



Kearney's Fruit Vale Estate

History Of Fruit Vale Estate:

" Mr. Kearney is a gentleman whose reputation for enterprise and energy is well known in Fresno County, and his plan proposes the combination of some 5,000 to 6,000 acres of good fruit land ---- 3,000 of which are now coming into bearing----under a simple management and to so conduct the fruit packing that the brand will be its own recommendation in every market of the world . . ."

Collis P. Huntington, 1894

The Evolution of the Fruit Vale Estate

Although agriculture was booming south and east of Fresno where a network of irrigation systems fanned out from nearby creeks to the colony farms, the fertile but the more arid west side area remained largely undeveloped. Irrigating this land would be a much more expensive proposition, and Kearney emphasized to the newspapers that it would be several years before he could begin improvements "in such a manner as to make it one of the most attractive spots in the state. . . to the mind of the reader. . . an impression of the extraordinary resources of the central portion of California and to illustrate what may be accomplished in a very brief period by a combination of intelligent labor, moderate capital, rich soil, abundance of water for irrigation. . . The remarkably rapid growth of trees and shrubs on the Fruit Vale Estate, covering a period of only seven years since they were planted is a constant source of wonder to visitors. . . ."

Kearney's inspiration for his park's design was the landscaped gardens at the Hotel Del Monte in Monterey, California created by Rudolph Ulrich. He had engaged Ulrich's services in 1889 to lay out a landscape plan for both the park and Chateau grounds. As associate of the distinguished American

landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Ulrich was Olmsted's chief designer for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and served as the chief horticulturalist for Brooklyn's Prospect Park. By 1900, the Kearney estate grounds were, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, "the most beautiful park on the West Coast."

The Sharrah Family. Born in a farmhouse on Chateau Fresno Avenue in 1912, Mildred Sharrah Foin's family moved to Kearney Park when she was seven years old. She played with Parker Frisselle, Jr. and upon a visit to the Mansion attic's art studio of his mother, Mildred was duly impressed with Dagmar's paintings and sculpture. On rainy school days, she recalls, S. Parker Frisselle would back out his "great big, I think it was a Lincoln, great big car," and drive many of the children to school, which was over a mile away. Mildred remembers wonderful years growing up in the park that included watching blacksmith Pete Luxhoi at his forge, climbing up to the top of the water tower, nibbling on cookies made by the Chinese cook, and canoeing on the lake while playing a ukulele.

The Waller Family. James Waller was employed as ranch foreman from 1921 to 1949. As Gertrude Waller Kovacevich remembers life with her sisters and brother: "Those were joyous, happy years. We were a small, self-contained community with our own grocery store, church, butcher shop and grammar school, and I grew up with the many different nationalities that lived there." Gertrude doesn't remember going into Fresno until she was in high school. One sister, Stella Waller Bradley, tells of their visits to the Kearney Store for ice cream bars. As with many of the Kearney kids, she remembers when her father paid the monthly store bill, Mr. Burnett would treat the children with a piece of candy.

The Kearney Years:

After thirteen years of colony farm and agribusiness activity in Fresno County (1869-1882) Kearney began his greatest challenge and triumph -- the development of the Fruit Vale Estate.

The initial plans for Kearney's ambitious land development venture began in late December of 1882. Kearney, an associate L.P. Drexler, and another premier Fresno developer Thomas Hughes held a series of meetings and toured an area west of the Central Pacific Railroad line. Three months later, both local newspapers announced Kearney's purchase of 6,800 acres of rich

land west and southwest of Fresno that appeared perfectly suited to irrigation.

Over the next four years, Kearney sought investors for his ambitious enterprise through his business connections in New York and Europe. By June 1885, his diary entries show that he was in London, established at the Metropole Hotel. During that summer, two significant names appear in Kearney's correspondence -- Dr. Edward B. Perrin and Captain George C. Cheape. He had met Dr. Perrin during his trip west to California 1869, and the shipboard friendship grew into a profitable business relationship. Dr. Perrin, who studied irrigation methods in Egypt and Spain and bought large tracts of land in the central San Joaquin Valley, had convinced Kearney that the Fresno land, if properly irrigated, would produce bountiful crops.

Through the Perrin connection, Kearney pursued Captain Cheape, a shrewd Scottish capitalist who had invested heavily in a Perrin enterprise, the Fresno Canal and Irrigation Company. An intensive series of cables, telegrams and meetings in December, 1886 finalized Captain Cheape's major role in the Fruit Vale enterprise.

The first months of 1887 were filled with activity as Kearney returned to Fresno to focus on the estate's initial development. He engaged E.W. Hilgard, head of the University of California Agriculture Department, to prepare a report on the quality of the soil and the types of plants, bushes and trees that would thrive on the land. When Captain Cheape arrived in San Francisco, Kearney wined and dined his major investor. After reviewing the positive results of Hilgard's feasibility study, Cheape gave his final blessing and financial backing to Kearney's plan.

In the first years of the 1890s, Kearney was intensely involved in a high-power promotional effort to entice investors to purchase 10 and 20 acre farms on the estate. He also focused on the development of vineyards and acres of diversified crops that were directly under his ownership. By April 1893, the Fresno Republican published its first large article on the Fruit Vale Estate: ". . . neat farmhouse and barns dot the landscape, surrounded by large fields of alfalfa and grain glistening in the warm sunshine and rippling before the gentle breeze. . . Several large vineyards have been developed as a part of the grand scheme including the Ten Broeck Vineyard, the La Favorita Raisin Vineyard Company, the Nestell Vineyard, and the Paragon Vineyard. . ."

By the spring of 1903, the Fruit Vale Estate's thousands of acres of raisin vineyards, fruit trees, and alfalfa were in full production. Situated at the center of the extensive operations was 240-acre Chateau Fresno Park, the Superintendent's Lodge (present-day Kearney historic site museum), and the ranch town.

A list of the estate's operations in 1903 included:

- general store reading & family refreshment rooms
- carriage house & stables
- meat market & cold storage plant
- warehouse raisin packing-house w/ large capacity raisin dryer
- four hay barns
- dairy
- servants' quarters w/ ranch kitchen
- employee cottages & 100-seat ranch dining room
- blacksmith & wheelwright shop
- livestock barns
- 100-room workers' quarters
- poultry department w/ 3,000 chick brooder
- bell tower
- tea house w/ palm-frond roof
- lumber yard
- post office w/ long distance pay telephone
- Southern Pacific RR spur
- skimming station of San Joaquin Ice Co. Creamery
- Coal-powered electric generator
- tank house

In the first years of the 20th century, Kearney published a remarkable record of his achievements in a volume titled *Fresno California and the Evolution of the Fruit Vale Estate, Illustrated*. This 180-page landscape photograph book presented the development of the estate through a series of dramatic images. Many were 'before and after' shots, showing the same view in the early 1890s and again in the early 1900s.

The Park and the Boulevard

In early spring of 1891, cultivation of the Chateau Fresno Park began, with its projected 240 acres of garden landscape. In early 1892, activity intensified with plantings of rose gardens, stands of fruit trees and vineyards. It was on the Park's southern border that Kearney developed the ranch town that became the headquarters for the Fruit Vale Estate .

The initial planting of trees in the park commenced in 1892. According to Kearney's notes, this included 500 eucalyptus, 1,000 acacia, 20 pepper, 90 camphor, 90 magnolia, 150 California black walnut, 75 mission olives, 50 cypress, and an unrecorded number of evergreens such as redwood, cedar and spruce. Also part of the plan were bunya-bunya trees, juniper, bamboo, cork oak, fan palms, wisteria and other blooming vines, as well as a small lake lined with shade trees

A banner newspaper headline in April of 1893 announced "Fresno's Fine Avenue – Eleven miles of Unsurpassed Driveway Through a Rippling Sea of Grain and Vines and Fruit – The Chateau Fresno Boulevard." Planted with some 50,000 trees and shrubs, the main avenue of the three-lane boulevard featured palm, eucalyptus, and oleander, with the outer lanes lined in Monterey cypress and pampas grass. The road to the south was intended for pedestrian and bicycle traffic; the road to the north for an electric streetcar line that never materialized. Wagons, horse-drawn buggies and eventually the new horseless carriages drove down the center stretch of road.

Today, the seven-mile drive from the entrance to Kearney Boulevard in downtown Fresno westward through the vineyards and orchards to the park is an impressive visual introduction for tourists to the Kearney story.

Kearney's tree-lined Boulevard extends four miles to the west of the park to the town of Kerman.

The University Ranch Years

M. Theo Kearney passed away on May 27, 1906 at age 64 aboard the British luxury liner Caronia. In the Raisin King's final will, he bequeathed the 5,400 Fruit Vale Estate to the Regents of the University of California with the wish that they establish an experimental station as an adjunct to the University's College of Agriculture.

The distribution of Kearney's estate, including Kearney Park and Kearney Mansion, to the University of California was confirmed by the probate court in June of 1910, following an unsuccessful attempt by San Francisco labor leader Denis Kearney to prove he was M. Theo's first cousin. Ralph Frisselle, who had been Kearney's superintendent, continued as general manager for the University from 1906 until his death in 1912. His son, S. (Samuel) Parker Frisselle, managed the property from 1912 until the end of the University period in 1949.

For the first half of the 20th century, the Kearney Vineyard Ranch, as it came to be known, continued to play an important role in California agriculture. Articles in the Historical Society Archives highlight aspects of the land's vitality. In 1913, the Pacific Rural Press featured an extensive analysis of the estate. Dubbing the Kearney Ranch "one of the greatest ranches in California," the piece described its ownership and policies, drainage and fertilization, progress, and raisin production, noting that there was a yield of 735 tons in 1912. In the July, 1916 issue of The Olive Journal, S. Parker Frisselle wrote of the commercial crop of olives that was being cultivated on Kearney Vineyard land. Plans to double the acreage to 160 were revealed, and Frisselle gave a detailed report on the varieties of olives being produced along with predictions of future industry growth. With the headline "Begin Cotton Ginning at Kearney," a February 1920 Fresno Morning Republican article told readers about the installation of a new two-stand cotton gin at Kearney Vineyard. The lengthy piece reported on the location of the machinery, the production of the finest quality of cotton at Kearney, and provided a step-by-step description of the cotton ginning operation.

S. Parker Frisselle

By the time the Fresno Republican newspaper profiled S. Parker Frisselle in a December, 1938 "Meet Mr. Frisselle" biography, the manager of the Kearney Vineyard was a prominent member of the state's agribusiness community. Involved for years in both the state and county Chamber of Commerce, he also served as president of the Agricultural Labor Bureau of the San Joaquin Valley for ten years and led the organization of the Associated Farmers of California. Proud of the University's involvement with Valley agriculture, Frisselle stated in the 1916 Olive Journal article that "On this ranch, the most skilled men in the various departments. . .furnish to all the community a center from which a great diversity of information and instruction may be given out to all who will avail themselves of the opportunity. Demonstrations are held. . .of agricultural and animal husbandry industries, and much valuable knowledge is thus furnished." In addition to his role in Valley agriculture, the residents of Kearney Park have fond memories of his quiet and kind temperament, recalling him as a "gentle person."

The First Mistress of Kearney Park

Profiled throughout her years at the Kearney Vineyard as "The First Mistress of Kearney Park," Dagmar Bradford came to Fresno in 1912 as the seventeen-year-old bride of S. Parker Frisselle. The San Francisco Chronicle described her as an accomplished musician and vocalist and enthusiastic sportswoman who could ride, drive, swim, play polo and was an expert shot. Over the years, the Fresno Republican featured stories and photo layouts of Dagmar's many and varied parties in Kearney Park, her elegant fashions in poses around Kearney Mansion, her stylish riding attire on the boulevard, and European sojourns. An accomplished artist, she worked in the attic of Kearney Mansion and a pink stucco studio on F Street, causing a revolutionary change of dress at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco when she decided to don "a stout pair of blue overalls" to facilitate her work as a sculptor. Her only son, S. Parker Jr. was born in the Mansion in 1914. Dagmar also flirted with a film career. On April 16, 1925, the world premier of "Man and Maid" was held at Fresno's Kinema Theater with Dagmar Desmond in the role of Countess Odette. She made only one other movie before deciding to "come home because I did not like the eighteen hour days and was accustomed to a life of luxury." After the Frisselles divorced in the 1930s, Dagmar moved to northern California.

Stories from the Ranch

Over the span of four decades as the center of the University ranch operations, Kearney Park was home to a close-knit community of families. Vivid descriptions of growing up in the park – schools days, the Big House (as Kearney Mansion was known), adventures in the 'jungle' (the children's name for the park), regular visits to the general store, and swimming on long, hot summer afternoons – all emerge from the oral histories of the Kearney kids.

The Kearney Store

At the center of community life at Kearney Park was the quintessential general store – "Absolutely stocked with everything. . .you never needed to go into town!" Complete with a big pot-bellied stove and presided over for many years by Glenn Burnett, the Kearney Store served as the meeting place for everyone on the ranch. The memories of this special place are filled with a myriad of sights and pungent smells -- barrels filled with crackers,

potatoes and onions, a huge pickle jar, the oiled wooden floor, a glass locker filled with cool beer and soda, long counters and shelves stacked with dry goods and cooking supplies, and the Kearney post office. The penny gum machine was an object of much interest to all the children as the lucky recipient of a piece wrapped in red could claim a candy bar from Mr. Burnett! A family's bill was paid on a monthly basis, with all purchases recorded on charge tickets. LeRoy Cox, a supervisor for the county sheriff's department during the 1950s remembers when the Kearney Store finally closed its doors in 1956. "The store looked like a museum. Shelves with items from floor to ceiling. It still had stock from the 1800s. The inventory was really something. . .high button shoes with button hooks, high top shoes, vintage type clothing, farm equipment. . ."

The Kearney School

All of the Kearney kids have detailed memories of their two-room school house – and their mode of transportation to school! Pulled by two horses named Romeo and Juliet, the long, open wagon was built with railed steps leading up the back and benches on each side plus two benches down the middle. In winter, some students would get off and run alongside the wagon to keep warm. The rooms – one for the first four grades and one for the upper four grades -- were separated by large moveable doors which could be opened for school programs. The building also featured two stoves and a screened lunch room.

In the 1940s, Kearney residents decided to raise funds to build a new facility, and with the help of a mother's club, Houghton-Kearney School was constructed and opened by 1950. The Kearney structure was later purchased and moved to the town of San Joaquin where it now serves as a Catholic church.

In one of the Servants' Quarters first-floor rooms, a branch of the Fresno County Library provided books for park residents. Dakota Rose "Kato" Burnett, wife of Glenn Burnett, served as the town's librarian. Open once a week, "the library would come out and bring new books. . .we just checked them out and brought them home." The library room also served as a popular (and respectable) meeting place for the ranch teenagers.

Ranch Families

There were many families who called the ranch their home over the years. A few are mentioned here.

The Kunishige Family. Harry T. (Tozuchi) Kunishige immigrated to America in the first years of the 20th century, and after experiencing the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, he came to Fresno. He was employed as the ranch chief chef, butler and handyman. His daughter, Michiko, remembers that the Kearney School teacher had a difficult time pronouncing the Kunishige children's Japanese names. Instead she gave them American names. Two of her brothers kept their new names of "Kearney" and "Fred" throughout their lives. Michiko, however, wanted to retain her given name and so refused to answer when the teacher addressed her as "Rose." In May of 1942, a bus came to Kearney Park to take the Kunishiges and other Japanese families to the Fresno Assembly Center and the family was eventually relocated to the Jerome Arkansas internment camp for the duration of World War II.

The Gonzales Family. Ralph and Maria Gonzales came to Kearney Park as newlyweds in 1938. Ralph obtained a job as one of the caretakers of the Mansion's grounds through his father-in-law, Francisco Munoz, who was employed as one of Parker Frisselle's assistants. The Gonzales boys, Fred, Art, Alfred and Louie grew up chasing peacocks and playing with Navarro family cousins in what they called the "jungle."

The Kearney Site Today

"I am very proud of the state and county that have been my home for thirty-five years. . . .Kearney avenue and Kearney park will be living things of beauty centuries hence that will keep my name and memory green. . . ."

M. Theo Kearney, *Fresno Morning Republican*, January 1904

What remains of the estate and ranch of M. Theo Kearney is now one of the Fresno County's most important agricultural historic sites and includes:

- 11-mile long Kearney Boulevard
- 225-acre Kearney Park
- Five original structures: Superintendent's Lodge, Servants' Quarters, Carriage House, Ice House, and Tea House.

The site lends itself to telling the story of the colony farm system and the development of the raisin industry. The story of the development of agribusiness in California's San Joaquin Valley and the Valley's transformation into the most productive agricultural region in the world can also be explored at the site of the Kearney estate.

The Fresno Historical Society's relationship with the site began in 1962, twelve years after the County of Fresno began operating the Kearney estate grounds as a public park. In July 1962, the Society's President, Edwin Eaton, announced that the organization would begin partnering with Fresno County to care for the Kearney site. Specifically, the Society would take on the administration of the Kearney Superintendent's Lodge as a historic site museum, known as Kearney Mansion Museum, as well as assume responsibility for the Servants' Quarters, Carriage House and Ice House. The first years of administration saw the Society establish its headquarters in the Servants' Quarters and begin the work of restoring the Superintendent's Lodge to reflect the Kearney era. M. Theo Kearney inhabited the Lodge from its completion in 1903 until his death in 1906, and by 1962 many of the original artifacts from the house were missing. Thanks to the generosity of many, a significant number of the original pieces that Kearney purchased for the Lodge were located in the 1960s and today the site features over 70% of its original furnishings and décor. By the late 1960s, the museum's school education program was established and the first public events were being staged.

During the next two decades, the Historical Society partnered with the County of Fresno on two major State-funded preservation grants that transformed the Lodge. An exterior restoration project accomplished structural repairs and returned the building's exterior to its original light gray color. In the mid-1980s work commenced on interior spaces of the Lodge and included replicating three wallpapers and conserving original ones, restoring all painted surfaces to their original finishes, as well as replicating the main carpet in the house, the Entry Hall's grape cluster chandelier globes, and the Jacobean Quatrefoil anaglypta ceiling. When the official ceremonies to reopen the museum were held in March, 1986, reproduction carpets in the Reception and Dining Rooms funded by the Society's La Paloma Guild also made their debut.

Other significant projects were completed through the 1990s. Again, State monies received through Fresno County funded the installation of a

temperature control system in the Servant's Quarters and the Superintendent's Lodge. In addition, the Historical Society took on the refurbishing of the Carriage House which included restoring the exterior and renovating the interior into a multi-purpose education center. This project was completed through the generosity of Valley families and community businesses.

Over the last ten years, funding received through the Fresno County Community Block Grant program enabled new roofs to be installed on the Superintendent's Lodge, the Servants' Quarters and the Ice House. The restoration of the Ice House also included the reconstruction of its north adobe wall to stabilize the structure. In 2003, the Superintendent's Lodge celebrated its centennial and as part of the year-long celebration, Sun-Maid Growers of California sponsored the publication of a 12-page magazine which highlights the history of "M. Theo Kearney and the History of the California Raisin." The centennial year also included a research project that focused on gathering the stories of people who lived and worked on the ranch during the University of California period.

Today, the Kearney historic site continues to provide a unique venue for interpreting and sharing Central California's agricultural history and the story of the Raisin King, M. Theo Kearney. Currently, the Fresno Historical Society is making plans to convert the historic house to museum-style exhibits with descriptive panels and photographs.