The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and Carquinez Strait are not just places considered special by Californians. The events that have shaped this landscape – the enormous impact of Delta agriculture and agricultural innovation, the distinctive historic communities shaped by waves of immigration, and the vital role the Delta and Carquinez Strait played in the development of California – also affected the past and present of the United States as a whole.

Now, there is national recognition of Delta and Carquinez Strait culture and history. The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta National Heritage Area was signed into law on March 12, 2019, after years of tireless efforts by Senator Dianne Feinstein and Congressman John Garamendi. Although there are now 55 National Heritage Areas (NHAs) nationwide, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta NHA is California’s first.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta NHA boundary extends from West Sacramento to Stockton to Vallejo. The new NHA will help connect the region’s agricultural, cultural, natural, and recreational assets and raise the profile of the area throughout California and the nation. The Delta Protection Commission, the state agency that serves as the local coordinating entity for the NHA, is working on the management plan, which will provide guidance on ways to preserve, enhance, and educate the public about Delta and Carquinez Strait heritage.

In honor of the Delta’s new NHA status, we invite you to take a look back at a few of our past Delta Voice articles, which share a small slice of the region’s agricultural and industrial heritage, and the cultural and artistic landscapes that helped build, and help celebrate, this incredible region.
The proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention” was never truer than in the early days of Delta agriculture and reclamation. The Delta is well known for its rich peat soils, but this same soil made plowing and planting extremely difficult. Horses and mechanical equipment often sank and became stuck. Peat soil was also a poor material for building the levees that were supposed to protect newly reclaimed farmland and communities. “Tule shoes”, which functioned like snowshoes for horses, were one of the first inventions to deal with peat soils. While tule shoes didn’t quite catch on, subsequent inventions transformed agriculture and earthmoving around the world and made the Delta – Rio Vista and Stockton in particular – the epicenter of agricultural and earthmoving technology.

The most famous of these inventions was developed by the Holt Manufacturing Company, located at the corner of Church and Aurora Streets in Stockton. Benjamin Holt followed his brothers to California from New Hampshire in 1883 and established himself in manufacturing wooden wagon wheels, combine harvesters, and steam traction engines. In 1904, he first demonstrated a steam-powered machine that moved on self-laying tracks, which were able to move better on the soft Delta soils. The “Caterpillar” tractor soon became a machine that was used not just in agriculture, but for construction and warfare as well, and inspired the design of modern tanks.

Holt’s tractors served as the foundation of Robert G. LeTourneau’s work as a mechanic, contractor, and manufacturer. LeTourneau opened one of the first automobile repair shops in Stockton and eventually started a contracting and manufacturing company there that pioneered earthmoving technology. He was single-handedly responsible for 299 patents, including the mechanized bulldozer, electric wheel drive, scrapers, dredges, portable cranes, rollers, dump wagons, bridge spans, logging equipment, and the offshore oil platform. His factories across the United States supplied 70% of the heavy earth-moving equipment used by the Allied forces during World War II.

Five years after Benjamin Holt’s death in 1920, the Caterpillar Tractor Company moved to Peoria, Illinois to be closer to sources of steel. Eventually, Caterpillar convinced LeTourneau’s company to follow them to Peoria. The Delta town of Holt – site of the first demonstration of the Caterpillar tractor – and Benjamin Holt Drive and Benjamin Holt College Preparatory Academy in Stockton serve as reminders of Holt’s significant contributions to the Delta. Unlike Holt, there is very little to mark LeTourneau’s time in Stockton - unless you count every plowed field and levee that you see.

You can learn more about the Holt and LeTourneau inventions and legacy at the Haggin Museum in Stockton and San Joaquin County Historical Museum in Lodi.
2016 marked the 100th anniversary of Jack London’s premature death at age 40. At the time of his passing, he was one of the most widely read writers in America. London’s stories focused on human interactions with nature and the plight of workers, reflecting his many travels around the world, his upbringing in poverty, and his socialist political views. His legacy lives on in the many places he visited and wrote about during his life, including the Delta as well as Alaska, the Sonoma Valley, and Oakland. In the Delta’s Pittsburg, one of his favorite haunts was the Bay View Saloon, and the Pittsburg Historical Museum contains a reproduction of the interior in its London display. He is honored in the Pittsburg Entertainment and Arts Hall of Fame, and his name is on a street there, an elementary school in Antioch, and a park in Benicia.

London’s first adventures in the Delta started when he found himself on both sides of the law, first as a teenage “oyster pirate” – a poacher – and then as a member of the “fish patrol” – a group of maritime game wardens headquartered in Benicia. He turned these experiences into *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1906), a book of adventure stories for young adults. The stories reference Antioch, Benicia, Collinsville, Pittsburg, and Merryweather, an old coal-mining town east of Antioch.

As he became more successful, London enjoyed spending time in the Delta aboard his boats, called the Snark and the Roamer. Records show that one of his boats was built for him in Pittsburg, but the name of the craft was not recorded. It was outside of Pittsburg (then known as Black Diamond) that he and his wife, Charmian, appeared in his novel *Valley of the Moon* (1913) as “Jack and Clara Hastings” aboard a boat named the Roamer. The Hastings take the novel’s protagonists on a tour of the southern Delta, pointing out the productivity of the Delta farmland and sermonizing on sustainable agriculture, a passion of London’s.

*Valley of the Moon* also describes the great cultural diversity of the Delta, though London’s views on other racial and ethnic groups certainly reflected his era. As the Hastings and their guests travel on foot and boat from Rio Vista to Sacramento, London writes that, “They encountered - sometimes in whole villages - Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Portuguese, Swiss, Hindus, Koreans, Norwegians, Danes, French, Armenians, Slavs, almost every nationality save American.”

Jack London was incredibly prolific, writing books, as well as short stories and poems while serving as a war correspondent, touring the world, and managing his ranch in Glen Ellen (now Jack London State Park).
Overall, branding portrays an image, a likeness of a place, and it tells a story. Historic destination and product branding efforts in the Delta have portrayed the Delta landscape, its other unique features, and the influence of the local culture since the 1800s and will continue for generations to come.

DESTINATION BRANDING

“The Netherlands of America”, “The Fruitbasket of America”, “Where Agriculture and Industry Meet.” These are a few taglines that have been used to promote the Delta region over time. Historic Delta promotional material often evoked feelings of tranquility and comfort, encouraging travelers to escape the bustle of city life by car, boat or train. Visitors sought a peaceful experience in the lesser-known Delta region, with its countless miles of waterways and some of the richest farmland in the world.

The Netherlands of America marketing campaign compared the Delta with Holland, a country from which many early settlers of the Delta had originated. Parallels were drawn between the two landscapes, which both featured levees, productive farmlands, and busy rivers and sloughs filled with ships for commerce and recreation.

The Netherlands Route was a Southern Pacific Steamer Service that ran in the early 1900s, linking to several stops in the Bay Area and Sacramento. The Navajo, Modoc, and Apache steamers transported people and goods along the Sacramento River with pickup locations in Sacramento and San Francisco, stopping at towns along the way, including Benicia, Rio Vista, Isleton, Walnut Grove, and Clarksburg.

The steamers were advertised as more luxurious and comfortable than Dutch canal-boats, with wide promenades, luxurious salons, and cozy staterooms. Brochures boasted of amazing scenery along the way including Italian fishing vessels in the San Francisco Bay, early Californian architecture along the Carquinez Strait, and waterfowl in Suisun Marsh. Delta attractions included numerous salmon canneries, diked islands with lush fields and orchards, prosperous homes and houseboats, and small towns. Interestingly, the town of Hood even had a quite spectacular “Hotel Netherlands” at one point. It had Dutch-inspired architecture to further promote the brand.

Many Delta towns, often referred to as the legacy communities, began as steamboat landings, and continued to depend on steamers to transport freight and connect the residents to the outside world. The Netherlands Route was an earlier century’s Delta brand, to support the recreational and agricultural economies.
PRODUCT BRANDING

In addition to branding the Delta as a unique destination experience, unique produce of the Delta were branded and promoted with labels applied to wooden fruit and vegetable crates from the early 1900s until the early 1970s.

To learn more, Commission staff visited with Jim Dahlberg back in 2013. Jim was a President of the Sacramento River Delta Historical Society and one of the founding members of the Pear Fair.

Known as “Jimbo” by Delta residents, Jim grew up in Walnut Grove and began collecting vintage fruit labels in the 1960s. His wife, Barbara, was born and raised in Walnut Grove. Over time, Jim acquired thousands of vintage fruit labels. Together, Jim and Barbara collected “a million stories” about the Delta, its history, and its people.

As in destination marketing, Netherland themes and images were depicted on vintage labels for Delta produce. The tagline for Rio Vista Brand pears was the “Capital of the California Netherlands.” A Walnut Grove packing house produced the Rivermaid Brand using Dutch imagery. Holland Brand asparagus originated from a farm in the historic Holland Land District near Clarksburg.

Brands like Wingdam Brand pears reflect other unique aspects of the Delta. Wing dams were used to reduce or eliminate bank erosion by controlling the flow of the water. Wingdam Orchard was located adjacent to a wing dam on the Sacramento River at Ryde.

These Dutch-inspired brands may have been influenced by farmers’ heritage as well as the landscape. According to Jim, tulips used to be grown in the Delta, and some of the North Delta levees were constructed “Holland style” which were wider at the base.

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Some brand labels reflected personal meanings to individual farms. The label for Diamond S Brand pears has images of Pearl and Whiskey Mary, the Simpson family’s beloved horses.

In some instances, brands include a tagline, like Pride of the River Brand pears. This brand captures the scenic Sacramento River landscape.
Potatoes are one of the top 20 agricultural crops grown in the Delta with a little more than 4,000 acres producing a crop worth almost 50 million dollars a year. Potatoes are native to South America, with 99% of all cultivars worldwide traceable back to a single genetic origin in Peru. They are related to the deadly nightshade, a poisonous plant, and the green leaves of a potato plant are toxic to humans. Introduced to the rest of the world only four centuries ago, the lowly tuber with the poisonous accessories has become an incredibly popular vegetable all over the world, but nowhere is its history so fascinating as in the California Delta.

FROM MUD TO SPUD

At the turn of the 20th century, Los Angeles investors, wealthy from citrus, real estate, and oil, as well as others from the East and Europe began reclaiming the “swampland” of the Delta. These investors were soon leasing Delta peat lands to energetic farmers, many of them Asian immigrants. A major crop planted on these rich peat farmlands was potatoes, and Stockton became known throughout the United States as the “great western potato mart.”

THE RISE OF THE “POTATO KINGS”

Japanese immigrant Ushijima Kinji, later known as George Shima, arrived in San Joaquin County in 1889 and worked his way from migrant laborer to farmer in the Delta. The soft, rich soil was ideal for growing smooth-skinned, high-quality potatoes, and Shima perfected the sub-irrigation of the crop using narrow trenches, or “spud ditches,” every thirty rows of plants. Shima was a moderately successful farmer when he struck up an important friendship with Lee Allen Phillips, a Delta reclamation agent. Phillips would purchase Delta land, arrange for reclamation and draining, then lease the land to Shima, who moved in crews of Asian workers to clear the tules and plant potatoes.
By 1906, Shima was growing more potatoes than any other farmer in the world, leasing over 14,000 acres from Phillips. He became famous nationally when the Stockton Record published a widely reprinted story on “the Potato King.” His lavish yearly entertainments for bankers, produce merchants, and journalists became legendary. He and Lee Phillips, among others, financed the construction of the luxurious Stockton Hotel, which still stands in downtown Stockton. Shima first purchased, rather than leased, Delta farmland in 1910: 800 acres on what is now known as the Shima Tract. A year later, he bought another 800 acres on McDonald Island, west of Stockton. These land buys, combined with his high profile and lavish lifestyle, apparently contributed to the statewide agitation for California’s Alien Land Law of 1913, which forbade Japanese, Chinese, Indian and Korean immigrant farmers from purchasing land and severely restricted land leasing.

In the 1920s, Shima had to dismantle his “potato empire” due to the Alien Land Laws (in California, there was the 1913 Act and an additional Act passed in 1920), and he became a leader in the fight against these discriminatory laws. He was president of the national Japanese Association of America from 1908 through 1925, the most important leader for Japanese in the United States. He also left a generous legacy of supporting students at the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University. He is memorialized in San Joaquin County by the Shima Center at San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton. But did you know there was a slightly earlier Chinese immigrant also known as a “Potato King?” Here’s the story of Chin Lung.

**POTATO KINGS – THE PREQUEL**

Chin Lung was one of the first Chinese farmers to lease Delta farmland. In September 1901, he planted a crop of potatoes on his 1,100-acre lease just west of Stockton. Chin’s potato crop hit the Eastern markets almost two months ahead of competitors from other areas and he suddenly became wealthy.

Delta potatoes not only reached the market first, they could also be grown in the rich peat soil with little or no fertilizer, and they had a pale skin that Eastern customers found attractive. Yields in the Delta were significantly higher than elsewhere in California or the United States. The 1910 Agricultural Census reported the average potato yield in other regions of California to be 147 bushels per acre, whereas the San Joaquin County yield was between 300 and 800 bushels per acre!

In spite of racist editorials and exclusionary laws, Caucasians in the Delta region generally liked the Chinese. The Stockton city attorney, for example, spoke in favor of further Chinese immigration and he and his law partner helped Asians ineligible for citizenship form corporations so they could continue farming. Census records show that in 1910 Chinese farmers were leasing 5,381 acres of San Joaquin County farmland, and by 1920, the acreage leased by Chinese had increased to about 13,500 acres.

Between 1901 and 1925, Chin Lung farmed at least 1,000 acres each season and was the principal employer of Chinese laborers in San Joaquin County. In 1910, Chin purchased 2,200 acres of Delta farmland of his own, northwest of Stockton near White Slough - the first agricultural property in San Joaquin County purchased by a Chinese man. Two years later, Chin purchased another tract, but by 1923 Chin, just like George Shima, lost all his holdings in California and Oregon as a result of the discriminatory Alien Land Law Acts of 1913 and 1920 in California (Oregon passed a similar Act in 1923). Considering Caucasians had been in the area less than a hundred years, the rush to exclude later immigrants was rank hypocrisy, fueled by racism, greed, and envy on the part of the settlers of European descent.

This article was adapted with permission from the San Joaquin Historical Society blog, originally dated March 20, 2013, by David Stuart.

Learn more about the Historical Society at [www.sanjoaquinhistory.org](http://www.sanjoaquinhistory.org)
January

First three weekends in January and February - Sandhill Crane Preserve Tours - LODI
www.wildlife.ca.gov/regions/3/crane-tour

Jan 19 - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration - STOCKTON
www.visitcadelta.com/calendar/dr-martin-luther-king-jr-celebration/2020-01-19

Jan 23 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting - SACRAMENTO
www.deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings

Jan 27 - Chinese New Years’ Celebration - BRENTWOOD
www.visitcadelta.com/calendar/chinese-new-year-celebration

February

Feb 8-9 - Port Wine and Chocolate Weekend - CLARKSBURG
www.oldsugarmill.com/events.html

Feb 15 - Chinese New Year Celebration - LOCKE
www.locke-foundation.org

Feb 22 - California Duck Days at Yolo Bypass - WEST SACRAMENTO
www.yolobasin.org/californiaduckdays

Feb 27 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting
www.deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings

Feb 29 - Annual Delta Blues Festival Benefit Concert - ANTIOCH
www.deltabluesfestival.net

Feb 29 - Brazilian Carnaval - CLARKSBURG
www.oldsugarmill.com/events.html

Feb 29 - Asian New Year Celebration - ISLETON
www.isletonchamber.com/event/asian-new-year-2020

March

Mar 1 - Chinese New Year Celebration - STOCKTON
www.stocktonnyc.org

Mar 7 - The Bob McMillen Annual Memorial Fishing Tournament - STOCKTON
www.sjparks.com/events-calendar

Mar 19 - Delta Protection Commission Meeting
www.delta.ca.gov/calendar/delta-protection-commission-meeting-march-19-2020

Mar 25 - Delta Conservancy Board Meeting
www.deltaconservancy.ca.gov/board-meeting-materials

Mar 26 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting
www.deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings