

## **MITROVICH, STEPHEN N.**

### **Vineyard-Figs**

Prominent among those Californians by adoption, who worked hard to usher in the horticultural and viticultural era of Fresno County, California which first assumed importance in the 1880's and which since then has become the principal industry of the county, bringing millions annually to the producers, is Stephen N. Mitrovich, who came to Fresno from his native Dalmatia, Croatia when he was twenty-one years old, and since then toiled to improve conditions here and to build up the export trade. He was born in Dalmatia, on January 7, 1859.

Arriving just before the great "boom" in California, Mr. Mitrovich was employed as assistant superintendent by George W. Mead, father of a raisin industry in this State-for it was Mr. Mead who induced the importation of vine-cuttings from Smyrna and the planting of the first vineyards. Later Mr. Mitrovich suggested that fig-cuttings be imported from Dalmatia are planted as borders around the vineyards, and also that mulberry trees be so brought in and distributed, and soon a few vineyards were enriched by the ever productive

#### **White Adriatic Figs.**

In 1889 a new departure was made when Mr. Mitrovich, in response to his home-folks in Dalmatia, received an ounce and a half of silk-worm eggs, and Mr. Mead allowed him to use of the packing-house for the purpose of raising silk and introducing sericulture-for the first time-into this State... As soon as the worms began to spin themselves into cocoons, the event was heralded by the newspapers, and thousands of visitors, from throughout the Valley and even from Los Angeles San Francisco, came to see the wonderful sight. Mr. Mitrovich produced six hundred pounds of very best raw silk in 1889. In the course of time, the young fig trees already mentioned were ready to bear, however small the crops, and naturally Mr. Mitrovich turned his attention to the fig industry, then in its infancy.

"...And here may be related a special chapter of the vicissitudes of the early fig industry in California. Martin Denikey refused to negotiate for his crop of figs on the Del Monte vineyard, stating that he had a man who would harvest, cure and pack them for him, working on salary. This man, Prof. V. Vlahusich, gathered in Del Monte figs at a cost of 6 cents a pound, cured them at cost of 2 1/2 cents a pound, and then packed them at cost of 5 cents a pound, making a total cost to pick, cure and pack of 13 1/2 cents a pound. They were picked when mature enough to be eaten green, and each picker was furnished with a step-ladder and a specially made basket, and special trays were made for sulphuring them and drying them. The figs were picked up with difficulty and caution, often under the personal direction of Professor Vlahusich, who even pointed out the figs to the pickers who brought them into the yard, spread them out, one by one, in symmetrical fashion, with the mouth sky-ward, and the trays were left in the sulphur for twelve hours. While these figs were drying, men went over the trays twice daily, and turned each one over; but as they never had not been mature enough when picked, the figs turned pink and dark-

a good deal like liver-and they become rocky-dry. The Del Monte production of that year had been consigned by Denikey to John Demartini & Co., commission merchants in San Francisco, at limited price of 25 cents a pound; while the famous silky Smyrna figs, imported from Asia, were being sold at only 10 cents a pound. A few months after these figs were on the market, and unsold, they fermented and the dark syrup of the figs ran out everywhere; on which account Martin Denikey lost the entire crop, as well as the money spent in picking, curing and packing in a way that no one ever heard of before.

On the other hand, Mr. Mitrovich harvested and packed his figs at a cost of 3 1/4 cents a pound, and he shipped them to Jonas Erlanger & Co., of San Francisco, unconditionally consigned; and they were all promptly sold at the price of the imported Smyrnas-10 cents a pound. The Fresno papers boomed the enterprise, and Mr. Mitrovich was proclaimed the "FIG KING", which title he maintained for many years. Farmers, instead of uprooting their trees, planted more White Adriatic. Especially during four years, when he had no competition, Mr. Mitrovich packed the figs on each farm where they grew, and in the way in which the celebrated figs from abroad are treated, using no grader, steam or any kind of machinery, and quite unlike the steaming method of the big-packing houses, where the fruit is spoiled both in looks and taste. Such was his success, in fact, that when he exhibited his Adriatic figs at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the AA Gold Medal was awarded to him for the best cured and packed White Adriatic figs, in competition with the world, and later he was awarded the AA Premium Gold Medal by the Midwinter Exposition in San Francisco.

For a good while Mr. Mitrovich held seventy per cent of the total fig products hereabouts, and had bought land and planted his own fig orchard; and by hard work in and out the Chambers of Commerce, he alone saved and developed the California fig industry, and introduced and cured figs into eastern markets by systemizing the harvesting and packing methods, thereby diminishing the expense.

We believe that this summary is enough to introduce an Immigrant who came to America from the Adriatic shores-of Dalmatia, Croatia.

Paul E. Vandor's History of Fresno County, Los Angeles, Historic Record Company, 1919, p.1621-1624.