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"Apples and Experts: Evolving Notions of Sustainable Agriculture"

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Current advocates of sustainable agriculture in the US posit that our food industry needs to recover from the deliberate missteps of the pioneers of chemical dependency and market-driven cultivation techniques that ushered in an age of industrial agriculture at the turn of the 20th century. A careful look at early 20th century agriculture in California, the theoretical ground zero of environmentally abusive cultivation techniques, reveals that this food industry history is more complex than it seems. Using the Central Coast of California as a case study, this article argues that a nexus of ambitious growers and a growing state agricultural bureaucracy worked to create a "brand name" and teach cultivation approaches that would buoy their local industry with increased production and expanded markets. But these same actors also embraced these changes with all due caution, keeping the long-term health of the industry and the community in mind. Whereas traditionally this juncture in California agricultural history is described as the moment where farmers sold out their traditional stewardship of the land for higher profits and chose non-sustainable agricultural practices, many growers actively pursued sustainable agriculture, at least as understood by them. In navigating market demands and technological changes, they made choices based on both economic grounds, and a modified agrarian ethic, shaped by concerns for environmental and social stability similar to the modern sustainability movement. Using examples ranging from state-sponsored erosion programs to local immigration policy, this article reveals a community that consciously made economic choices to keep up with larger competitors, but also monitored the impact of monoculture on their land and balanced an agrarian ideal with an increasingly ethnically diverse populace and a burgeoning class division. Their concern for social, economic and environmental stability reveal that there were more than market-driven missteps behind the emergence of our current system.

— Text from The White Horse Press website

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