

# Do You Remember?

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## Where Have All the Roses Gone?

In 1938 Jackson and Perkins, today perhaps the largest grower of roses in the world, planted roses in fields south of Highway 50 (now I-580) on land leased from August Hagemann. In October of that year the Herald reported, "Sunshine, water, and ideal soil, have done their part to bring the plants to maturity, rows of thickly foliated bushes stretching for a mile, with multicolored tops of blooms of every hue creating an enormous garden." By 1941 the firm's rose fields in this area had increased to 600 acres.

Valley Rose Company, run by the Schwertschaff family, leased 40 acres at the corner of East Avenue and Vasco Road from Gatzmer Wagoner. By 1947 two million rose bushes were growing on the Hagemann property and 750,000 on Wagner's. Jackson and Perkins also planted roses in Pleasanton on 600 acres of the Bernal property. Dick Smith, whose family lived nearby on Rose Avenue in the early 1950s when he was young, would run over to the rose fields whenever he heard the crop duster roaring. He loved to watch its acrobatics.

In 1937 George DeVor, foreman for Jackson and Perkins, resigned from his position to start the local Amling-DeVor Company with his son Paul and a partner. They grew some 1,200 acres of rose bushes on land just east of the current Jackson Avenue School in Livermore, and more in Pleasanton near Santa Rita Road and Valley Avenue, site of today's Orloff Park. They also rented about 10 acres from August Hagemann north of the railroad tracks, an area now part of the gravel

industry. Rose farming and hybridization became a big industry in the valley, with yellow, red, white, pink, and even mauve roses blanketing the fields.

Roses were hard on the soil, so they were grown on a five-year rotation. One year was for roses, then four years for wheat or barley, which usually did well thanks to the residual fertilizer in the ground from the rose cultivation. The grain crop helped to pay for the land rental.

All these blooming acres were rose bushes for the wholesale, catalog, and hot-house trades. No World War II sailor from the navy bases in Pleasanton or Livermore ever bought his gal a dozen red roses from these fields. The Tejada brothers, Chris and Jimmie, were among the many workers from the Philippine Islands who came to the Tri-Valley and formed the labor force necessary to tend the rose fields and nearby vineyards, often tedious and back-breaking jobs. A mess hall was built on McGraw Avenue off South Frontage road in Livermore to serve the field workers. During World War

II a number of rose growers planted tomatoes in some of their rented acres.

By the mid-1950s seven other growers had settled in the Tri-Valley because of Jackson and Perkins's presence and influence, and 12 million rose plants were produced annually. A Livermore Chamber of Commerce publication about 1961 boasted, "There are more hybrid rose seedlings grown in the Livermore valley than anywhere else in the world." So, to paraphrase an old anti-war folk song, "Where have all the roses gone?"

In February 1962 Jackson and Perkins suffered a huge loss in a nursery fire at their facilities on McGraw Avenue. The monetary loss, estimated at \$300,000, was bad enough, but they also lost two years of scientific research. In 1963 the city of Livermore decided to put its new airport on the Hagemann property. Increased taxes began squeezing other farmers who had rented their fields to the rose companies. Growers had to cope with crown gall, a disfiguring disease caused by a bacterium that attacks the rose plant and, once successful, remains in the soil. In 1968 the crown gall hit 25 per cent of the Jackson and Perkins tree roses. Not until 1973 did an Australian researcher come up with a cure. But before that the bloom was permanently off the Tri-Valley rose industry.

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After a December harvest of 97,000 rose trees in 1968, Jackson and Perkins moved its growing operations to southern California. Ernest Schwertscharf died in 1956; his son, also named Ernest, took over the Valley Rose Company but was forced to sell in 1963. Young Ernest told a Tri-Valley Herald reporter that he was not nostalgic for those days when he and his father and sometimes his brother "were consumed by the upkeep of 1½ million plants, but it makes for nice memories of a family working together and the beauty of the crop." Water for irrigation was

becoming more expensive, and new neighbors of the fields complained of the pesticides being used. DeVor at first retreated to its Pleasanton properties. Finally, in 1990 the company moved its operations to the Watsonville area. Smaller companies went out of business, and our only roses today are in private gardens or public parks.

"The Tri-Valley has played an extremely important role in the history of roses in America," said local rose expert David Lowell, not only because of the quantity grown here, but the quality. Since the awarding

of "All-American" status for roses began nationally in 1940, almost a fourth of the honors have gone to men associated with the Tri-Valley. Dr. Walter Lammerts, who worked here with DeVor, developed two major species—"Charlotte Armstrong" and "Queen Elizabeth." Eugene Boerner, chief hybridizer of floribunda roses for Jackson and Perkins, won 14 All-American honors. Pleasanton has had an annual rose show since 1938, and the city's official flower is the Don Juan rose, developed by Jackson and Perkins.

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