***Building Communities – Economics & Ethnicity***

Jennifer Helzer, California State University, Stanislaus

The theme of this Delta Narrative is *Building Communities: Economics and Ethnicity*. The essay focuses on the primary zone of the Delta, comprising the "Delta proper" towns. When appropriate, cities and towns outside the primary zone are included in the discussion because they are relevant to the topic at hand. The narrative is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on initial settlement in the Delta, starting with the earliest indigenous inhabitants. It traces the arrival of subsequent immigrant groups and how communities were built around ethnic bonds and the economic needs of an emerging agricultural region. It also covers the early experience of Delta residents, emphasizing themes of human-environment interaction, emerging settlement patterns, and early community development.

***In the 1850s, powerful economic, political and social forces precipitated momentous change in the Delta region of California: 1) the California Gold Rush, 2) levee construction and agricultural development, and 3) the migration and settlement of domestic, European and Asian cultural groups.*** The great migration linked to California's Gold Rush is purported to be the largest movement of people to a single area on the North American continent. Other areas have comparable numbers associated with their frontier migration, but California's distinctiveness lies in the rapidity and uneven pattern of settlement over the land. Moreover, the region's settlement and was complicated by Hispanic colonizers and topographic features that restricted movement into, and settlement of, certain areas.

***The Delta was an important crossroads location during the post-Gold Rush period*** and the inhabitable lands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys proved enticing to settlers. Diverse cultures forged distinct communities during the Delta's land reclamation phase and subsequent agricultural development. While this might seem to exemplify familiar themes in our country's past, the small family farm that once characterized so much of agricultural development in North America has not epitomized rural life in the Delta; instead corporate farming and agribusiness has significantly shaped the region's history.

***Since its early colonization, the effective settlement and development of the region has depended on the labor of both indigenous and subsequent newcomer groups***. The second section of the narrative emphasizes the labor history of the Delta and how the work of different ethnic groups impacted the development of the region. It draws particular attention to how the nature of agricultural labor in the Delta hindered development and the growth of community in the region. Immigrant labor in reclamation, tenant farming and patterns of ethnic specialization in agriculture, along with discriminatory and exclusionary activities associated with work and settlement are important themes in this section. In the post-Gold Rush era, ***Chinese laborers*** were among the first newcomers to arrive in the Delta and the narrative highlights their contributions to levee construction, orchard work, and potato, onion and asparagus farming. The discussion also addresses the impact of exclusionary laws and how these policies led to the spatial isolation of Chinese in the Delta and the development of Chinatowns.

***By the late 1800s, a second wave of settlers arrived in the region to meet the demand for agricultural workers***. ***The Japanese*** moved into farming in great numbers and quickly progressed to secure long-term leases to grow high-value crops. They made important contributions to large-scale agricultural operations including potato farming and cannery work. Their success often made them the target of discriminatory policies including the establishment of segregated schools in the Delta, and ultimately resulted in their forced relocation and incarceration during World War II in response to Executive Order 9066.

***Southern Europeans*** also began to arrive in the Delta region in the late 1880s. Italians made significant contributions to truck farming and cherry-growing. They were also important innovators of mechanized farming equipment and they developed important labeling and

packaging advances that allowed for the export of quality produce to the world market. Portuguese from the Azores were involved in reclamation activities in the northern Delta. Their efforts led to the creation of the Lisbon District and the manufacturing of the first clamshell dredger.

***Filipinos*** played a major role in Delta farming and the urban life of Stockton. In the 1920s, their migration to California gained strength and Stockton was a primary destination. They made up ninety percent of the asparagus harvesters in the Delta and worked under some of the most difficult farm labor conditions in the country. Filipinos used Stockton as a base, as they moved from one labor camp to another throughout the year. Filipinos were systematically exploited and faced many forms of mistreatment including deplorable living conditions, and corrupt hiring and payroll practices. They responded with resistance and became instrumental in the farm labor movement, creating highly influential ethnic organizations.

***Punjabi Sikh*** immigrants also arrived in the Delta in the early 1900s. The region resembled their Punjabi homeland in northern India and they found work in the Delta's orchard and field crops and eventually expanded into leasing farmland. Sikhs also settled in Stockton where they built the first Sikh temple in the United States.

***The Delta was also a major focus of migration for Mexican laborers*** associated with the bracero farm labor recruiting system. The Delta region is considered the epicenter of bracero program which was initially driven by the demand for agricultural laborers to harvest sugar beets and orchard crops in the region. Lobbying efforts by growers helped to extend the program after the war ended.

***The third and final section addresses the notion of the Delta as a refuge for short-term, transient settlement, recreation and respite***. In some cases, ethnic communities were too small to become viable communities, while other transitory settlement efforts represent urban dwellers seeking isolation or retreat into Delta hideaways. Throughout the narrative, community vignettes illustrate how these three themes played out to shape the Delta's identity including its legacy towns, enduring ethnic landscapes and economic imprints.

Throughout history the Delta has been a crossroads, a place of environmental change and agricultural fortune, and a destination for newcomers. It is a place *in between*, exceptionally endowed by nature, location and cultural heritage. Flanked by the urban fringes of both the Bay Area and Central Valley, the region faces development and population pressures from all sides, and commuters and city dwellers alike seek refuge on its back roads and in its quiet communities. The region's unique rural landscape has multiple meanings. It can be interpreted as symbolic of prosperity and success, and it can equally reveal labor conflict, inequality and exclusion.