

PART 1

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# Fresnocentric

*The Heart of a Growing City*



# The Salad Bowl

“I don’t think I know what it is precisely (or even imprecisely) that Fresno has,” William Saroyan wrote. “Certainly I don’t know what it’s got that some other town hasn’t got. I do know, however, that it’s got me, because when I left Fresno in 1926 my idea was never to go back. That was a good idea until I discovered that New York was Fresno all over again.”

Saroyan didn’t expand on exactly what he meant by that last comparison, but there’s something to it. The Big Fig (or the Big Raisin, if you prefer) has this in common with the Big Apple: It’s a city of immigrants. The people who came to Fresno just came from different places than the East Coast immigrants, riding different historical waves.

In New York, hundreds of thousands arrived from Ireland in the mid-19th century on the heels of the potato famine. At the same time, crop failures in Germany prompted many there to head for the New World. Then, at the turn of the century, a

second wave of immigrants came crashing ashore at Ellis Island, bringing with it a large number of Italians and Russian Jews.

## The Chinese

In Fresno, the first wave of immigrants came not by sea, but by rail. They didn’t ride the rails, they built them. Chinese immigrants laid thousands of miles of track for the great railroad enterprises of the late 19th century, often settling in neighborhoods called Chinatowns in cities up and down the Golden State. Fresno was no exception, and its Chinatown lay just west of the Central Pacific rail line that got to Fresno in 1872. They ended up there because a group of white landowners got together and agreed not to sell any property east of the tracks to Chinese buyers.

The heart of Fresno’s Chinatown wasn’t a street, but a narrow strip of concrete called China Alley, which ran between F and G streets, from Inyo on the south up through Tulare. It was, literally, a back alley. But it was also a place to preserve their culture—and promote some less-than-legal activities—beyond the view of those who they knew would not approve.

Even more secretive was a series of tunnels the community built beneath the earth. They served a variety of purposes. Residents could hide valuables there. They could escape the heat ... or the authorities. The second consideration became all the more important as the area grew into a hub of Fresno nightlife, often drawing people from upscale neighborhoods to the other side of the tracks for legitimate and illegitimate activities alike. There were boxing matches and burlesque shows. During Prohibition, Chinatown was one place you could go to buy a stiff drink, no questions asked. Such illicit trade was profitable, so it’s hardly surprising

that rival Chinese unions known as tongs rose up to demand a piece of the action, maneuvering for influence over the narcotics trade and illegal lottery games.

In 1935, rumors of an impending tong war brought police with loaded shotguns into Chinatown. There they broke down four doors on G

Street and took 18 men into custody during a raid on lottery operations. Other officers took up positions around the neighborhood, with orders “to shoot at the first sign of open violence,” *The Bee* reported. The police chief, Frank Truax, cautioned people without business in the district to stay away

*“On the whole, Fresno’s made up of a lot of good people, and it’s got a lot of ethnic balance. Fresno’s done OK for itself.”*

— Roger Rocka

## Fresno population, 1940–1990

1940	60,685	
1950	91,669	(+51.1%)
1960	133,929	(+46.1%)
1970	165,655	(+23.7%)
1980	217,129	(+31.1%)
1990	354,202	(+63.1%)



and vowed to keep an armed contingent of officers patrolling the streets until the crisis had passed.

How many people escaped to the underground tunnels is unknown, but it's a sure bet that many did. The arched tunnels, wide enough for two people to walk abreast, offered a hidden refuge and, perhaps, also a means of access for the outside world. How far the tunnels went is unclear, but rumor has it that they may have extended under the tracks to the downtown area, allowing "reputable" Fresno's covert access to the seedier side of town.

In 2013, archaeologists began to dig through the area in earnest, looking to preserve any bits of history buried beneath sidewalks and since forgotten.

## The Japanese

Chinese immigrants weren't the only ones who lived in Chinatown. Over the years, the neighborhood and the surrounding area became home to numerous immigrants, including Italians, Basques, Russians, Germans and Greeks. Portuguese settlers came from the Azores, a string of nine islands in the Atlantic colonized by Portugal in the 15th century. In 1880, Fresno County was home to 449 Portuguese immigrants, nearly half of whom worked as shepherders.

But six decades later, on the eve of World War II, perhaps the most prominent group in Chinatown was the Japanese-American community. Indeed, the 900 block of F Street and the adjacent cross-streets of Tulare and Kern housed a plethora of businesses owned by Japanese-Americans. The twin Nippon buildings each ran half a block along



The Nippon Building on the northwest corner of Kern and F Streets, former home of the Rex and Cal theaters. 2013.

the north side of Kern and faced each other across F Street.

Komoto's Department store operated for many years just up the block, at the corner of Kern and G streets. Several restaurants owned by Japanese-Americans could be found in the area, along with fish markets and a drug store. There were also two massage parlors, a couple of pool halls, bicycle shops, laundries and various other businesses.

In many ways, the Japanese-American community seems to have enjoyed a good relationship with its neighbors. Roeding Park's Japanese Tea Garden featured an impressive wooden pagoda and the state's largest grove of cherry trees, with

more than 100 of them planted around the park's Lake Washington. In the summer of 1939, the local Japanese business association presented the city with a stone lantern two times the height of an average person. It was placed on an island in the middle of the lake at Roeding.

Everything changed less than three years later.

On December 7, 1941, the Empire of Japan unleashed an unprovoked assault on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, killing more than 2,400 Americans. The United States declared war on Japan the following day. Just over two months later, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order that authorized the military to set up

geographic zones from which “any and all persons may be excluded.”

The military used this sweeping power to declare the entire West Coast an exclusion zone for all persons of Japanese ancestry—foreign or American-born. They would be sent to hurriedly constructed assembly centers that served as temporary barracks while more permanent relocation centers were being built. The military couldn’t wait. The army deemed it necessary to separate the ethnic Japanese population from the general public as quickly as possible, fearful that those targeted for internment might harm national security interests.

This hardly explained why even Japanese-American infants in orphanages were included in the order, but the nation was in a panic, driven by a searing combination of fear and prejudice. The fear was perhaps, understandable, in light of the sudden and shocking assault on Pearl Harbor. But the racism it spawned, or perhaps exposed, was inexcusable.

Anyone who doubts that racism was in play need only read the words of Lt. Gen. John DeWitt, the man assigned to oversee the evacuation. DeWitt declared that “the Japanese race is an enemy race.” Two or even three generations of U.S. citizenship had no bearing on the situation, he said, because “the racial strains are undiluted.” When confronted with the fact that not a single Japanese-American had been accused of sabotage, DeWitt resorted to pretzel logic, calling it “a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken.”

The only thing disturbing was DeWitt’s thinking, which was shared by no less a personage than

California Governor Earl Warren. “The only reason that there has been no sabotage or espionage on the part of Japanese-Americans is that they are waiting for the right moment to strike,” Warren told Congress. As a Supreme Court justice nine years later, this same man would draft the majority opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education*—the decision that put a dagger in the heart of separate but “equal” education for whites and African-Americans.

In 1941, he had believed Japanese-Americans should be kept separate ... and entirely unequal.

As a result of this thinking, thousands of American citizens and legal residents were uprooted from their homes and told to “evacuate,” with only as much of their belongings as they could carry.

Houses were lost. So were businesses, which by that time numbered in the hundreds in Fresno alone. In many cases, evacuees had little choice but to sell their homes and other belongings to opportunistic neighbors for pennies on the dollar. When they returned, one survey indicated, four in five Japanese found their belongings had been “rifled, stolen or sold during their absence.”

In Fresno, scarcely a month after Roosevelt issued his order, nearly every carpenter in the city was hard at work building more than 500 buildings at two assembly centers designed to house the families who were about to be uprooted. One was in Pinedale to the north of town and the other at the Fresno County Fairground. For two months, the Pinedale center housed some 4,800 internees from the southern end of the Valley and the Pacific Northwest on an 80-acre parcel of land.

Those held at the fairgrounds came from closer to home: Fresno, Madera, Kings and Tulare counties, along with some from around Sacramento.

The American military sought to put the best face possible on the situation, declaring that the internees were being locked up for their own protection. With most Americans in favor of the program, the press went blithely along with the storyline. A front-page story in *The Bee*, chronicling the May 11 arrival of the first internees in Fresno, read as follows:

**“Free to come and go as they wish within the limits of new abodes provided for them by a considerate nation, more than 500 evacuated Japanese were in assembly centers near Pinedale and at the Fresno District Fairground today. All ... appeared pleased with their new surroundings and began planning for landscaping the grounds and preparing vacant acreage designated for recreational activities. Several Japanese families brought drapes, pictures and other items decorating their quarters.”**

From the description, one might have thought the internees were off for an extended weekend holiday. The reality was much different.

Elements of supposed normalcy were publicized. At both Fresno-area centers, for instance, high school students attended graduation ceremonies, complete with valedictorians. Noticeably absent: the friends and classmates with whom they had shared all but the final days of their time in high school. Newspapers were published at both sites, too (*The Logger* in Pinedale, site of an old



Internees dance at the Fresno Assembly Center in 1942. Near-nightly dances were among activities held to create the illusion of normalcy for those who had been rounded up and forced to leave their homes against their will. Library of Congress.

lumber mill, and *The Grapevine* at the fairgrounds), but the stories that appeared on their pages were subject to official censorship.

Amazingly, the Supreme Court upheld the supposed constitutionality of the internment despite such blatant violations of free speech and free press, not to mention freedom of assembly.

Stanley Umeda, who was born in Florin near Sacramento, recalled his first impression of the fairgrounds site in an interview with the Elk Grove Unified School District: “All the buildings looked exactly the same,” he said. “There was nothing distinctive about them other than the fact that they had addresses stenciled on each of the barracks.” The only way he could remember where he lived was to memorize the address: J-10-4.

“The government tried to say in the propaganda that it was to protect us, but the tower and the guns were pointed at us,” Fresno fairgrounds internee Saburo Masada told the *Fremont Tribune* years later. “And you don’t protect innocent people by imprisoning them.”

In Pinedale, internees spent a few months on a desolate site barren of trees or even ground cover. Their “homes” were wooden shacks covered with tarpaper, guarded by military patrols and surrounded by barbed-wire fences. Single men and women were housed in dormitories; families had small apartments. The internees arrived in the late spring and stayed through midsummer, baking beneath the Valley’s unforgiving sun without any relief from air conditioning or even swamp cool-

ers. Instead, they were given salt tablets as temperatures rose as high as 110.

By the end of July, residents of the Pinedale camp had boarded trains for Arizona or the Tule Lake relocation camp near the Oregon state line. In late October, the last internees from the fairgrounds had left for a “permanent” camp in Jerome, Arkansas.

At the time, many in California hoped the situation would, indeed, be permanent. According to a December 1943 poll in the *Los Angeles Times*, 91 percent of respondents favored excluding Japanese-Americans from Pacific Coast states for good. But the end of the war changed things for the better ... eventually.

When the government approved the return of “loyal” Japanese-Americans to the region in early 1945, they were hardly welcomed with open arms. In February, shotgun fire targeted homes in Fowler and Fresno less than a week apart. An arsonist burned down a home in Selma, and a gunman fired at a Visalia home.

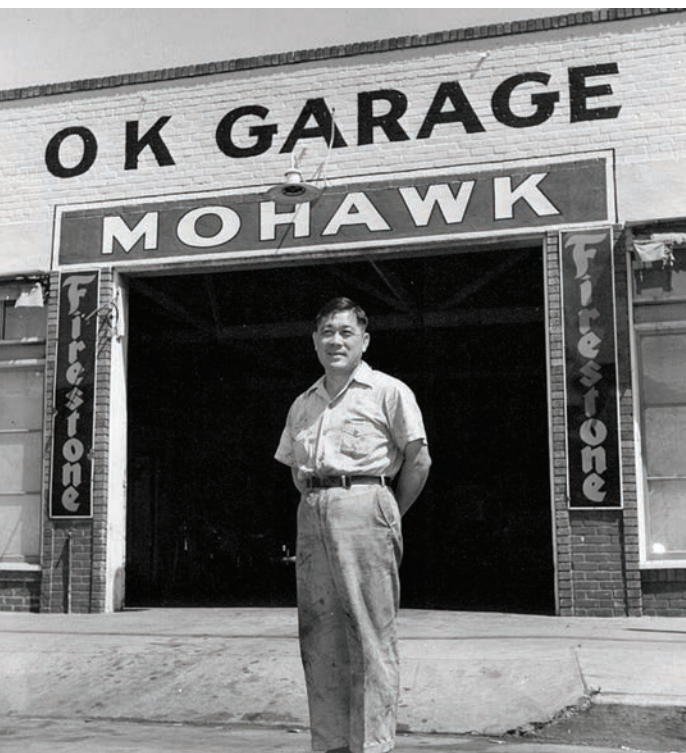
During the war itself, the pagoda at Roeding Park had been torn down, and the stone lantern had been vandalized and lost.

Fortunately, however, public opinion soon began to turn. In subsequent years, Japanese-Americans returned and resettled in the Fresno area without major incident.

By the mid-1960s, plans were on the drawing board for another Fresno park on the north side of town. It was suggested that the park include a Japanese garden as a symbol of the ties between Fresno and her sister city, Kochi, Japan. The garden, which eventually included a koi pond, wa-

terfalls and an array of plant life, opened in 1981. Bright and verdant foliage in each of the garden's four areas reflected a different season of the year across the five-acre site.

Meanwhile, the old stone lantern that was reportedly lost during the war turned up in the backyard of an estate. It was later rededicated and placed at the Woodward Park site, known as the Shinzen Friendship Garden.



Tom Inouye owned the O.K. Garage at 1402 Kern Street. He is seen here in 1945 after returning from the Jerome Relocation Center in Burrington, Ark., where he was sent with his wife and son. Inouye, who had owned the garage since 1922, had kept about 60 cars owned by evacuees in storage there. 1945. Hikaru Iwasaki (U.S. government).

## The Armenians

About a mile east of Chinatown, another neighborhood grew up that became home to a group of immigrants who had a major impact on Fresno's history. The first Armenians to settle in Fresno, Hagop and Garabed Seropian, arrived in the 1880s and were so enamored of the area that they wrote home to their relatives and friends, comparing it with their homeland in the Caucasus Mountains.

By 1894, a total of 360 Armenians had immigrated to Fresno, and many more followed over the next few years as the Ottoman Empire embarked on a savage campaign to purge Armenia of its Christian population. As many as 300,000 Armenians were slain in what came to be known as the Hamadian massacres, and many more fled the country, large numbers finding their way to Fresno.

Still more followed in the aftermath of the even more brutal Armenian Genocide launched in 1915. Fresno soon became home to more Armenians than any place else outside of Armenia (although the Los Angeles suburbs of Glendale and Burbank later surpassed it).

As with many groups who have come to Fresno, agriculture was a key component of the Armenians' story. In Armenian tradition, the grape has long been styled the "queen of all fruits," and grapevines thrived in the Fresno area. Of course, they still do, with the city taking pride in its identity as "Raisin Capital of the World." For many years, Sun-Maid Raisins had its headquarters in Fresno and boasted the world's largest dried-fruit packinghouse, just south of downtown. Fresno's own Lorraine Collett Petersen was the model for the original 1915 por-

trait of the iconic "Sun-Maid Girl," wearing a red bonnet and holding a basket of grapes.

By 1930, Armenians owned four out of every ten acres of raisin land in Fresno County, along with substantial fig orchards. Still, like most immigrants, they often found themselves targets of discrimination in various forms. Ordinances were passed restricting land ownership, though these were eventually overturned in court. Organizations as diverse as fraternal orders, veterans groups and even the YMCA banned Armenians from membership. Some even derided them as "lower-class Jews" while others referred to them "Fresno Indians."

Despite that discrimination, the list of well-known Fresnoans of Armenian heritage by no means begins and ends at Saroyan.

Jerry Tarkanian, who played basketball and later coached for Fresno State, saw his greatest success as a coach in Las Vegas, where he led the UNLV Runnin' Rebels to a national championship in 1990 with a savage 103-73 rout of Duke.

Saroyan's cousin, Ross Bagdasarian, co-wrote the song "Come on-a My House" with Saroyan, and it topped the charts for Rosemary Clooney late in the summer of 1951. With a melody based on an Armenian folk tune, it was by far Saroyan's most significant songwriting effort.

Bagdasarian, however, would go on to greater fame in entertainment as the creator of Alvin and the Chipmunks. He sped up a recording of his own voice to create the instantly recognizable voices of Alvin, Simon and Theodore for the first time in 1958, using the professional name David Seville. In an era when an Armenian name could still mean



losing out on a chance at a job or a contract, it was common for public figures with Armenian ancestry to use pseudonyms. The surname suffix *-ian* (or *-yan*), meaning “son of,” was so common as to be easily identifiable as Armenian—even though it is found in other traditions, as well.

Krekor Ohanian went by the stage name Mike Connors when appearing in a succession of films and the TV series *Mannix*.

Cherilyn Sarkisian, who attended Fresno High School before leaving at age 16 for a music career, went simply by Cher. She would go on to earn an Academy Award for Best Actress (for the 1987 romantic comedy *Moonstruck*), and her musical career would produce four chart-topping singles among a dozen to hit the Top 10 on the Billboard charts.

Sid Haig was born Sidney Mosesian in Fresno but took his father’s given name as his last name. He went on to a career that spanned more than 50 films and 350 television episodes, mostly playing tough guys and villains. (His imposing 6-foot-4 stature couldn’t have hurt.) A graduate of Roosevelt High School, he got his start performing with other Fresno kids in a Christmas skit in the display window at the JC Penney store downtown.

Armenian success stories extended beyond the entertainment arena and into the realm of business. Sometimes, they combined the two. Kirk Kerkorian grew up in Fresno’s Armenian Town and, like Saroyan, worked as a paperboy in his youth for the *Fresno Morning Republican*, hawking newspapers near Fresno’s downtown hotels.

As an adult, Kerkorian would become connected to the hotel industry much more directly



as an owner. His success began as a pilot, earning a living first as a crop-duster and then, more lucratively, by delivering Canadian planes to Scotland and taking on a variety of dangerous missions. He befriended fellow aviation enthusiast Howard Hughes and parlayed his savings into a major investment, the purchase of Trans International Airlines.

Kerkorian’s biggest payoff, however, came when he plunked down just under a million dollars for an 80-acre parcel of land on the Las Vegas Strip in 1962. He leased the site to the builders of Caesar’s Palace and, within six years, had multiplied his investment times 10. Even grander successes followed. In 1969, Kerkorian opened the largest hotel in the world, the International, booking

Barbra Streisand and Elvis Presley for his first two engagements. And four years later, he opened the even larger MGM Grand, after having purchased famed movie studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Kerkorian’s personal wealth went as high as \$16 billion in 2008, when he ranked among the 50 richest people in the world. Not bad for a former Fresno newsboy.

Other Armenians never became nationally known, but contributed immeasurably to the fabric of the city that is Fresno. Among their number is Edward Megerdichian, who came to Fresno in 1956 and attended Fresno State. His impact on my own life became substantial after I enrolled in his algebra class as a sophomore at Bullard High School. I had flunked the class cold the previous

year, but “Mr. M” made it seem simple, and it wasn’t long before a kid who’d been on the verge of failing an entire grade became a straight-A student.

Megerdichian played no small part in that, but his influence was certainly far greater than that single individual success. Not only did he coach the Bullard soccer team to several championships, he also built a successful career of some three decades as a teacher. Although I did well in his algebra class, I subsequently found myself more drawn to English and pursued a career in journalism. I was surprised to find, many years after I graduated from Bullard, that Mr. M had gotten his start in journalism, as well.

Megerdichian had been on the four-person staff of a newspaper called *Asbarez* (“The Arena”) in a building at the northwest corner of Ventura and M streets—right across from the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church and next door to the Asbarez Club.

The newspaper was founded in 1908 on Fulton Street, putting out its first edition the same month Saroyan was born. *Asbarez* published two Armenian-language editions a week. Editor Melik Shah would listen to English-language radio broadcasts and translate the news into Armenian for the newspaper, which also ran serialized novels on its pages, in addition to editorials.

The newspaper eventually moved its headquarters to Los Angeles in the 1970s because the Armenian community there was growing more quickly than its Fresno counterpart.

“A day doesn’t go by without me looking at the word ‘Asbarez,’ and flashing back to pictures of what it used to be and what it is now,” Megerdichian

told the newspaper for a 2002 interview marking its 95th anniversary. “I have this admiration for the sacrifice of the young people in our organization and the admiration for the older generation who were willing to give us responsibilities. They were very happy to see the young get involved. They gave us roles to play. They believed in us.”

Though Fresno is no longer home to the largest Armenian population in North America, the community continues to reside at the heart of Fresno’s identity and tradition.

Grapes remain important, even today. Each year, Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates the Blessing of the Grapes, which marks the beginning of the mid-August harvest. The 100th such celebration in Fresno took place in 2013.

## The Dust Bowl Refugees

If hardship drove many Armenians from their homeland to Fresno, hardship also drove a group of Americans from their homes during the 1930s. The twin catastrophes of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression reduced a vast swath of the nation’s midsection to a virtual wasteland during the decade, with giant dust storms and foreclosure notices swallowing up once-fertile farmland in equal measure.

Oklahoma was at the heart of the Dust Bowl. During the Depression, the state suffered a net migration loss of 440,000 people. One in 10 farmers who owned their land had it taken away by the banks. Tenant farmers, who worked the majority of the acreage, simply picked up and left. Some loaded bedrolls, blankets, suitcases and anything else that would fit into and onto their cars. Others

rode the rails, and still others traveled by foot along Route 66 to U.S. 99 ... if they could get that far. At one point in 1936, Los Angeles police stationed themselves at the border as part of a “bum blockade” to keep the migrants out.

About a third of those who made it through went to Los Angeles, but the rest branched off northward to Route 99. Most went via the Tehachapi Pass from Mojave, while others headed over the winding, three-lane Ridge Route that spanned the mountains north of the San Fernando Valley (one lane in each direction, plus a treacherous shared center lane for passing).

Their travels were immortalized by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, by Dorothea Lange in a series of chilling photos taken for the federal Resettlement Administration, by folk singer Woody Guthrie—an Oklahoma native who made the journey himself—and others.

The largest number came from Oklahoma, but others came from the nearby states of Arkansas (“Arkies”), Missouri and Texas, a four-state region consisting largely of people who had migrated from the Old South.

They had started moving farther west before the Depression began, but fled in droves when the bottom fell out of both the regional and national economies.

Between 1935 and 1950, the population of these migrants in the San Joaquin Valley more than quadrupled from 62,300 to 254,800, and by midcentury they accounted for more than one in five residents of the region. Before their arrival, Mexican workers had often performed migrant labor in the California fields, as they would again





once the Dust Bowl migration eased. But the influx of “Okies” (used derisively by their detractors but later worn as a badge of honor by some) displaced the old Mexican laborers. It also caused greater resentment among those already settled in the region because, unlike the Mexicans fieldworkers who returned home after the harvest, the Dust Bowl refugees tended to stick around.

Most had no place else to go.

The Mexican migrants didn't like them because the Okies competed with them for work, and the settled population didn't like them, either. In 1940, three-quarters of farmworkers in the San Joaquin

Valley were non-Hispanic whites, and half of those were from the Dust Bowl and surrounding region.

While agriculture has always driven the area's economy, it has also served to isolate those who perform its most physically demanding—and essential—jobs. Earlier Armenian settlers, ostracized from service clubs and even churches, had often lived on the rural fringes of Fresno, harvesting grapes and figs. Now, the newly arrived American migrants were similarly marginalized by their poverty and social identity. Often destitute, they scraped together a living in the fields when they could find work and spent their nights in federal labor camps—if they were lucky. (If they weren't and the camps were full, they often slept in tents by the side of the road, underneath billboards in squatter slums, or in irrigation ditches.)

Their median income in 1939 was a mere \$650, below government-defined subsistence levels.

Permanent homes often weren't an option, not only because of the migrants' paltry income, but because they needed to follow the harvest. According to a Kern County Health Department report, families would typically “harvest cotton in the fall, go on relief until May, harvest the potatoes in the spring, work the vegetables and fruit during the summer and rest on relief until the cotton harvest again.”

Those who did find homes often settled into “Okieville”s—cheap migrant subdivisions that sprang up around virtually all the Valley's communities, including Fresno.

A letter writer in 1938 addressed *The Bee* as follows:

**Editor of The Bee—Sir:**

**Please let me thank the few who write a kind word for the Oklahoma and Texas people. Any one who has enough common sense or human charity to think we ought to be allowed to live is appreciated. ...**

**A lot of Californians seem to have a chronic grouch. If citizens from other states come here and take any kind of work and any wages they can get to keep from starving, they howl. And if, from lack of work, we are forced to ask for relief, they howl again and accuse us of coming here to ask relief. ...**

**We pick cotton half a day at a time when it is not too wet. If we make as much as \$6 or \$8 a month, we are supposed to be sitting on top of the world. I would like to find some one who can figure food, clothing, medicines, house rent, lights and water bills out of that. ...**

**Really deserving persons can not get help so there are three things they can choose from, starve, commit suicide or plunge into debt and get on the SRA (State Relief Administration). When one does not want to do any one of the three and has searched the county over to beg for work, what is there left to do?**

**Mrs. W.M.R.  
Clovis, Calif.  
March 17, 1938**

**Migrants traveling from Missouri deal with car problems by the side of the road along Highway 99 near Tulare. 1938. Dorothea Lange.**



When the war ended and the economy improved, many of those who had come west from Oklahoma and the surrounding region left the fields and found better-paying jobs. Some, like the Tatham family, found great success. Walter and Cora Tatham moved with their son Oca from Oklahoma to the McFarland area in 1934. There, Oca Tatham started working the vineyards, turning grape trays for 20 cents an hour. But he soon found a better way to make money: buying 100 potatoes for 50 cents and selling them to fellow farm laborers for twice that price.

He quickly made enough to buy a Ford pickup, and his continued success enabled him to purchase a farm east of Fresno and get into real estate—the field in which son Bill would make his fortune. (He made enough to buy a pro football team in 1983, placing it in his family’s home state of Oklahoma and christening it the Outlaws.)

But no matter how far they got from the fields, the migrants didn’t forget their roots. They flocked to hear the southwestern brand of country music that Bob Wills and Spade Cooley played, bringing it to mainstream radio on KEAP in Fresno and KGEN out of Tulare.

They also brought their brand of evangelical Christianity, a faith that had kept them going through the tough times. Cora Tatham, for instance, was a charismatic Christian who believed in the power of prayer to effect faith healings.

The Tathams were hardly alone. Others were attracted to the Pentecostal faith, as well. Many old-line Protestant churches weren’t receptive to people who spoke with an accent and couldn’t afford anything approximating a “Sunday best” out-



Children of laborers play outside “homes” in a company housing camp near Corcoran in Tulare County, 1936. Dorothea Lange.

fit. But the less formal, more passionate evangelical churches often accepted them with open arms. These churches, often ridiculed by mainstream Protestants for their fervent hallelujahs and practice of speaking in “tongues,” held an attraction for people who themselves were often ridiculed.

In the beginning, such churches were havens of refuge. They were largely isolated from the previous generations that had settled in the area, and that was fine with many migrants. Often, they lived by a strict moral code that shunned dancing, alcohol, tobacco and “the devil’s music” in the cause of purity and holiness. They preferred not to become entangled in the ways of the world.

But as they grew in number and left the old farm labor camps, other aspects of their lives became more integrated into society at large. With more and more migrants and their children moving from the fields to the city in the 1940s and ’50s, they began to integrate their own spiritual practices into the larger fabric of Fresno life.

With the passage of time, the migrants and their children flocked to Sunday services in buildings that quickly outgrew their congregations. Valley Christian Center, a Foursquare church, moved out of a modest building on Palm Avenue and converted the former East Shields Avenue Carousel skating rink into a new sanctuary in the



early '80s. Northwest Baptist (later, just Northwest Church) grew rapidly out on West and Barstow, building a large new sanctuary next to its modest white chapel. Cornerstone Church moved into the Wilson Theatre downtown.

The city's biggest congregation, which became Fresno's first "megachurch," was the non-denominational Peoples Church, which built a 2,000-seat sanctuary at Cedar and Herndon in 1977. It attracted so many churchgoers that it held three Sunday morning services there.

G.L. Johnson, a Texas native who led the church through its greatest period of growth, reflected in an interview with *The Bee* on the Okies' impact on the Valley landscape: "Their coming made the Valley as different from San Francisco and Los Angeles as Oklahoma is from New York City," he said. "They're conservative and Bible-believing people. They have a traditional ethic, and they have not only affected our churches, but our whole Valley culture."

The extent of that effect could be seen in 1962, when evangelical preacher Billy Graham drew 172,000 people during one of his crusades—more than the city's entire population at that time. He returned for another crusade in 2001, four years after an evangelical men's group known as the Promise Keepers staged a two-day event at Bulldog Stadium that drew a crowd of 44,000 men.

The city also became a frequent stop for Christian entertainers favored by evangelical audiences in the '70s and '80s, such as Larry Norman, Andre Crouch and Keith Green. Barry McGuire, who had a No. 1 pop hit with the protest anthem "Eve of Destruction" in 1964, became an evangelical Christian and lived in Fresno for several years.

The area's politics changed, too, with conservative religious values playing an increasing role in elections. As Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority rose to prominence nationally, Fresno's longtime tilt toward the Democratic Party swung the other way, with Republicans gaining the majority for a time.

A former Oklahoma resident summed it up in a 1981 interview with Judith Gannon, one of many interviews she conducted with Dust Bowl migrants: "We won—we took over," he said. "When I go there (to the San Joaquin Valley) ... I feel I am in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas."

### The Latinos

The southwestern migrants who came west had one advantage over some of the other groups who came from abroad to populate the great Central Valley. They were, by and large, of European stock. The color of their skin made it easier for them to blend in than the Chinese, Latinos, Filipinos and, later, the Hmong who found new homes in Fresno.

Mexican migrants had been working the fields around Fresno before the Dust Bowl crisis and continued to do so, even as migrants from the nation's southern plains came to compete with them for jobs. In 1931, Fresno had the Valley's largest Mexican population at 6,000, a figure that swelled to 10,000 at harvest time. At the same time, the federal government was promoting a mass expulsion of Mexican immigrants via "repatriation trains."

Their place was taken, in large measure, by the Okies.

But when the Depression ended and the Okies left the fields—often to fight overseas or work in factories during World War II—they were re-

placed by a new generation of Mexican fieldworkers brought in under the bracero program to take their place. The program, instituted in 1942 under a treaty with Mexico, enabled Mexican laborers to work on farms north of the border under contract to U.S. growers.

In the words of Harvard professor Jorge Domínguez, "It was Mexicans and Rosie the Riveter who ran the American economy and enabled American citizens to go off to war."

Although the program was initially designed to end after the war, the demand for cheap labor in the fields continued ... and so did the bracero arrangement. In fact, more came into the country after the war ended than before, filling a need created by the end of the Dust Bowl migrations.

The number of braceros peaked at more than 400,000 every year from 1956–59, and eventually totaled more than 4 million by the time the program ended in 1964. The workers were, unfortunately, exploited at both ends. U.S. farm owners wrote the bracero contracts in English, and many of those who signed them didn't know what they were agreeing to. They couldn't return to Mexico, except in an emergency, and even then only with employer approval. Then, when their contracts were up, they had to go back. To ensure they would, in fact, return, the Mexican government took 10 percent of whatever they made north of the border. Many who returned never received that 10 percent from their government.

The bracero program was flawed in other ways, as well. Most significantly, it failed to meet the demand of Mexican migrants seeking work ... or of U.S. farms looking for cheap labor. In scarcely

three months during the winter and early spring of 1952, four Border Patrol officers stationed in Fresno arrested more than 1,700 Mexican nationals for deportation.

“The need for harvest workers here, plus the fact wages are higher than in other sections of the country, makes the Valley a mecca for illegal aliens,” said inspector James York, one of the four. “Very frequently, we find cases in which American citizens of Mexican descent have been forced from jobs to make way for the nationals who will work longer and for less money.”

Still, it was more than they could have made back home. Arrestees told the Border Patrol that they had saved more in four months working in the U.S. than they could have made over the course of three years in Mexico. It was worth the price of \$100 for a false birth certificate and the risk of a felony charge for a second offense. It was even worth living with as many as 13 other people in a room designed to house just two.

In just one week during 1953, authorities arrested more than 1,100 people illegally in the U.S. That was in Fresno County alone.

With more and more foreign workers crossing the border from the south, the U.S. government launched a deportation program in 1954 known as “Operation Wetback.” (The name employed an ethnic slur first used to denigrate migrants who entered the country by crossing the Rio Grande.) The Border Patrol sent more than a million migrants back across the border in the first year of the program alone.

When the bracero program ended eight years later, the need for farm labor didn’t. U.S. farmers continued to employ fieldworkers illegally, most often for a pittance. Illegal immigration outside the bracero program had already been an issue, with many foreign workers crossing the border and ignoring the authorized program.

“The problem of Mexican illegal immigration is born at the moment that the bracero program ends,” Domínguez told *Harvard Magazine*. Mexicans, he said, “keep coming, because the demand is still there.”

As the demand grew, so did the number of people attracted to field jobs. Their persistence spoke to their desperation. One described being caught near the border three times in one day, sneaking back across each time. He finally made it on the fourth try and stayed in the country for nearly two years before he was caught again.

It wasn’t against the law to hire men and women labeled as *alambristas*, or “fence jumpers,” and growers had long resisted any penalties for doing so. It simply wasn’t in their interest to pay more than they had to for labor, and by the mid-’60s, immigrants who were in the Valley legally had



A sign advertises for cotton pickers on the Hotchkiss Ranch near Fresno. 1933. Dorothea Lange.



begun to organize for better wages under Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers.

In 1965, the UFW began a five-year-long grape boycott to demand that they be paid the federal minimum wage. But even though the union reached a collective bargaining agreement in 1970 that covered more than 10,000 farmworkers, those laborers faced competition from others pouring into the country illegally.

One farmworker residing legally in 1968 put it this way: “When the alambristas come into a job, the regular workers are out”—he snapped his fingers —“just like that.”

The population of Latino immigrants became even more substantial than that of the Dust Bowl migrants years earlier. Whereas the Dust Bowl migration had lasted roughly a decade, the influx of migrant workers from Mexico and Central America continued far longer than half a century.

By 1980, the Hispanic population of Fresno had surpassed the one in five figure for Dust Bowl refugees in the Valley at their peak. That year, 23.5 percent of Fresno’s population was classified as Hispanic, with the figure jumping to three in ten at the close of the decade.

During the same period, another ethnic group also saw dramatic growth. The Hmong people from Laos in Southeast Asia saw their population increase from 2,392 in 1980 to 44,275 ten years later—an astonishing 602 percent jump.

## The Hmong

The Hmong immigrants, like the Mexican braceros, had helped the United States during wartime. In the case of the Hmong, they had fought as part

of a “Secret Army” supported by the CIA against the communists in the Vietnam War. When the American-backed South Vietnamese lost the war, many among the Hmong became targets of a genocide that claimed as many as 400,000 lives. Others became political refugees, and those who had been part of the Secret Army were brought to the United States after the war concluded.

In 1980, legislation was passed allowing their family members to emigrate, as well, with large numbers heading for Minneapolis and the Central Valley—specifically, Fresno and Sacramento.

There were some difficulties. The new land to which the Hmong had migrated was far different than their traditional home in the highlands of Southeast Asia. One Hmong didn’t understand the meaning of a flashing red light, so he made his way across the intersection in front of him by repeatedly accelerating, then braking. Another thought the picture of a chicken on a Crisco can meant that a chicken could be found inside the container.

Naturally, many customs were different, too. Practices such as paying a “bride price” to the family of a groom-to-be and engaging in shamanic rituals were foreign to other Fresnoans.

Some raised and slaughtered swine or fowl on their property, as they would have done in Laos without a second thought. But sensibilities (and ordinances) in the San Joaquin Valley were very different, and longtime residents viewed them as either unsanitary or cruel. Animals were, in some cases, killed as part of shamanic rituals.

Many were shocked in 1995 to find out that a Hmong shaman in Fresno had clubbed a three-month-old German shepherd puppy to death in

order to “appease an evil spirit.” To Chia Thai Moua, the act seemed perfectly rational. He had already tried sacrificing a chicken and a pig, yet his wife’s illness had continued unabated. A dog’s heightened sense of smell, he reasoned, would enable it to track down the evil spirit in the other world. The animal, he said, was helping him, and he would return the favor in a special ceremony that would release its spirit to be reborn. It was not, to his way of thinking, cruel. A neighbor who found out about the incident, however, reported the shaman, who was charged with animal cruelty.

The case generated headlines beyond Fresno and significant publicity, but it was far from the norm. The shaman himself stated that his actions were a last resort, and the lead investigator for the Fresno Humane Society stated he could “count on my hand the actual cases” of Hmong dog sacrifice he knew about. Most of the complaints, he said, were false accusations fueled by racism.

Indeed, most Hmong were willing to comply with local ordinances by taking their animals to processing plants for slaughter.

While retaining their own cultural heritage, Hmong migrants and their children have integrated themselves into the larger social structure quickly, becoming professors, business owners and politicians. Blong Xiong, who left Laos with his family in the early 1970s, was seated as Fresno’s first Hmong city council member in 2008.

And by the new millennium, the Hmong New Year celebration—an annual event featuring traditional clothing and food, dancing, and entertainment—had become more than a Hmong custom.

It was a Fresno tradition.

## The African-Americans

Other groups contributed to Fresno's diversity, as well. A thriving African-American community developed on the West Side around the old Chinatown area, dating back to the early 20th century.

Among its early leaders was a man named Jesse E. Cooley. Cooley, who studied mortuary science in Cincinnati, opened a mortuary in 1928 in Mississippi, where he married Beatrice Gray. Three years later, they moved to Fresno. They founded a funeral parlor called Valley Funeral Home that served the city's west side—the first black-owned mortuary in the San Joaquin Valley. (His son and namesake later established funeral homes in Bakersfield and Stockton.)

In addition to running his business, Jesse E. Cooley Sr. served as president of the West Fresno Forum, a group that was active in social and political advocacy for the African-American community. The group held candidate forums, took positions on issues and scheduled speakers on issues of the day.

The board, however, wasn't always united. When it convened to endorse a presidential candidate in 1932, the forum backed incumbent Herbert Hoover, but several members of the executive committee disagreed with that choice and formed the Negro Progressive Republican Club, which endorsed the Democratic candidate, Franklin Roosevelt.

A statement by the new group declared that a "majority of the colored people of this section, who are virtually all Republicans, refuse to follow the party any longer while it is under the leadership of Herbert Hoover and do not endorse him

for re-election. The campaign committee has signed 200 members of the Fresno Forum who state they cannot and will not support the Republican ticket." The shift was part of the process during which vast numbers of African-Americans left the "Party of Lincoln" and realigned with the Democrats, soon to become the "Party of Roosevelt" and the New Deal.

Jesse Cooley's wife also played a significant role in the community. Beatrice Cooley taught black history courses at the Fresno Adult School, worked to improve health care for migrant workers, and helped spearhead the creation of the Kearney-Cooley Plaza as a trustee for the Carter Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church, founded in 1882, was a focal point for the community, sponsoring numerous social events and encouraging political involvement.

As time passed, other leaders emerged in the community. Hugh Goodwin, a Harvard Law School graduate, became Fresno's first black attorney in the early 1950s and, in 1976, its first African-American Municipal Court judge via an appointment by Governor Jerry Brown.

Les Kimber, who founded the *California Advocate* newspaper in 1967, later served on the Fresno City Council.

In the field of medicine, Willie Lee Brown interned at Fresno County Hospital and began private practice as an obstetrician/gynecologist in 1962, becoming the first black specialty board-certified physician in the county. In doing so, he followed in the footsteps of physician Earl Meyers and his wife, Mattie, who together founded the first medical center to serve the black community in West Fresno. Complete with an X-ray lab, clin-

ical facility and pharmacy, it eventually became home to several African-American physicians.

Mattie Meyers would take her civic involvement beyond the medical practice and even ran for mayor in 1965—becoming the first woman in more than two decades to seek the office. She also served as president of the local NAACP branch. In her role as social activist, she fought against de facto segregation of Fresno's schools and, in 1964, helped arrange an evening appearance by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Ratcliffe Stadium. The event was attended by some 3,000 people.

An excerpt from King's speech that night:

**"The law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that is pretty important also. The law doesn't change the hearts of men, but it changes the habits of men and, pretty soon, they change the hearts of men. ... I still have faith in the future and in America. We have the resource to solve this problem."**

The problem was segregation based on prejudice. It was, in King's words, "the Negroes' burden and America's shame," and it had long been felt in Fresno.

One example: In January of 1941, five African-American men from West Fresno filed suit against the Last Chance Café in Friant after being refused service there because of their race. When they entered the place to buy sandwiches, the waitress told them, "It's just too bad. We cannot serve colored folks here." The justice of the peace awarded each of the five \$100 in damages, the minimum amount allowable by law.



Five years later, Fresno State star halfback Jack Kelley and teammate Millard Mitchell were told they couldn't make the trip with the Bulldogs for a game at Oklahoma City University because the home team refused to guarantee the two black players' safety. Oklahoma City did agree to play the Bulldogs' full team in Fresno the following year, but that didn't help Kelley, a senior in his final season of eligibility. It didn't help the rest of the '46 Bulldogs, either: They took it on the chin from OCU, 46–7.

Kelley had originally joined the team in 1942, only to have his football career put on hold while he served in the Army during World War II. When he finished his playing career with the Bulldogs, he thought about going pro, but instead decided to stay in Fresno, joining the police force in 1949 and becoming the city's first African-American police sergeant two decades later. He went on to found the African American Historical and Cultural Museum of the San Joaquin Valley.

Many of the challenges the community faced were a matter of false perception ... and prejudice. In 1963, an estimated 95 percent of Fresno's African-American population lived in West Fresno, and some feared an exodus of blacks from the west side would lower property values in the suburbs.

But it simply wasn't true.

In fact, one study found that home prices were actually higher in 45 percent of integrated neighborhoods than in segregated white suburbs; they were lower in just 15 percent of the cases. Still, some real estate agents weren't interested in showing houses to West Fresno residents looking to move out.

Many residents, meanwhile, weren't interested in moving. "The mass of Negroes—especially the older ones—never will move," said Guy Sherman, president of Fresno's NAACP branch, in 1963. "Their roots, their friends, their churches, their social organizations all are in West Fresno."

Some of those who did find homes outside West Fresno also found welcoming neighbors, while others faced discrimination. The Mosley family, who had moved into a home near Ashlan and Millbrook, faced something worse: violence. It started with milk bottles being thrown through the windows of their home and threatening telephone calls warning them to leave the neighborhood. Those threats were backed up by a shotgun blast that tore through the windows of Ward and Nellie Mosley's garage.

The Mosleys didn't give in to the pressure. Ward Mosley, a college student at the time, said he received hundreds of supportive letters after the incidents, some of which offered his family a place to stay until the trouble stopped. He went on to complete his degree in sociology and got a job with the California Youth Authority. His wife became a schoolteacher, and they raised two daughters.