettuce planted.

Materials to make shipping crates for the lettuce arrived in Murrieta in October. A month later, crate construction began at the warehouse as the time to harvest neared. Mexican and Japanese field workers arrived in Murrieta from Oceanside in order to harvest the first crop.

When the crop was harvested, it was trucked to the warehouse. A group of men

then packed the lettuce with ice into the crates and labeled the crates the Palomar Brand. Then the crates were loaded onto a Santa Fe refrigerator car. In November 1925, the first train car of the Murrieta Lettuce Company left the station, and headed east to Chicago, Illinois.

Each crate held about 60 heads of lettuce. Three hundred and twenty crates filled one train car. There were roughly 19,200 heads of lettuce being shipped out. Each train car had an estimated value of \$1500. During November and December, an average of one to two cars left Murrieta each week.

The first harvest was deemed a success. In February 1926, the next crop was planted. The second harvest occurred in April and soon ten cars were leaving Murrieta and headed to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Within two months, 105 train cars had shipped out of the Temecula/Murrieta area.

Though Lusk & Myers saw that the Murrieta Lettuce Company was a success, they decided to sell to Mr. F. Barnard in October 1926. Barnard had moved to Murrieta in February 1926, and within a month owned a 20-acre ranch and had built his family a small cottage. He had bought the lettuce company in time for the winter harvest.

Meanwhile, in the Imperial Valley, the water shortage had been resolved and the farmers were eager to recover their losses by increasing production. At the years end, there was over

65,000 acres of lettuce in California. Market experts predicted a price drop was in the near future due to the surplus of lettuce.

The price of lettuce dropped drastically in February 1927. There was more lettuce than there were buyers on the East Coast. The farmers in the Imperial Valley held off shipping their harvested crops in hopes that the prices would go back up. As they waited, a large lettuce crop was destroyed by mildew while it was stored in train cars.

A few months later, the Murrieta lettuce harvest was minimal. A heat spell had ruined a large field of lettuce. The company labored on and eventually recovered during the winter harvest. During that season, fifty train cars were shipped to Los Angeles and to the East.

Then W. J. Gould of Corona traded his property for the Barnard Ranch by 1928. Lettuce continued to be harvested, but the winter harvest was smaller due to cold weather. The lettuce boom began to dwindle. By 1928, there was less lettuce planted in the valley. In 1930, the Gould family left Murrieta and moved to Los Angeles. There was no further mention of the Murrieta Lettuce Company after their departure.

By the mid-1930s, the former warehouse used by the lettuce company was razed. The last train left Murrieta in March 1935 and the railroad was re-

moved. Dry farming continued to be the main means of farming in the valley up through the 1970s. As time passed, the Murrieta Lettuce Company faded from memory.

Today the former lettuce fields are now covered in houses and businesses. There are though a few people that grow small portions of lettuce locally and sell at the Farmer's Market. Meanwhile, the Imperial Valley continues to grow lettuce with an average production value of over two hundred million dollars per year.



Trimming Lettuce. The butts and the damaged or diseased leaves are trimmed off. The waste leaves are used for poultry, cattle or hog feed. (Jones, 1925)



Packing and Trimming in the packing shed in the Imperial Valley. In the background the men are cutting back the stems, and removing the diseased and damaged leaves. The trimmed heads are tossed onto a low table in reach of the packers. (The Growing and Handling of Head Lettuce in California by H. A. Jones and E. L. Garthwaite, 1925)



Dedication and cutting of the ribbon at Sykes Ranch Park on October 3, 2024

Museum Update

The Museum and our volunteers are preparing for this school year's 3rd grade tours. The students will be learning about Murrieta's rich history and will be participating in hands on educational activities. The students are led on a walking tour of the Historic Downtown District and learn about the people, places and businesses of our shared past.

There have also been multiple Historic Downtown Walking tours given to several groups. It has been exciting presenting the history to families, residences, and visitors.

We participated in the City of Murrieta's Ribbon Cutting Event for the Sykes Ranch Park on Hayes Avenue. Society

members worked with the Parks and Recreation team to create panels for a "Walk through History" project. This project took several years to produce, and we are grateful for Lea Kolek, Parks & Community Services Manager for her leadership and resources to see this to completion.

We were also present for the ribbon cutting event for the new addition at the Murrieta Elementary School.

We had a booth at the Annual Murrieta Rod Run and it was great seeing everyone with their cars. We want to thank our volunteers for assisting us during this event. We would also like to say thank you for the event space in order to share Murrieta's history with the attendees.

For the month of November, the Museum will be honoring our Veterans with a display. The Museum will be open in November every Thursdays from 1-4 pm and every Saturday from 10 am-2 pm.

We offer private museum tours by appointment, private walking tours and historic presentations. If you would like to become a volunteer for the museum contact us at

info@murrietahistoricalsociety.org

or 951-677-7758.

Thank you,

Annette Jennings,

Murrieta Museum Director

Scan the QR code to visit our website.



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**The General
Monthly Board Meeting
is held on the second
Monday at 5:30 p.m.
Please join us at
the Murrieta Museum**

MUSEUM Hours
**THURSDAYS
1 - 4 PM**
For groups and tours call (951) 677-7758

The Murrieta Museum,
41810 Juniper Street
at Hunt Memorial Park.

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