



## **Bonnie Brae Lemons and Bonita**

At one time the Sweetwater Valley was filled with Bonnie Brae lemons with their smooth thin rind and sweet seedless fruit. The Sweetwater valley, carved by the Sweetwater river, runs through Sunnyside, Bonita, and Chula Vista and into San Diego bay. The valley is located south of Lemon Grove and Lincoln Acres; North of San Ysidro and Imperial Beach.

In 1888, the Sweetwater Dam was completed to bring water to the valley. Local developer Frank Kimball became the State Commissioner of Agriculture and discovered citrus trees to be the most successful crop for the area. Bonnie Brae lemons were first grown by Hiram Murray Higgins(1820 -1897) on his 76-acre Bonnie Brae Ranch in Bonita.

Mr. Higgins purchased his ranch in 1871 and began cultivating citrus orchards. In 1889, Higgins described how his special variety of lemon came to be, *I went to San Francisco and bought two barrels of the finest Messina lemons, raised in Sicily; brought them home and let them rot in the barrels. Sowed the seeds in beds, transplanted in the nursery, and in due time into the orchard. When the trees came into bearing, I had every variety from the coarsest citron to the finest lemon, the Bonnie Brae.* (Bonnie Brae – Eating and Digesting the Soil – How the Bonnie Brae Lemon was originated,” The Great Southwest, September 1889)

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*Growers could make about \$2,000 per acre growing lemons in 1911. Gross sales of lemons in Chula Vista that year exceeded \$400,000. Five packing houses had been established and two of them were spending more than \$10,000 each on additions and improvements. Because lemons ripened throughout the year and are shipped as soon as picked, packing houses kept busy year-round. Lemons were transported east in reefers; that is, rail cars cooled by blocks of ice.*

Charles Mohnike also commented in 1911, *I have been a resident of Chula Vista for the past twelve years and have seen the development of the lemon industry and the growing prosperity of our city. From now on forward will be easy sailing for our thriving city.*

But in 1913 citrus mealybug arrived in California causing extensive damage to citrus crops throughout the state. Cryptolaemus ladybugs, the ladybug Ellwood Cooper proposed importing at the Fruit Growers Conference in 1890 and the one Albert Koebele brought back from Australia in 1891, were soon found to be an excellent

control for citrus mealybug throughout California's citrus groves, including Chula Vista's lemon orchards. By 1921, the San Diego County Department of Agriculture was rearing cryptolaemus for release into local orchards at an insectary built at 511 G Street in Chula Vista. Conveniently, a lemon grove was located across the street.

The success of citrus in the valley lead to the creation of the Sweetwater Fruit Company which shipped lemons around the world. When the Sweetwater Dam gave away in in 1916 the majority of Bonnie Brae lemon trees were destroyed.

Manager of the collections at the Bonita Museum and Cultural Center, Elizabeth Stonehouse, keeps track of the elusive Bonnie Brae variety that still exists in Bonita. *They are still around; you just need to know where to find them.* Bonnie Brae means "pleasant hill" in Gaelic, a language still spoken in Scotland and Ireland and is fitting for the Sweetwater area.