Rewriting Tomorrow’s Agricultural History
By Antoinette Mantz

In this article, Antoinette Mantz presents us with a brief look into California agricultural history and how organized political action might reshape the Western landscape. Using her own personal experiences as a volunteer, Mantz explores how corporate based farm became a socially accepted reality while endangering that of the small-scale local farmer. She contends that economic monopolies of the corporate agribusiness have left the local farmer with reduced and often impossible options.

It is a truly noble thing to plant a seed, nurture it through those early stages, provide it with the essentials of life, and harvest the fruits of your combined labor, all the while knowing that the fruit is destined for your neighbor’s kitchen table. Small family operated farms hold the potential to be lifelines within a community, often cultivating the land without causing severe environmental degradation, offering fresh and nutritious goods, providing employment and economic stability for community members, and supporting a healthy local economy.

As corporate agribusiness became the prominent alternative across the United States, the farms on the edge of town have been economically and spatially out-competed. In response to past and ongoing encroachment of the agricultural industry, state governments have turned to the regulation of land purchase making it harder for corporations to acquire land for agricultural production. Over the past 30 years, nine Midwestern states including Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Wisconsin have taken such legislative action (Welsh & Lyson 2001). California however, has not adopted any such laws. By deferring corporate ability to monopolize prime agricultural lands through anti-corporate farming legislation, family farms and the local economies that they uphold may have another chance to flourish.

As California has not adopted legislation regulating corporate buy up of agricultural lands, there are various organizations engaged in the battle to save family farms. The Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) is an organization devoted to “building a movement of rural and urban people who foster family-scale agriculture that cares for the land, sustains local economies, and promotes social justice.” Over the past year CAFF has been building a campaign based on the same intentions for which anti-corporate farming laws exist: to halt corporate rule of agriculture, and promote opportunity for family-scale farms.

Through my experiences working with CAFF and the Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign, which is aimed at connecting farmers with local retailers to increase public awareness and success of locally grown products, it is clearly evident that such community building and key resource networking organizations are necessary in California’s absence of regulatory farm legislation. My participation in the Buy Fresh, Buy Local effort has included contact with campaign partners and attendance at various CAFF sponsored events. I have had the oppor-
tunity to witness the sheer strength involved in a community coming together and celebrating locality and familiarity, to understand the true importance of a strong local food system built around family farms.

While the ideological strength of a community is compelling to many, it unfortunately does not reach everyone. Goldschmidt (1946) along with additional supporting studies (Welsh & Lyson 2001), supports the contention that the well-being of an agricultural community rests on the structure of the farms that weave the landscape. In his case study conducted on two farming dependent counties in California in the 1940’s, this anthropologist presented the idea that “communities surrounded by large-scale farms fared poorly, on a number of important social indicators, when compared to communities surrounded by small-to-moderate sized farms.” In analyzing the maps of the two surveyed communities (see figure 1&2), one can see the visible economic difference between Arvin, the community surrounded by large-scale farms, and Dinuba, the town surrounded by small to medium scale operations. The shaded areas represent the local business district, which is virtually absent in Arvin, and with approximately the same population, Dinuba hosts multiple schools and parks while Arvin has only one school (Goldschmidt 1946). This idea is now referred to as the “Goldschmidt” tradition (Welsh & Lyson 2001). Applying such an idea to California’s Central Coast, where family farms are attempting to reestablish their territory on our fertile terrain, the impor-

Figure 1: City of Arvin at the time of Goldschmidt’s research. The yellow highlighted area represents the business district in Arvin (Goldschmidt 1946).
tance of the family farm structure stretches far beyond simple nostalgia as may be traditionally perceived.

Throughout California’s coastal cities it appears that a sense of community is being lost. Though the agriculturally rich Central Coast is not where my roots lie, I am able to draw many similarities between the area and my city of origin in San Diego County. Each time I visit my hometown of Ramona it appears a bit less like home. The originality of Ramona once created by locally owned antique stores, Mexican restaurants, markets, and the absence of cookie-cutter homes has now been modified and homogenized to resemble American suburbia. It is a rarity to encounter a born and raised Southern Californian in San Diego largely due to increased cost of living, which in terms of environmental restoration, has relocated many natives and attracted the affluent.

Raymond Dasmann and Peter Berg reflect on the importance of remaining in one place in order to sustain a community and its environment: A society which practices living-in-place keeps a balance with its region of support through links between human lives, other living things, and the processes of the planet (Dasmann and Berg, 1980). A decrease in small family farms and the loss of local businesses amounts to increased dependence on outside sources, lessening the links that our community may establish within itself, and deteriorating the attachments we hold to our place. The loss of these icons removes us once more from that which sustains our lives: our community and our land.

From anti-corporate farming laws to numerous organizations created solely for preservation of the family farm, I ask what brought us to this
place? At what point in our Nation’s history was the desire to provide for the community through cultivation of one’s own land no longer enough? Where did labor lose its nobility and at what point did farmers leave for work wearing a suit and tie? When did our symbiotic relationship with the land transform into a science of industry and engineering, where only the giants have economic means to prevail?

Though I will not be delving into the extensive history surrounding California’s shift in ownership, I refuse to ignore the hardships that so many native Californians experienced as a result of the dynamic political past. I acknowledge and feel remorse for the wrongs that were done to several cultural groups; however, my purpose is to investigate what events might have led to the need for regulatory legislation prohibiting dominant corporations from displacing family farms, painting yet another conquest on the Western canvas.

The Spanish mission system which sought to subdue, civilize, and Christianize the California Indians (Bolton 1917), whose land the Spaniards desired, establishing a theme of cultural domination and subordination in California and the West for years to come. Based on their higher level of technology and society, the Spanish perceived the Native Americans as heathens and their way of life as primitive (Palau 1926). Native Americans were looked upon as wild animals, part of the landscape that was to be tamed and cultivated to promote economic wealth for the emerging class, and this perception is still expressed today in locations as common as our national parks (Meeker 1973). In an article addressing American portrayal of Native Americans, Joseph W. Meeker sarcastically states “So now we can see bears at Yellowstone, wolves at Mount McKinley, Hopis at Grand Canyon, and Navajos weaving blankets at many national monuments of the southwest” (1973). Patricia Nelson Limerick suggests this idea of conquest constantly revealed in our Western lives through a social and environmental context in her book, *Something in the Soil* (Limerick 2000).

There once existed a time when labor was valued, and cultivating the land to produce food that would support one’s family was a respectable deed. At the California Constitutional Convention of 1849, in opposition of allowing African-Americans into California, one Mr. Wozencraft stated, “the laboring man is the nobleman in the true acceptance of the word” (Heizer & Almquist 1971). Though these words implied that allowing African-Americans to labor in California degraded the work’s very nobility, they also expressed the value placed on such labor. The respect associated with farming is one that parts of society have held to, demonstrated by several non-profit, community-supported organizations such as Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) and California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). But I wonder if this was not just an ideal of those migrating to California, much like Mr. Wozencraft who was born in Ohio and previously resided in Louisiana (Heizer & Almquist 1971). I propose this idea due to the inability of finding a time in California where agricultural labor was respected. Quite the opposite, I repeatedly fall upon accounts of migrant farm workers held up in uninhabitable labor camps and closely supervised so that the oppressed would not organize themselves against the large growers (Steinbeck 1936; Mitchell 1996).
It seems that there is a certain “nostalgia” instilled in our perception of farming, blinding us from the dark past of agricultural labor and the true corporate domination of the California agricultural industry. In Patricia Nelson Limerick’s essay “The Gold Rush and the Shaping of the American West”, she cites the influence of common nostalgia associated with the Gold Rush as a guiding factor for the international corporate control of today’s mining industry (Limerick 2000). Limerick goes on to mention the detrimental means by which corporations mine, and the capital required to now enter the mining industry, stating: “This is not an enterprise for the little guy”. The comparison of the mining industry and agricultural industry in the United States is pertinent: both are intensely extractive industries managed by outside corporations with huge potential to degrade the surrounding environment, which they often have little connection to.

Upon looking deeper into the capital necessary to establish oneself in California’s agricultural industry, many uncertainties are revealed in questioning how family farms have literally lost so much ground to agribusiness. The West was different. In Donald Worster’s Rivers of Empire, he expresses the importance of looking at the historical West and how it was shaped so strongly by human’s battle with the environment (1985). Unlike the individual democracy outlined in Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier culture, where the environment complimented the emerging self-sufficiency of agricultural settlers in Wisconsin (Pisani 1985), the West was not for “the little guy”. In a follow-up to his original frontier theory, The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893), which so inaccurately accounted the West, Turner wrote an article regarding the scarcity of water in the Atlantic Monthly stating, “the destiny of this new frontier should be social rather than individual” (Turner 1962). This was simply because the small farmer did not have the resources for highly technical equipment and irrigation; they did not have the ability to reshape the landscape as the West demanded for this new industrialized agriculture. The volatile combination of various factors in the West including the arid climate, shortage of water, dependence on government subsidies, and thus such a necessity for “social democracy” (Turner 1962), contributed greatly to the corporatization and industrialization of California’s agriculture.

The tendency of California legislation was to favor ownership of large tracts of land, leading to “factories in the fields” and “suitcase farming”, or highly industrialized corporate farming (Pisani 1991). At the threat of large landowners’ refusal to pay taxes, which would deny the county government their existence, the solution was found in taxing small farmers. These small farms, which held only 20 percent of the land, were thereby subsidizing the larger farms by paying 75 percent of the agricultural real estate taxes (Pisani 1991). While pure production allowed large land-owners to successfully out compete the small farmers, such laws in the mid-nineteenth century acted as a catalyst to speed the process of land and capital monopolies, leading to the inability of small farms to establish themselves in the West. Additionally, the federal government’s irrigation subsidies were intended to only aid farmers owning less than 160 acres of land to reverse the trend of land monopolies (See Figure 3). The proposed National Reclamation Act, which set
these limits, were not enforced, which acted only to increase the already huge advantage that large landowners carried (Worster 1992).

![Figure 3: Cartoon from an East Coast newspaper depicting government irrigation subsidies in the arid West (Pisani 1992).](image)

If small tracts of land were acquired with intentions of farming in California there was yet another barrier to overcome, or more appropriately stated, another desert to cross. The arid climate translated into a very low water supply, which was drained even further by hydraulic mining throughout the Gold Rush (Pisani 1992; Worster 1985). In the absence of water laws prior to the Gold Rush, there was constant controversy over who had rights and where such rights began and ended (Pisani 1992). The properties making water so easily manipulated, that it will flow in a predictable path to and from far off places, caused great legal confusion. The issue of prior appropriation caused extreme complications in taxing of water rights, leading to no tax dollars returning to the state. Additionally, water regulations set no quality requirements, which would lead to irreversible environmental consequences (Pisani 1992).

Modern statewide agricultural regulations differ drastically across the individual states. This is possible by a constitutional right set forth in Amendment X – Powers of the States and People, granting states the right to create their own laws so long as they are in accordace with federal laws. For example, nine out of fifty states in the United States of America have decided to establish various anti-corporate farming laws, which generally speaking, ban the purchase of real estate intended for agricultural use and farming operations by corporations (Welsh & Lyson 2001). In particular, the Nebraska Constitution, Article XII, Section 8 states, “No corporation or syndicate shall acquire, or otherwise obtain an interest, whether legal, beneficial, or otherwise, in any title to real estate used for farming or ranching in this state, or engage in farming or ranching” (Nebraska Constitution 1982). Because the constitution allows each state to set forth such policies independently, residents of those states are able to manage their specific situations. The
state can determine the extent to which they feel corporations should be involved in agriculture, and to what degree they desire preservation of locally owned and operated farms, ranches and businesses. It is my personal opinion, in discovering how drastically different agriculture can be from region to region, it is to each state’s advantage that the constitution borders on ambiguity when addressing agricultural issues. On the contrary however, it is possible that some states may be more concerned with misleading economic benefits of large scale intensive farming as opposed to environmental concern for their land and social concern for their residents. For this reason the States may benefit from some form of national regulation on corporate involvement in agriculture or limit to the acreage of land one entity can control.

There is also the suggestion that the Constitution has laid the groundwork for corporate rule of industry, including agriculture. The idea of “corporate personhood” was established in the late 1800’s as many corporations pleaded their constitutional rights, though the Constitution makes no actual mention of corporations (Lazarus 2003). After a Supreme Court decision in 1886 corporations were given the same rights as you and I, including those set forth in the Bill of Rights (reclaimdemocracy.org 2003). In an article titled “Consent of the Governed: The reign of corporations and the fight for democracy,” Jeffrey Kaplan illustrates the threat to democracy posed by corporations: “Having achieved extensive control over so many facets of our lives -- from food and clothing production to information, transportation, and other necessities -- corporate institutions have become more powerful than the sovereign people who originally granted them existence” (Kaplan 2003). Applying this idea to corporate control of agriculture, it is clear to see that growth of local food systems centered on small family-scale agriculture promotes the intended democratic foundations upon which our country was built. Allowing corporations all rights granted to human beings creates an industrial superpower against which no one person can compete.

Beyond inhabiting a region, there is much to learn about the limits to which our local resources may be stretched. By “living-in-place”, the founding principle of Bioregionalism, one becomes aware of non-human restrictions that exist over time. Such restrictions perhaps represent nature’s laws, revealed through observation over time and scientific investigation, and are non-negotiable. This is one supporting reason that I feel our Nation may benefit from allowing local governments to determine some aspects of agricultural policy. In Arthur McEvoy’s “Aboriginal Fishers”, indigenous communities over harvested their fisheries and perished as a result (Merchant 1998). Indian tribes were directly dependent on the condition of the local environment and the resources that it held, where mistreatment of the land could easily lead to that tribe’s demise. A corporation on the other hand, who uses intensive farming methods and depletes the land of nutrients vital to a crop’s success, can relocate their operation with much more ease when compared to a family farm whose land is home.

The events that I have covered in California’s history outline a system of industrialization and need for great capital in establishing oneself in the agricultural West. I have come to the realization that when commercial agriculture arrived in the arid valleys of California it
became industrial, it became corporate, it became political, and it became bigger than the small family farm. The desire to provide for the community through cultivation of one’s own land never was quite enough in the state of California. The small farmer for whom the non-profit organization Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) fights, cannot compete on such an industrial level; rather than legislative policies to reverse that truth, government subsidies and foreign trade policies have historically done quite the opposite by offering support to the large landholders and corporations (Pisani 1992). During the mid-nineteenth century, the federal government’s irrigation subsidies were intended to only aid farmers owning less than 160 acres of land to reverse the trend of land monopolies. However, the proposed National Reclamation Act, which set these limits, were not enforced, which acted only to increase the already huge advantage that large landowners carried (Worster 1992). Recently in 1998 the largest eight percent of farms received 47 percent of all Government farm payments, and ten percent of farms with the highest net cash income received over half of farm payments (Hoppe et al. 2001).

There are now nine states in the union who have developed laws to prevent corporations and non-family farmers from entering the industry through anti-corporate farming laws. California is not one of these states. With an agricultural industry value over $27 billion, California follows the U.S. pattern with much of its land controlled by large landholders and corporations (CDFA 2002). Over one-third of U.S. farmland is owned by approximately 7.3 percent of total producers, earning annual income levels over $250,000, and an average farm size of 2345 acres (USDA 2003). Additionally large and very large family farms account for only eight percent of all U.S. farms, but 53 percent of all agricultural production. Because this situation of large-scale domination already exists, even in the “family farm” sector, implementing anti-corporate farming laws in California would not ensure the viability of family farms. These laws cannot push corporations from the market; they can only and not always, prevent them from entering through limitations on the buying and small selling of real estate. Thus, the responsibility to change the structure of California’s agriculture is in our hands.

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers’ Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign with which I am working this semester is guided by the suggestion that we as consumers hold the power to establish a place for small family farms in California’s history. We are the consumers who drive the market therefore we have the power to determine who grows our food, where it originates, and how it was produced. Until small family farms gain market share through increased economic support by their surrounding communities, corporate factory farms will prevail. Additionally, as consolidation of food retailers continues, corporations gain stronger control over the food system by determining what consumers have access to. By 1955 supermarkets represented 60 percent of American grocery sales, marking the beginning of a critically disconnected food system in which the consumer is unaware of the processes that bring their products to the supermarket (Gwynn 1999). In 2000, supermarkets reached 73.5 percent of all U.S. grocery sales (Harris et al. 2002). The largest four supermarket firms in the U.S. now account
for 27.4 percent of all food sales, followed by the largest eight firms accounting for 40.5 percent (Harris et al. 2002). This system of detachment from the growers of our food is supported by the fact that direct sales to individuals, such as Community Supported Agriculture and farmer’s markets, account for only 12.5 percent of marketing options among all farms, large, small, corporate and family-owned (USDA 1998). Because agriculture in the Golden State replaced natural processes with mechanized processes and diverse crop systems with monoculture, the symbiotic relationship that surrounds our nostalgic vision of a farmer and his land has failed to materialize. Because one man’s field became one corporation’s investment, farmers became businessmen and left for the office rather than the soil. Because we are detached from the source of our food, the source of our life, we fail to question that which we cannot see. In her book of essays Small Wonder, Barbara Kingsolver advises that we “look our food in the face” (2003); this suggestion entails knowing the source of our food, how it was grown or raised (including such things as chemical inputs and inhumane treatment of animals), and the conditions under which laborers worked. If the aforementioned practices are unbearable to witness, and the conditions under which our food was produced requires that we turn a blind eye, we should not support them. Though we as Californians have failed to follow this instruction in the past, I believe that patterns can be broken, revolutions can begin, and we can build a place for family farms in California’s history.

Political Project
Buy Fresh Buy Local (BFBL) is a campaign that Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) has been leading since October 2002. The campaign brings farmers, retailers, and community members together in hopes of strengthening the local food system. Specifically, BFBL uses signs and product labeling to indicate that locally grown and produced foods are available, and to express the benefit in purchasing these goods. The campaign has also used the radio and newspaper to highlight locally grown foods, and briefly spark an interest in consumers so they will want to know more. My role with CAFF goes beyond the ten hours required for this class as I have been working as an intern with them over the past year. My goals associated with this class were to better understand the history behind agriculture in California and the United States, discovering how the need for CAFF and these efforts came about.

For the campaign I have been working on an intercept survey, which questioned shoppers at New Leaf Community Market, our main retail partner in BFBL. Each local product is labeled with the Buy Fresh Buy Local logo (on right), so the intercept survey questioned shoppers coming out of the store, asking if they had purchased any local products, how they were sure, if they had noticed the label, and if they had heard or had seen any of the media releases for the campaign. I then compiled the results and presented evidence to the effectiveness of our work thus far. Additional work for BFBL has included developing a protocol for handling new member applications, and an organization system for our current members so we can better serve them. I have completed the goals associated with my political project and by the feedback from my community partner, CAFF is pleased with my work.
The work that I did with CAFF has revealed the importance of working on a community and policy level to achieve goals such as those presented in this campaign. It has inspired a greater interest in me to one-day advocate for environmentally and socially just policy surrounding food systems issues. The work that I have done with this organization has led me to understand and be certain of the goals that I have for my life and career. My participation within CAFF has also helped me to be a more informed consumer when deciding how to spend my food dollar in a way to promote my local economy, community and environment.

I mentioned earlier that my goal in the historical research portion of this class was to understand how the history of agriculture led to the necessity of organization such as CAFF. What I have come to understand is the battle is much larger than I had originally assumed. California’s agriculture has reflected large-scale and corporate domination since it began due to the capital necessary to establish oneself in this arid environment. First, the hydrology of California has been almost entirely mechanized in order to sustain the production that this industry-leading state has boasted for the past 150 years. This was done largely by government subsidies, which as explained in the historical portion of this project, dramatically favored large landholders. Second, and partially as a result of this previous reason, to compete with such large landholders it was necessary to produce ever increasing yields. This was achieved by the industrialization of farming, exploitation of farm workers, and heavy use of chemicals in the growing process. Many of these factors have been traditionally rejected by small farmers, and therefore small farms have become endangered. So what does this suggest for CAFF’s efforts?

Upon realizing what small farms are truly up against, I found myself discouraged and overwhelmed. If small farms were never a significant part of California’s agricultural landscape and economy, then what are we fighting for? Then it came back to me: I am fighting for the right to know who raised and harvested my food, the right to see the place that my lettuce grew, the right to be sure that my tomato was not genetically engineered or doused with chemicals, the peace in visiting the farm where my food is harvested and the ability to repaint that vision in my mind each time I sit down to dinner.

**Works Cited**


