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# South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

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This view of the Land and Town Buildings at the corner of Third and K in 1904 is from Third Avenue looking southwest toward K Street behind the buildings. The Boarding House is on the right, the small company office is center, a two-story bunkhouse is behind the two buildings, and the large Company barn is on the left.

## **Packingtown on K Street**

Part One . . . by Steve Schoenherr

The most famous Packingtown in America was in Chicago during the late 1800s. It was where millions of animals were "disassembled" into processed food, and where thousands of immigrants found jobs and homes. Chula Vista also had its

Packingtown, located on K Street, where millions of lemons were boxed and shipped to the nation. Like Chicago, it was built by the railroad on the outskirts of the town and provided housing as well as jobs. Unlike Chicago, it was not the brutal cesspool described by Upton Sinclair in his 1906 novel *The Jungle*. Rather, it was a vital part of making Chula Vista the "Lemon Capital of the World."



On this 1953 aerial photo of K Street, the numbered sites are (1) Sunkist packing plant (today Bank of America) at Third and K; (2) Hatz Trucking at 848 Third; (3) the bus turnaround, later Dairy Queen (today Jack in the Box); (4) the Try-Angle restaurant inside the triangle of land formed by the railroad spur curving from Third to K; (5) Bryce's Market and Reuter Block (today empty lot); (6) The Coffee Cup restaurant at 297 K; (7) Beatty chicken barn, later Kenworthy Flowers at 276 K; (8) C. C. Alley house at 258 Kearney; (9) Shuttleworth orchard at Third and J; (10) Owen house at 736 Third, later Masonic Temple; (11) Dawson Nursery and old Boarding House; (12) site of Dawson Nursery after 1955 (today BJ's); (13) Serv-all factory (today Marquez); (14) T & D Transfer at 345 K; (15) Vegetable Exchange; (16) Laubmayer at 365 K; (17) Spencer Pest Control garage; (18) Davidson house at 388 K; (19) Chula Vista High School; (20) Spencer house at 799 Fourth, and row of 7 company bungalows; (21) Holmes house at 786 Fourth; (22) Bergen house at 780 Fourth; (23) Slauson house at 772 Fourth; (24) Griefe house at 769 Fourth; (25) Verde Park subdivision.

When the Santa Fe Railroad took over most of Frank Kimball's Rancho de la Nacion in 1880, it promised Kimball to bring a transcontinental terminal to National City and to develop the 5000 acres that would become Chula Vista. The Santa Fe stockholders created a subsidiary, the San Diego Land and Town Company, to build the Sweetwater Dam and the National City and Otay Railroad (NC&O) to provide water and transportation to its new lands. Under the guidance of Company general manager William Dickinson, the town of Chula Vista would grow up around the railroad station on Third Avenue at Center Street. Dickinson worked from his office in National City, in a small building built on a foundation of rocks from the Sweetwater Gorge. He also had sales offices in San Diego and on the northeast corner of Third Avenue and F Street in Chula Vista.<sup>1</sup>



The family of William Dickinson, on left with cigar, with his daughter Mary and John Boal standing on top.

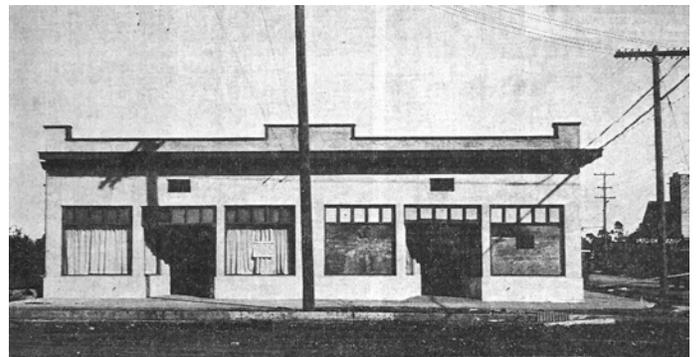
The working headquarters of the Land and Town Company was established one mile south of Chula Vista at the junction of Third Avenue and K Street (known as 3rd Street until 1922). Buildings were constructed on the north side of K Street between Third Avenue and Fourth Avenue (known as Second Avenue until 1941). A spur of the NC&O railroad curved onto K Street 600 feet west to a large hay

barn, wagon shed and granary. Behind the barn were bunk houses for workers and a two-story boarding house. Along Fourth Avenue north from K Street was a row of seven small bungalows built for workers.<sup>2</sup>

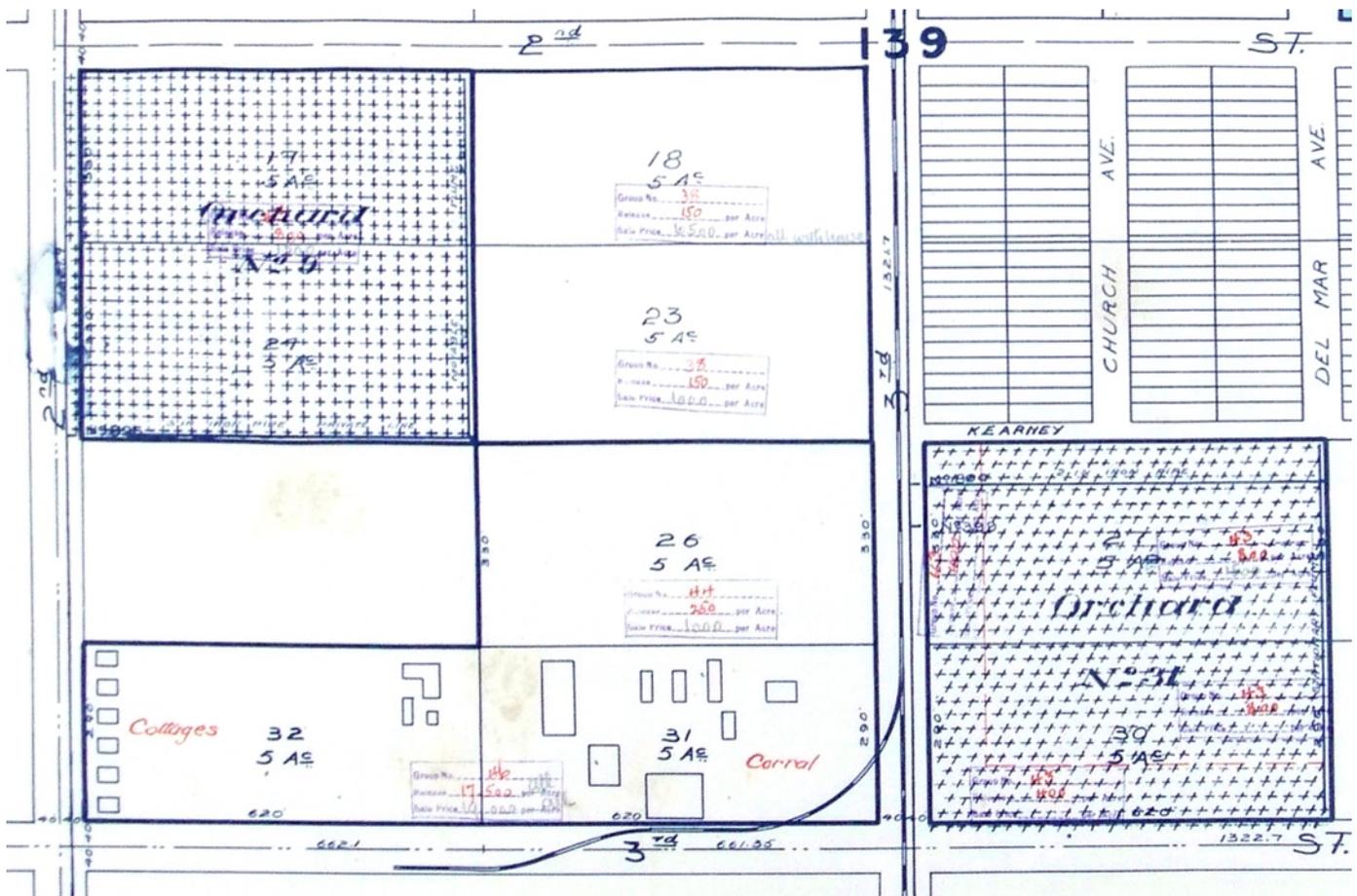


Land and Town Company workers at the Boarding House 1888.

It was here on K Street that the work began to plant lemon trees. The first Agricultural Superintendent hired by the Company was Francis E. Prendergast, a civil engineer born in Dublin, Ireland. With his wife Mary and seven children, Prendergast lived in a home built near the Melrose station of the NC&O railroad at J Street and Third Avenue, across the street from John Clouse who supervised construction work for the Company. Prendergast was one of the eleven charter members that built the Congregational Church in 1890 on land donated by the Land and Town Company.<sup>3</sup>



The office of the Land and Town Company was at the northeast corner of Third Avenue and F Street in Chula Vista. (Chula Vista Star-News Feb. 23, 1969)



1894 planting map of Francis E. Prendergast shows K Street (3rd St.) between Third Avenue and Fourth Avenue (2nd) where the buildings, corral and cottages of the Land and Town Company were located (San Diego Land Company Map Book #4, Box 40EN-42, Sweetwater Authority Archives).

The first lemon trees were purchased from nurseries as far away as Florida, and planted in orchards that took three years to mature. Prendergast kept careful records in a series of planting maps that noted plant varieties and spacing. His efforts to grow oranges failed, while the Eureka, Lisbon and Villa Franca lemons flourished in the Chula Vista soil and climate. In 1894 Prendergast moved to Redlands where he found success developing orange groves in the San Bernardino valley.<sup>4</sup>

Heman Copeland replaced Prendergast in 1894 and served as Horticultural Superintendent for the next 13 years. Heman was born in Plymouth Mass. and came to Chula Vista in 1887, joining his cousin Fred Copeland who was one of the founders of National City in 1868. Fred was an engineer who had married Mary Kimball in New Hampshire in 1857, and came west to help Mary's brothers build National City.

Heman and his wife Caroline bought their first 5-acre lemon orchard in 1887 and over the next several years expanded to 80 acres, the largest lemon orchard in the area.<sup>5</sup>

The early 1890s was a time of explosive growth in California for the citrus industry. Grower co-ops were formed to process and market the fruit from the rapidly increasing number of orchards. The Land and Town Company helped to organize the first such co-op in the South Bay, the Chula Vista Fruit Growers Association in 1893. The Company leased the old brick warehouse of Gordon, Isham and Kimball at 24th Street near the railroad yard in National City to pack the fruit of the Association. The Company and the Association also owned two lumber mills in northern California for wooden boxes used to pick the lemons in the field and for shipping from the warehouse.<sup>6</sup>



A crew of the Orchard Operating Company planting lemon trees in Orchard #102 of the old Land and Town Company at First Avenue and G Street in 1923 (courtesy Tom Spencer).

The long drought that began in 1897 brought the downfall of the Land and Town Company. In 1902, it was divided into three parts. The Sweetwater Water Company took over the dam and water system; the San Diego Fruit Company was set up to manage the orchards; the San Diego Land Company took ownership of property. The NC&O was sold to John D. Spreckels and became part of his San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railroad. John Boal presided over this reorganization after becoming general manager following the death of William Dickinson in 1891.<sup>7</sup>

The first fruit packing houses appeared in Chula Vista as the drought ended and the Land and Town Company broke up. The railroad was the key to shipping fruit to market quickly and efficiently.



John Boal riding carriage in National City 1888 (Courtesy Sweetwater Authority).



Workers boxing lemons in the National City packing plant of the San Diego Fruit Company 1908.

Charles Mohnike was an orchard owner who opened his own packing house next to the tracks on F Street. John Boal started a packing house for the San Diego Fruit Company near the railroad depot on Third

Avenue in 1903. Edmund B. Leach opened a packing plant in National City, and in 1907 moved to a new building in Chula Vista next to the tracks at Landis and Center Street. The Stewart Fruit Company in 1910 built a packing plant on Landis near Leach.<sup>8</sup>



The Randolph packing plant at 350 K Street in 1914.

The largest of these new packing plants was built on K Street by the Randolph Fruit Company of Los Angeles. It was the packing plant for the Chula Vista

Fruit Growers' Association, the co-op started by the Land and Town Company. In 1909 when the Randolph plant was built, there were 40 large growers who were members of the Association, representing 450 acres of lemons. Randolph could take advantage of the resources available on K Street developed over the years by the Land and Town Co. Railroad cars could be loaded on the spur track. Barns and sheds were available for storage. The packing plant employed Japanese workers from the Hatashita camp on the southeast corner of Third Avenue and K Street. Other workers could stay in the bunk houses and bungalows and the boarding house.<sup>9</sup>

Fred Phelps became the manager of the boarding house in 1909. He was the brother of Hulcy Phelps who came to Chula Vista in 1889 to work for the Copeland Orchards, then for the Land and Town Company for 30 years. Fred was well-known chef in Chula Vista, preparing and serving breakfast and supper every day. "Lunches were packed for the



Loading fruit boxes on the NC&O boxcar at the "Old Red Barn" packing plant in Bonita. Russell C. Allen created the packing shed in 1894 for the Sweetwater Fruit Company. (Courtesy Mary Oswell)

workers which was rather an undertaking with one hundred men involved. Mr. Phelps kept the records of the employees -- hours worked, lodging, and meals. He also supervised the four employees at the boarding house, two of which were a day cook and a night cook." In 1927 Mrs. Elsie Irwin took over as manager of the boarding house and Fred stayed on as chef. The newspaper reported that Elsie "has planned a special service service for working girls and persons employed in the various industries of this city. She will serve a special plate lunch and has arranged arranged for a menu which is supplied supplied by the inimitable chef, Fred Phelps, who has a reputation in this vicinity. Mrs. Irwin has arranged for the comfort of the girls by providing easy chairs, swings and many other conveniences." <sup>10</sup>

**Special Plate Lunch**

Mrs. Elsie Irwin, of Irwin Boarding House, Third Avenue and K Street, announces that beginning Monday, she will serve

**Special 35c Plate Lunch**

Catering especially to working girls and employes of various industries.

No item over 15c.      Sandwiches to order 10c and 15c  
Cold Drinks, 5c.      All cuts Cake and Pie, 5c and 10c  
Coffee with cream, 10c      Ask for one of our menus

**Fred Phelps, Famous Chef, Back on Duty**

**MRS. ELSIE IRWIN, Prop.**  
303 K Street, Corner Third Avenue

(Chula Vista Star, 20 Feb. 20, 1931)

The success of the Randolph plant encouraged John Boal to move his National City packing plant to K Street. In 1914 the parts of the old Land and Town Company were sold to J. P. Morgan and became a new company, the San Diego Land Corporation. This corporation revived the horticultural headquarters on the northwest corner of Third Avenue and K Street to administer the Corporation's lemon orchards. In 1916 Boal gave the opposite corner, where the Hatashita camp had been located, to a new grower

co-op, the Chula Vista Citrus Association (CVCA). The CVCA took over a packing plant on this corner built in 1912 for growers who previously had sent their lemons to National City. The CVCA was affiliated with the California Fruit Growers Exchange that marketed fruit under the Sunkist logo, and the local packing house became known as the Sunkist plant.<sup>11</sup>



MOD packing plant in Chula Vista at 4th and F St.

The CVCA would grow into the largest packing plant in Chula Vista, but it was not the only one. In 1923 a fire destroyed the Randolph building on K Street, and the company moved to Third Avenue and Madrona. In 1926, Randolph and Leach merged to form a new co-op, the Chula Vista Mutual Lemon Association that was affiliated with the Mutual Orange Distributors (MOD). This co-op built a new packing plant at Fourth and F Street, where the Parkwoods condos are today.<sup>12</sup>



The Insectary on K Street in 1920 (Monthly Bulletin of the Department of Agriculture, State of California, Jan.-Feb. 1920, p. 449).

The Insectary was another institution that appeared on K Street in 1917. Horace Armitage was the County Horticultural Commissioner in 1917 when he established a small research building on the south side of K Street near to the Randolph packing plant. This was part of the Department of Agriculture's new Bureau of Plant Industry and its program to breed beneficial insects to control harmful insects. The devastating mealybug had recently arrived to infest the orchards of California causing extensive damage. The Insectary raised thousands of Australian ladybug beetles that proved effective against the mealybugs. In 1927 the Insectary was moved to 511 G Street where it still stands today, Chula Vista Historic Site No. 29.<sup>13</sup>

To support the grower-members of the Sunkist packing plant on K Street, John Boal created the Orchard Operating Company in 1920. Like the CVCA, this company was a co-op, owned by the growers who received shares of stock based on acres under cultivation. Its purpose was to maintain the orchards, to plough and plant trees, to fertilize and weed, and to spray and fumigate. The company kept its machinery and supplies on the 10 acres of the north side of K Street between Third and Fourth Avenues. During peak season it put as many as 125 men into the orchards, and provided housing in bunk houses and the bungalows along Fourth Avenue.<sup>14</sup>

David Arthur "Art" Spencer was the foreman in charge of the Orchard Operating Company. He started working for John Boal's Land Company in 1914, living in the boarding house at first, then renting the bungalow at 799 Fourth Avenue. Two of his uncles also worked for the Company and lived in nearby bungalows along Fourth Avenue.<sup>15</sup>



Art Spencer married Nora Perman in 1928, and bought a house at 283 Twin Oaks. Nora was the daughter of Joseph Perman, who was opened Chula Vista's first barbershop at 296 Center Street on April 1, 1912. Above, Art and Nora pose with their two boys, Tom age 1 and Dean age 3.

Below, Art has his arms around Richard, left, and Fred Schaaf in 1926. The two brothers were sons of Frederick Schaaf, a blacksmith who worked for the Land and Town Company and its successors for 20 years. The brothers worked for Orchard Operating Company and were on the Browns baseball team with Art Spencer. (photos courtesy of Tom Spencer)



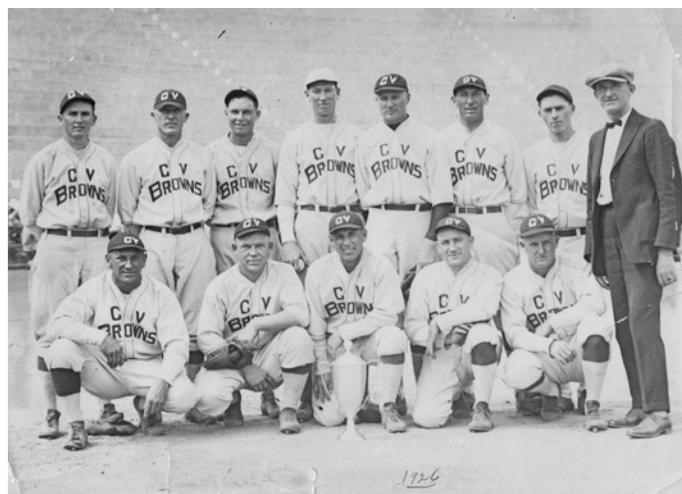


Art Spencer and Bill Latham fumigating orchards 1922.  
(courtesy Tom Spencer)

Art's friend Bill Latham also worked at the Orchard Operating Company and lived in one of the company bungalows on Fourth Avenue. Bill married Meneva Sherman who had moved from Utah to Otay in 1919 and later became postmaster of Palm City and Imperial Beach. Meneva wrote about the group of friends living around K Street and south to Otay. "There was a monthly social and business event in Otay at that time, called the Otay Welfare League. There was a business meeting and then a program and refreshments after the business. The Hyers had a ranch at Anita and Industrial. They had a daughter Viola, and we became good friends. One day Viola picked me up in her car and we went for a ride. We stopped at the old watch factory and went in. It was dirty and in bad repair, but we decided it would be a grand place to have a Halloween party, so we took the idea to the Otay Welfare League at their next meeting. Everyone worked and scrubbed to clean the place up. That started the ball rolling. A club was formed, called the San Souci Club. Walter Sharp was president. There was a young couple in Otay managing a turkey ranch, Dave and Arlene

Richardson. We became acquainted with them. Arlene gave dancing lessons to make a living. One of her students in that class was a young man by the name of Bill Latham. One night he came down to the Otay Watch Factory to a dance. Mrs. Bill Riley introduced him to me. We were married September 11, 1924. Bill Riley was for many years a foreman in the Chula Vista Citrus Association Packing House at Third and K Streets. Some people I remember at our dances were Bob McCan and Theresa Cox McCan, Johnny Greife, Claude and Ethel Brown. He was called Chula Vista Brown and was mayor at one time."<sup>16</sup>

Bill Riley lived in the big old orchard house at 769 Fourth that was built for Charles Hazard in 1909. This house was sold to John Greife who worked for the Orchard Operating Company and who lived there until it was finally torn down in the late 1940s. John's father, John Henry Greife, worked for the Land and Town Company from 1888 until he died in a hay baler accident on the Copeland orchard in 1909.<sup>17</sup>



Chula Vista Browns team picture from 1926, which lists the team members by their first initials and last names: (standing) O. Johnson, C. G. Smith, L. Kent, Mike Morrow, Art Spencer, Herb Smith, F. Dubranski, C. V. Brown, mgr. (kneeling) R. Schaaf, Mel Knutson, B. Foote, F. Schaaf and Gibbons (no first initial). Mike Morrow went on to become a well-known local coach, at San Diego High School from 1926 to 1950, then San Diego City College and the University of San Diego.  
(courtesy Tom Spencer)

C.V. Brown was a celery farmer who joined the parties at the Watch Factory and became friends with many of the men working on K Street. He became manager of the Class A League baseball team, the C. V. Browns, that won the county league championship



in 1915 and 1926. Art Spencer and the two Schaaf brothers played on both teams. Art was an outstanding pitcher who went undefeated in the 1926 season. Art Spencer and Fred Schaaf were also founding members of the volunteer fire department in 1921 and played on the department's baseball team. John Greife

joined the fire department later on, and was still a member along with Art Spencer until 1948 when the volunteers were disbanded.<sup>18</sup>

Meneva Latham and Theresa Cox went to school together as well as to the Watch Factory dances, and were in the first graduating class at Sweetwater High School in 1922. Theresa was the daughter of George Cox who moved from Riverside to become foreman of the CVCA packing plant in 1918. The first home of the Cox family was the old orchard house at Fourth and K built by A. H. Whittaker in the 1890s and sold to Azel H. Skinner, founder of Skinner Hardware Store in 1906. Azel's son Mark married Carrie Haines who grew up in the orchard home of lemon pioneer Seaman Haines at 671 Fourth Avenue. Carrie's sister Emily Haines married Jack King who was an agent for the Stewart Fruit Company. Theresa Cox packed lemons at age 14 to earn extra money for clothes. She survived a case of flu during the great epidemic of 1918, went on to attend San Diego State Teachers College and became teacher and principal at Hilltop Elementary School after World War II.<sup>19</sup>

On the east side of the packing house in 1919, Walter and Elizabeth Beatty built a home and a long chicken barn on two and a half acres. This property at 276 K Street was purchased by Ambrose and Harriett Wideman in 1931 and was passed on to their

daughter Gladys and her husband Hubert "Curly" Horn. Another daughter, Grace, lived in a house built next door at 270 K Street with her husband Pallas Tye after he retired from serving as a prison guard at Alcatraz. Their son, Edgar Tye, went to high school with Tom Spencer, and later became a county sheriff. In 1949 the property at 276 K Street was purchased by George and Mary Kenworthy who converted the chicken barn into flowers. The Kenworthy Flower Stand opened in 1956, remained in business for about 10 years, and then the property was developed into apartments. The Coffee Cup restaurant at 297 K was started by Phyllis King in 1957, later owned by Olga Pospichal.<sup>20</sup>

To Be Continued . . .

Unless otherwise noted, photos are from the Chula Vista Library John Rojas Collection. All footnotes will be included in the next installment.

Coming next in the July Bulletin:  
Part two of Packingtown on K Street.

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