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A Fig's Tale

By DAVID KARP, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES
August 11, 1999

California fig cultivation peaked at 42,500 acres in 1927. Forkner lost his land in the Depression, as did most of the Fig Garden smallholders. He later recouped his holdings and died a wealthy man in 1969. After a boom during World War II the fig industry settled into a long, slow decline, squeezed by increasing labor costs and cheaper imports.

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Business recovered somewhat and stabilized in the 1970s and '80s, but as Fresno sprawled northward, development gobbled up much of the old Fig Gardens. Most growers moved 25 miles north to cheaper land in the Madera-Chowchilla area. Today, only about 1,500 acres of figs--less than a tenth of the state's 16,500 acres--remain in the former "Fig Capital of America."

In the Fig Gardens, many owners have turned off the water in their groves, waiting for the inevitable houses and office buildings. Along California Highway 99, orchards lie abandoned, strewn with discarded sofas and television sets, the weeds shoulder-high. Heedless that the flanks are turned, the venerable, gnarled trees still bear generous crops, but only squirrels and birds appreciate the soft, sugary fruit. Aggravating problems for fig growers, Nabisco, the dominant buyer of dried figs, decided five years ago to pad out its Fig Newtons line with products made from other fruit. This cannibalized sales of the traditional cookies, and fig paste prices collapsed to \$300 a ton from \$1,000 a ton. Growers had to adapt or face ruin.

Some decided to emphasize sales of fresh figs, which have grown by a third to a half in the last five years. It's a small, high-end market, less than 5% of

the fig crop by weight but lucrative for those who master the tricky logistics of harvesting and shipping the delicate, perishable fruits. The season begins in late May or June with the first harvest of Mission figs in the Central Valley. Many fig varieties bear two crops annually. The first crop, known by the Spanish term breba, is borne on the previous year's wood, while the second, or main, harvest emerges from the new growth. Juicy breba Mission figs, twice as large as the later crop, go exclusively to the fresh market. A month later, the harvest shifts to Mecca, in the torrid Coachella Valley. Mike and Alan Weeks fill the gap between the first and second crops of the Central Valley with their Brown Turkey figs, large and mild-flavored. A visit to the 80-acre planting is no picnic: An almost biblical plague of maddening black flies, spawned in the nearby Salton Sea, buzzes incessantly. Even at 6 p.m., a sweet, heavy odor, steaming from the large palmate leaves of the fig trees, permeates the 115-degree air.

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