

# Profile of M. Theo Kearney

"The tall, stately . . . M. Theodore Kearney, the Prince of Fresno, was the observed of many observers in the Waldorfian halls this week. Mr. Kearney seems to be enjoying life at its full worth. Withal, he always speaks a big word for Fresno. . . , and people think well of the country that nurtures such big men."

San Francisco Chronicle, September 29, 1895

## The Man

The story of Martin Theodore Kearney is the story of a self-made man. In 1842, he was born Martin Thomas Carney of Irish parents in a Liverpool slum and became by the age of twenty-three a businessman and gentleman who called himself M. Theo Kearney. By the turn of the century, this bachelor's life included a grand tour of Europe in his \$25,000 custom Mercedes-Benz limousine, a life among the cultural elite of London, New York, and those who frequented the most exclusive German spas, and extensive plans for the construction of his five-story Chateau Fresno modeled after France's great Chateau du Chenonceaux. The source of Kearney's wealth lay in the heart of California -- the raisin vineyards of his Fruit Vale Estate located in Fresno County.

## The Developer

In February of 1869, the twenty-seven year old Kearney arrived in San Francisco via the overland route across the Isthmus of Panama -- only two months before the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. At the time vast tracts of land in the central San Joaquin Valley were being acquired by syndicates of investors. Kearney was hired by Bernard Marks and William Chapman to help develop the first colony farm in Fresno County.

The colony farm system was a method of land development that organized arable land into settlements of twenty-acre farms that included tree-lined roads, access to irrigation, and eventually schools. As the manager and chief promoter of the Central California Colony, Kearney had 192 lots to sell on six square miles of land southwest of Fresno. Each lot sold for \$1,000 with purchase terms of \$150 cash, \$12.50 per month, interest free, until the debt was paid. To promote the land sales, Kearney provided a steady stream of promotional information and human-interest stories to the local newspapers. His public relations experience and business acumen stimulated rapid sales, and by the end of 1878 most of the colony's lots were

under cultivation.

As the Central California Colony proved its viability, other colonies were established throughout the county. Some 10,240 acres of land were in production in colonies by 1880. By 1903 the region's map showed 48 different colonies (or tracts) with over 71,000 acres under production! Early Fresno historian L.A. Winchell described the significance of the first colony to Central California's agricultural history this way: "Eventually, the Central California Colony became the marvel of the desert, . . . the wedge which, driven to the head, laid open the heart of hidden riches, which grew, amassed and overspread the land to make the San Joaquin Valley the garden of the world."

## **The Raisin King**

The 1880s marked a decade of intense agribusiness activity for Kearney. He bought 6,800 acres of land to the east and southeast of Fresno on which to establish his Fruit Vale Estate and began the cultivation of the raisin grape which eventually became the source of most his wealth. Kearney also planned for the development of his ranch town, park and palatial residence. Work proceeded on the estate's vineyards, grounds, boulevard, and ranch town through the 1890s. And, notwithstanding the national financial Panic of 1893, Kearney solidified his position of leadership in California's raisin industry.

Kearney proposed the formation of the California Raisin Growers Association at a Fresno meeting of industry leaders in June of 1898. The purpose of this cooperative was to stabilize the raisin market through means of quality control, price setting, and shrewd marketing of California's raisins. With Kearney as their first president, a membership drive attracted 90 per cent of the state's raisin growers that year.

Hailed as the "Raisin King of Fresno," Kearney was seen as the industry's savior. However, the next eight years were stormy ones for the Association with intense conflicts and personality battles that weakened the effectiveness of Kearney's concept of a strong raisin packing-marketing corporation. In the end, the original cooperative fell by the way only to reappear in 1912, after Kearney's death, as the California Associated Raisin Company which eventually became the Sun-Maid Company and, ultimately, the present-day corporate giant of Sun-Maid Growers of California.

## **The Benefactor**

During the last years of his life, Kearney's concern for the full development of the San

Joaquin Valley's agricultural potential was paramount as he began to contemplate his legacy. Seven years before his death in 1906, he wrote a will that included instructions for the creation of a private school to be known as the Kearney Agricultural College. In a 1905 letter to California Governor George C. Pardee, he wrote: "I have long seen the necessity for a School for Farmers and Experimental Station to promote diversified and high class farming in the great San Joaquin Valley."

The Raisin King's final will bequeathed his entire 5,400-acre Fruit Vale Estate to the University of California with the suggestion that an experimental station be created "as an adjunct" to the University's College of Agriculture.

### **The Kearney Ranch Vineyard**

Upon Kearney's death in 1906, the University of California took over the estate and operated the Kearney Vineyard Ranch as a commercial enterprise and experimental site for 39 years until 1949. The ranch town continued to be occupied until 1949, and the families living on the ranch developed into a bustling rural community. Kearney's ranch manager, Ralph Frisselle and subsequently his son, S. Parker Frisselle, continued to oversee the operation. A story regarding the ranch appeared in an industry journal, *Pacific Rural Press*, in 1913 featuring an extensive analysis of the operations and describing the Kearney property as "one of the greatest ranches in California." In 1949, the University of California sold the Kearney ag lands.

### **Foundation of Soil Science**

With a 2.2 million-dollar endowment fund realized from the land sales and accumulated profit from the ranch operation, the M. Theo Kearney Foundation of Soil Science was created by the University's Board of Regents in 1951. The Foundation's two-fold mission was and is to study the relation of soil and water to plants and to provide for the education of soil scientists and teachers. Nine years after its creation in 1960, a horticultural field station was established with Kearney Foundation funds. Known today as the Kearney Agricultural Center, this 333-acre site near Parlier is located in the vicinity of original Fruit Vale Estate land and serves as a vital resource for ag research and education.

### **Regional Public Park**

When the University shut down the ranch operations in 1949, the County of Fresno began to

administer the historic estate grounds as a public park under a lease agreement with the University. Kearney Park has served as one of the region's recreational destinations for over 50 years with the added attraction of the historic Kearney house museum at the center of its 230 acres. M. Theo Kearney had ensured the preservation of his private estate grounds for public use by stating in his will that the park land should always be utilized for the benefit of the citizens of Fresno.

## **A Timeline**

**1842**

**Born Martin Thomas Carney.**

Liverpool, England

Father: James Carney, Irish laborer

Mother: Ann Carney (Long)

**1854**

**Immigrated to America.**

When Martin was 12 years old, the family settled in Malden, a small town 15 miles north of Boston.

**1865**

**Began diary notes.**

The entries reveal a proper young Bostonian with an extensive social life in the employ of a trunk-manufacturing firm. The former Irish immigrant boy had transformed himself into a successful businessman and gentleman who was now signing his name "M. Theo Kearney" in an elegant script.

**1869-1900**

## **Hailed the "Raisin King"**

Kearney traveled to California in 1867 with the sum of \$8,000 to invest in agricultural development in the central San Joaquin Valley. Over the next three decades, he developed his 5,000-acre Fruit Vale Estate to the west of Fresno and established himself as a leader in the raisin industry.

1898

## **Founded the California Raisin Growers Association**

In June, Kearney called the first mass meeting of the region's raisin growers and successfully proposed the establishment of an association to control quality, set prices and market for the industry -- with himself as its first president. By 1915, the raisin co-op that Kearney had founded took the name Sun-Maid -- and today, with its internationally recognized Sun-Maid girl wearing her red bonnet, is known as Sun-Maid Growers of California.

1895-1906

## **Enjoyed European "High Society".**

From New York's Waldorf-Astoria to London's Metropole Hotel, Kearney lived as an aristocrat during the last decade of his life. Although a life-long bachelor, he cultivated a circle of women friends and enjoyed female company. His standing in European social circles was emphasized by an August 1900 article in the Paris Herald noting Kearney's election as a founder of an exclusive new golf club in Hamburg, Germany. He toured the continent in the summer of 1904 in his \$25,000 French Mercedes-Benz touring car.

1906

## **Broke ground for Chateau Fresno.**

As he left for his European sojourn in May of 1906, Kearney stopped to watch workmen excavating the site for his great five-story castle that was to be the centerpiece of Chateau Fresno Park and the Fruit Vale Estate. Inspired by France's Chateau de Chenonceaux, Kearney's

Fresno castle was to include stained glass windows, 13 guest rooms each with private bath and dressing room, and a great hall for lavish entertainment. The foundation-work ceased upon news of his death.

**1906**

**Died at Age 64.**

Kearney died board British luxury liner Caronia and was cremated in Liverpool. His ashes were interred in Fresno's Chapel of the Light Mausoleum behind a bronze plaque "Kearney 1842-1906." His estate was valued at \$1.5 million, and he bequeathed all his assets to the University of California.