About Our Cover

THE SALINAS VALLEY
OF CALIFORNIA

The Salinas River\(^1\) and the valley through which it flows are deceiving to the casual traveler driving through on a summer day. If he looks down while crossing one of the bridges over it, the river is quite unimpressive. The bed seems to be largely overgrown with weeds. The trickles and pools of water seem to have no movement. The traveler is likely to forego a second look and to relegate it to the far reaches of his mind. The bridges over it, the highway connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco with a scattering of strange appearing trucks running along it. The trucks have wide wheel bases and a narrow cab with room only for one man, the driver. These are produce trucks and if a person stationed himself at a strategic spot and counted them as they went by, he would begin to become conscious of the great activity going on and to wonder if there was more here than he first thought.

For the Salinas is a mighty river and the valley a big valley. Together they have spawned a great agriculture and a great American literature. The agriculture and the literature of the Salinas Valley are bound together, because the latter came from the mind and pen of the late Nobel Laureate John Steinbeck, who wrote of the river itself, of his childhood and youth in the Salinas Valley and of the people and agriculture of the valley.

The writings of John Steinbeck mean different things to different people. They were a source of laughter and of sadness, of nostalgia, and of anger. Some of the anger was directed at conditions of which he wrote and some was directed at him, for writing of them. It was difficult for a reader of his books to be unaffected by what he wrote.

Agriculture in the Salinas Valley means horticulture, especially vegetables, and most especially lettuce. Lettuce is king, but the valley also is the leading producer of artichokes, broccoli,

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\(^1\)Photographs courtesy Al Weber, Carmel California.

and cauliflower in the United States and a major producer of celery, carrots, spinach, endive, garlic, tomatoes, and chili peppers. There are also substantial acreages of asparagus, green beans, cabbage, potatoes, onions, and Brussels sprouts. The name "Salad Bowl of the World" is not undeserved. Towering over all, of course, is lettuce. Lettuce occupies over 50,000 acres of land each year in the valley. From April through October, over 30,000 carloads are shipped to markets all over the United States and Canada. The crop was worth about $60 million in 1970. The valley produces 30% of the head lettuce crop in the U.S. and is the largest single producing area in the country and probably in the world.

Although best known as a producer of salad vegetables, its horticultural base is considerably wider. Strawberries, a relatively minor crop 10 years ago, are now worth $10 million a year. The wine grape industry is moving into the southern Salinas Valley at a rate which has led to a prediction that the value of wine grapes in the valley will exceed that of lettuce. The number of vineyard acres is rapidly increasing as the wineries move out of the increasingly congested San Francisco Bay Area to the cleaner air and lower costs of the Salinas Valley.

Completing the horticultural triangle, another movement out of the San Francisco area is bringing a cut flower industry to the Salinas area. About 250 acres of mostly carnations and chrysanthemums are being grown in glass and plastic greenhouses.

Non-horticultural crops are also important. These include sugar beets, small white beans, cereal grains and hay. Beef and dairy cattle, poultry and sheep also contribute substantially to the agricultural productivity of the valley.

The valley is also the home of the U.S. Agricultural Research Station. This institution specializes in lettuce, sugar beet, and mechanical harvesting research in cooperation with the University of California and the Monterey County Agricultural Extension Service. The research people of these groups are investigating problems of variety improvement, virus and other diseases, development of mechanical harvesting equipment, nutritional requirements, and crop management.

Perhaps because of the limited nature of the river itself, the Salinas Valley has failed to produce the great cities found in the Hudson Valley and the Mississippi Valley and other great river valleys. Since it has no great cities, it also has no great industries, except agriculture, and it is therefore clean. It is the last major clean air shed in the state of California which means that the people who live there can breathe and plants can be grown without pollutant damage. Hopefully, this will not change.

The Salinas Valley will continue to change in other ways, although the directions of change are not easily predictable. In addition to new crops, there will certainly be new methods of growing and handling the crops, spurred especially by unionization and mechanization. The effect of these two forces, on each other, and on the growing, handling and marketing of the various crops is not entirely clear. It does seem fairly clear however, that as in the past, history made in the Salinas Valley will reflect on the nation. In particular, the continued reshaping of Salinas Valley agriculture may augur the future of American agriculture.

Edward J. Ryder
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Salinas, California