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A Fig's Tale

By DAVID KARP, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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Since ancient times, Mediterranean growers have assisted this pollination process, called caprification, by hanging branches of caprifigs in Smyrna fig orchards as the female wasps emerge from the caprifigs in the spring, coated with pollen. Searching for new caprifigs in which to lay their eggs, they enter Smyrnas through the eyes at the bottom, and dust the tiny flowers inside with their pollen. The wasps die without laying their eggs, since the Smyrna fig flowers are too long for their ovipositors, but the figs develop.

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Although many American fruit experts considered caprification to be a peasant superstition, growers repeatedly imported caprifigs; each time, something went wrong, and the wasps didn't take hold. Finally, George Roeding of Fresno succeeded in establishing a colony, and in August 1899 his orchard bore large, blond, plump Smyrna figs. After a contest, Roeding re-christened the variety Calimyrna, for California Smyrna. California's big fig boom began in 1910, when a Los Angeles real estate developer named J.C. Forkner leased a swath of hog wallow badlands northwest of Fresno. To this point, the area had served only as pasture, because an adobe-like layer of hardpan lay a few feet under the surface and the pockmarked terrain made irrigation impossible.

But Forkner had a vision. He hired dozens of tractors, still novel in those years, to level the ground, blasted 660,000 holes through the hardpan so that trees could take root and planted figs on 12,000 acres. Next he blizzarded the nation with advertisements and brochures promising, "Own your own Fig Garden, You'll be rich! Five acres produce \$4,000 annual income." Chasing this lure of profits in paradise, hundreds of aspiring farmers, many from

the East, bought into Forkner's Fig Gardens.

A longtime Fresno fig grower, Harry Bud Buck, 80, remembers Forkner well, for his father supervised the western half of his plantings from 1918 to 1926 and later was his partner. "Mr. Forkner was quite a flamboyant character," he says. "He loved to regale people with stories about how good figs were, and why they should grow them. Others detested him thoroughly, but I liked him."

Most of the growers, then as now, were of Italian origin, with the old country's love and knowledge of figs. Although the vast majority of the harvest went to drying, in the 1920s a considerable market developed for canned Kadotas, with thick greenish-yellow skins. Shippers also started sending refrigerated carloads of fresh figs to the East.

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