

# Citrus Roots

*Preserving Citrus Heritage Foundation*



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***Our "Mission" is to elevate the awareness of California citrus heritage through publications, education, and artistic work.***

*We are proud of our accomplishments as a volunteer organization, which means each donated dollar works for you at 100% [for we have no salaries, wages, rent, etc.]. All donations are tax deductible for income tax purposes to the full extent allowed by law.*

**Citrus Roots – Preserving Citrus  
Heritage Foundation**

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The views of the writer may not be the same as this foundation.

## The Citrus Label Era (1887 to 1955)

Tom Spellman

### **Early California citrus**

During the latter half of the 18th century, California (then known as Alta California) was still in Mexican territory. The Spanish padres were busy establishing the mission system and bringing with them as many plant food sources as possible. Transportation of live plants was difficult and cumbersome, so the preferred source was propagation material. They brought dormant cuttings of figs and grapes as well as seed for citrus and other fruits and vegetables.

The first orchards and vineyards were established in the 1760s. Within a few years, fruitful plantings stretched from the tip of Baja to the northern end of the California territory. The first varieties were seedling strains of sweet and sour oranges as well as the lemon-like citron. By the 1830s and 40s, many early Californians traded and bartered with the missions and established orchards of their own. One of these early pioneers was William Wolfskill, who became a citizen of Mexico in order to purchase land and start his farming operation at the pueblo de Los Angeles.

### **The first shipments**

Due to very limited and slow transportation, all early California citrus fruits were for local consumption only. By the time of the California gold rush, Wolfskill was in full production and began to ship citrus fruit north to San Francisco via sailing ship. Citrus fruit was of great demand to the early gold miners, as it was the only reliable prevention for scurvy. Oranges and lemons were selling in the gold fields for as much as \$1 each.

By the 1860s, the railroad system was establishing itself as a reliable source of transportation from east to west. It was during this time that Joseph Wolfskill (William Wolfskill's son) sent the first shipment of California citrus east to St Louis via Southern Pacific Railroad. Wolfskill's shipment was successful, and soon rail shipments of citrus fruit to the eastern markets were frequent. The next decade was dramatic for citrus. During this period of rapid expansion, California citrus acreage exploded from a few hundred acres to over 40,000 acres by 1885.

### **The need to market**

With this huge increase in acreage came huge increases in harvest. But these increases in production were not necessarily a good thing for the fledgling citrus industry. When citrus fruit was rare, the eastern markets absorbed each and every shipment at great profit to the grower. At this point in citrus history, shipments outgrew the marketability of the produce,

**PERIOD OF NATURALISM**



**Argonaut, circa 1910-1915**



**Mountain Lion, circa 1900-1905**



**La Mesa, circa 1890-1899**



**Upland Quail, circa 1905-1915**



**Camp Fire, circa 1905-1910**

and many shipments sent east on speculation were left rotting on Midwestern and eastern rail docks.

The need for marketing organizations and a cooperative marketing strategy was apparent and was soon met by newly organized groups like the California Fruit Growers Exchange (now Sunkist) and the Mutual Orange Distributors.

**The first labeling**

As early as the mid-1880s, proud growers saw the need to distinguish their fruit from other growers' product. The first labeling was crude and informational, consisting of hand-painted or stenciled box heads with grower and geographic information only.

With this increase in marketing effort, eastern produce buyers began to recognize where the quality fruit was being grown. Areas like Riverside, Redlands, Ontario and Pomona became known for their quality fruit. As the influence of marketing organizations increased, so did the need for advertising and influential labeling.

It is believed that the first true labels were used in 1887. Some were done as single color wood block prints and others as multicolor stone lithographs. Some early packers in the Riverside area used small round labels depicting brand and grade of fruit, centered on a partially stenciled box end with exchange information. Simultaneously, some packers were using full-size square labels that covered the box end and printed all information in full color. Round labels were approximately 6" in diameter, and square labels were approx. 9" x 10" in size. The larger size square labels were soon the standard of the industry as more information could be offered in a larger, bold, artistic format.

Several west and east coast lithographic printers began to specialize in fruit box labels of all types and designs. Many prominent artists of the time were employed by the lithographers to design images and lettering. One such artist was Herman Hansen, who was employed by the H.S. Crocker Litho Co. of San Francisco. Many of the early western design labels were designed by Hansen.

Citrus industry researcher and art historian Gordon Mc Clelland has divided the label era into three distinct periods: Naturalism, Advertising and Commercial Art.<sup>1</sup>

**Naturalism (1887 – 1920):** This period played on the mystique of the western frontier. Little effort was made to represent the fruit itself. Labels of this period depicted images of western geography, Native Americans, pioneer heroes, Mexican heritage, beautiful women, birds and animals.

These wonderful images of western life not only sold the fruit, but sold the virtues of the west itself. It's been said that many an easterner made their final decision to go west while eating a delicious California orange and viewing the compelling image depicted on the label. One can certainly understand how on a bitterly cold winter

**ADVERTISING PERIOD**



**Tesoro, circa 1930-1935**



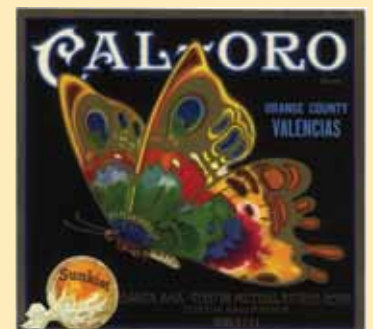
**Flavorite, circa 1925-1930**



**Progressive, circa 1925**



**Corona Cooler Lemon, circa 1930**



**Cal Oro, circa 1930**

COMMERCIAL ART PERIOD



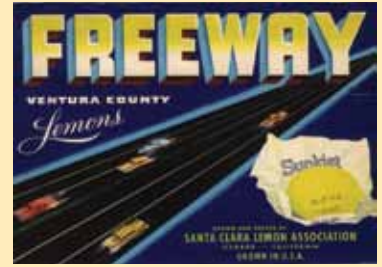
Pac Coast, circa 1935-1940



365, circa 1950



Orange Circle, circa 1940



Freeway Lemon, circa 1950

day in the eastern United States, a person could be inspired to go west by the beautiful label scene of a sun-drenched California orange orchard.

**Advertising (1920 – 1935):** In the years following World War I, lifestyle in the United States changed dramatically. Advancements were being made in transportation, agriculture, construction, communication, and most other aspects of daily life. Americans were living the so-called good life. Many new and improved products were being advertised and distributed nationally, and citrus was no exception.

The advertising era of citrus labels changed the way citrus was marketed. The value of the label as a vehicle for advertising was being recognized. The labels of this period featured the fruit itself. More attention was paid to the origin, quality, flavor and health aspects of the fruit. Images of fruit in daily use were commonplace – oranges in crystal bowls, orange slices on a plate, pitchers and glasses of orange juice and lemonade, as well as lemon meringue pies were popular label subjects of the time. Also popular during this era were images of children with fruit, storybook characters, and exaggerated images depicting fruit. California citrus was now a worldwide business.

**Commercial Art (1935 – 1955):** By the mid-1930s, the success of the advertising era had paid off. Citrus was now a staple of the world diet. California was growing, packing and shipping more than 35 million boxes of citrus fruits per year.

Again, the labels of this period changed dramatically. Bold block letters and geometric images changed the lines and look of the labels. Many images from the previous era were re-worked and streamlined to reflect a new modernized style and boldness. Marketers wanted the labels to be recognizable from a distance of 40' to 50' away. The method of lithography

had also evolved, and new modern photo-litho processes lowered printing costs and cut production time considerably.

**The end of an era**

By the mid-1950s, the American marketing system was again changing. Small grocery and produce stores were closing at record rates and being replaced by giant supermarket chains. Most produce, including citrus, was being purchased by the chains in large lots, and the value of the label became less and less important. Also in the mid-1950s, the wooden citrus shipping crate was being replaced by preprinted cardboard boxes depicting lackluster images with little color. The 70-year run of the citrus box label was over.

It's been estimated that during the label era, close to 10,000 different citrus box labels were created. Some were used for very short periods (maybe only one or two years), while popular brands have been used through the entire period and some – in very evolved forms – are still in use today.

<sup>1</sup> Mc Clelland, Gordon, Last, J.T., "California Orange Box Labels", Hillcrest Press, Inc. (1985).

*Tom Spellman is southwestern sales manager for Dave Wilson Nursery, which specializes in the production of fruit and nut trees for the U.S. wholesale and commercial markets. Tom has been involved in the production and sales of avocado, citrus, fruit and nut trees since 1981. Tom is a board member of the Citrus Roots-Preserving Citrus Heritage Foundation and also serves on the board of the California Citrus State Historic Park in Riverside. He is the 2011 president of the Citrus Label Society and an avid collector of original citrus packing crate labels. To learn more about the Society, go to [www.citruslabelsociety.com](http://www.citruslabelsociety.com)* ●

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