

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## Philippine-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



The Republic of the Philippines consists of more than 7,000 islands approximately 500 miles southeast of Asia. Filipinos identify with the region they come from and the language they speak. The three largest groups are the Visayans of the central islands, the Tagalogs who live on the island of Luzon, and the Ilocanos who occupy the northwest provinces of Luzon. The Ilocanos represent the majority of the first wave of Filipino immigrants arriving in the 1920s. The Philippines were under United States rule from 1898 to 1946.

The first Filipino immigrants in the Imperial Valley were lured by the success of a few Filipinos who had achieved financial security and education provided by the United States government. However, most of these young men came in search of work, not education. Known as the "Pinoys," they served as migrant agricultural laborers.

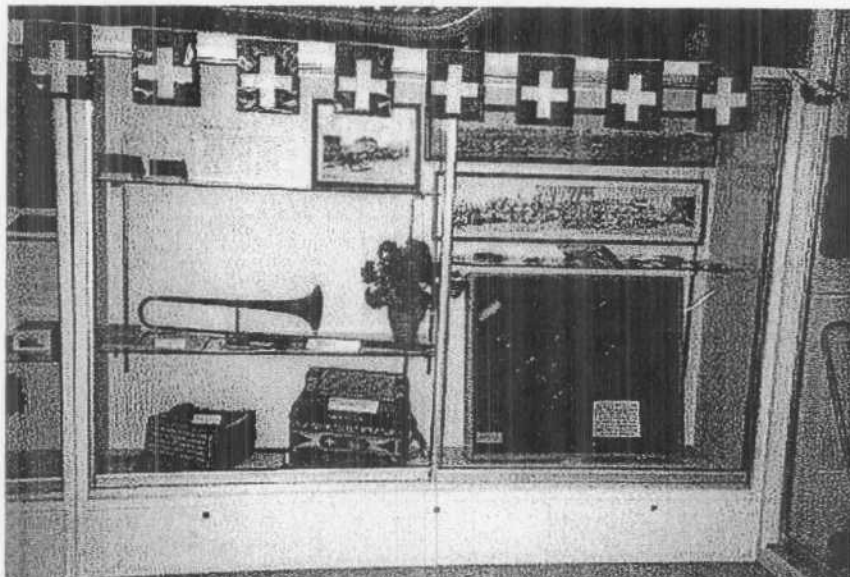
These jobs were low paying and physically exhausting, but were better than anything available in their homeland. Filipinos were shocked by the discrimination and prejudice they were dealt. During the Great Depression many lost their jobs and because they were not U.S. citizens they were excluded from relief programs.

Japan's attack on the Philippines during World War II motivated many of the Valley's Filipinos to enlist in the Armed Forces. As soldiers many were granted citizenship; however, most Filipinos had to wait until 1946 for this privilege.

The second wave of immigrants arrived after the war. These were the wives, children and family members of the earlier immigrants, as well as young women of marriageable age. With the repeal of the anti-alien land law, many Filipinos purchased

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## Swiss-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



The Swiss, as did many, saw the Imperial Valley as a place of opportunity--a place where men and women could be successful with strong determination and hard work. Enveloped by the dream of owning their own land and working for themselves, the Imperial Valley presented the ideal starting point. The first Swiss entered the Imperial Valley in 1901 with little more than their strong backs and their willingness to work. Hearing of the opportunities the Valley held through word-of-mouth, family, friends and even newspaper advertisements offering undeveloped farmland at reasonable prices, other Swiss natives soon arrived.

The Swiss were, and still are, shrewd and determined people who won't quit when the odds are against them. Their home was hot enough in the summer that many Swiss women considered going back to Switzerland. Pride, prospering crops, and the realization of cooler weather in the fall enabled them to persevere through the unbearable heat.

Many of the Swiss began as milkers in existing dairies and then acquired their own with the money they accumulated. Most of these men then called on brides-to-be and family members to join them as they started to build their own dairies.

Once the favored dairy spot of Southern California, with more than 24,000 dairy cows producing 6 million pounds of butter annually, only one dairy remains in operation today. Many of the Swiss have turned to farming, helping to make the Imperial Valley the strong agricultural area it is today.

The majority of these same families continue to reside in the Valley, with many

settling in the Holtville area. They became leading citizens in the community, contributing time, working for improvements, building strong establishments and incorporating their work ethic in all they did.

Proud of their heritage and eager to pass on tradition, the Imperial Valley Swiss Club was organized in 1925. The clubhouse, northwest of Holtville, is still used for their many activities.

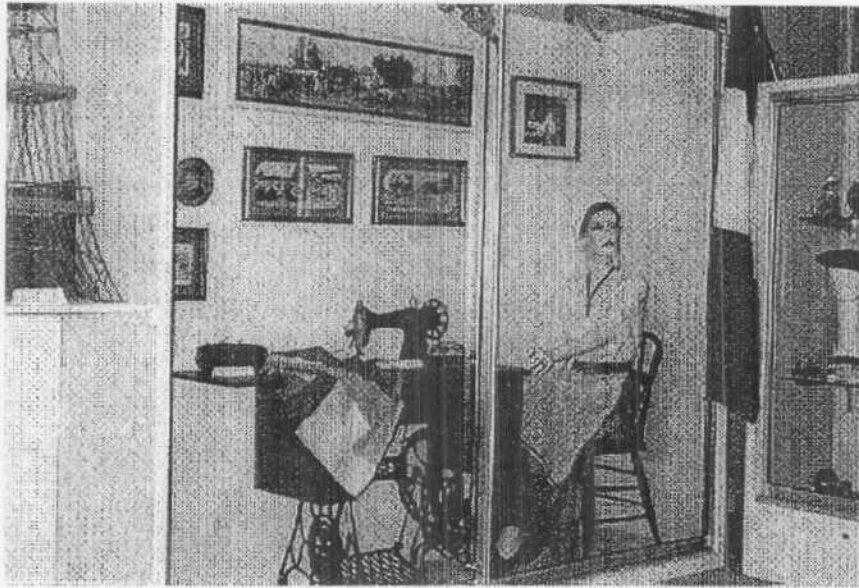
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**[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)**

**[Return to IVC Homepage](#)**

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## French-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



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Our ancestors must have had American fever for many of them came to this country thinking the streets were paved in gold. It was known as "The Gateway to the New World." These immigrants, most from southern France, came to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century for adventure and opportunity.

They were among the millions representing the largest movement of human beings in history. After spending at least three weeks crossing the Atlantic Ocean, they saw what they had longed to see--the Statue of Liberty-- a gift their own people had given to the United States in 1896. It was sculpted by French artist, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi. Beyond the statue was Ellis Island.

They did not know if they would be admitted to the United States after their long journey, or be returned to the old country. Now their fate would be decided. Almost all French immigrants came to the United States via Ellis Island; and most came by steerage class which was the cheapest way to cross the ocean. Immigrants had to be in good health and had to have a little money. Also, they were to be self-sufficient and not a public charge.

They had little schooling, and most had done their military duty for their own country. Almost all became naturalized citizens and were very proud of it. Some of them started as sheep herders, or had dairies, but most resorted to farming.

Except for the French Basque, all these people came from the province of Bearn in southwest France. The French Basque inhabited the area in provinces to the west. Although they lived just a few miles apart in France, most did not know one another until they reached America. Some of the first generation could not speak English when they started school here.

Many centuries ago it was the French custom, or tradition (particularly the Bearnais), to christen a newborn with garlic and wine. The baby's lips were rubbed with a clove of garlic, then moistened with wine.

Some of the French families have left the Imperial Valley, but many remain and would never consider leaving. It took a great deal of effort, sacrifice and hard work, and there are those still here who feel the Imperial Valley has been very good to them.

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**[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)**

**[Return to IVC Homepage](#)**

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## Italian-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



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Various circumstances brought the first Italians to the Imperial Valley in the 1910s. Some came for the adventure, some came for economic betterment, but all made an investment in the Valley whose impact is still felt to this day.

Almost all Italian immigrants to the United States arrived through Ellis Island. From there many headed to California. Several began working in the sugar industry which in turn led to their discovery of the Valley. Here they established farms, dairies and other agricultural businesses which proved profitable for many.

One young Italian man was blessed by an elderly benefactor who gave him \$100 to travel to the United States and better himself. He was to return the \$100 to his investor to give to another young man looking to better himself in this new country. He kept the bargain and several young men were able to follow after him in this manner.

These immigrants placed a high emphasis on assimilation yet stressed the importance of the values of their native culture.

Their first generation children learned to speak Italian and English. The value of a good education was stressed and educational opportunities were made equally possible for both girls and boys.

They emphasized, and proved true, the belief common to many immigrants that, with hard work, nothing was impossible because this was America.



The importance of family, the traditions surrounding it, and their faith in God were woven together to create the fabric of their way of life. Today the descendants of these early Italians still gather with their large families to celebrate holidays, religious and secular, with love and, of course, food. St. Joseph's Day is celebrated with all vegetable dishes. Christmas Eve finds the traditional seafood dinner followed the next day with ravioli stuffed with spinach, meat and cheese. And Easter wouldn't be the same without a breakfast of "dolls with eggs" cookies.

A proud Valley resident of Italian parentage, Joe Maggio, recieved acclaim for his mechanization of the packing industry. It's a common sight today to see the packing of produce immediately after havesting. However it was an innovation when Maggio brought the conveyor belt directly to the field or set up flood lights allowing the work to continue through the night.

Remaining in the Valley are members of the Abatti, Allegranza, Bertussi, Colace, Croce, DePaoli, Fusi, Maggio, Niboli, Scaroni Terribillini and other families. Many members of these families remain in Italy today. Most Valley residents of Italian heritage take great joy in returning to Italy to visit with family.

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**[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)**

**[Return to IVC Homepage](#)**

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## Japanese-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



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The Issei, or first generation Japanese immigrants, responded to the call of America, spurred by depressed economic conditions in Japan. They came to the Imperial Valley in search of the American promise and called it Teikoku Heigen. They would overcome great adversity by adhering to traditional Japanese ideals of duty, obligation and perserverance.

The first Issei arrived in the Imperial Valley in 1904 to serve as migrant agricultural laborers. They climbed to the ranks of crew bosses and foremen, then moved to share-cropping and eventually leased, and even owned, their land (until the 1913 Alien Land Law prohibiting Japanese ownership of farmland.)

These early Japanese-Americans were instrumental in establishing the Imperial Valley as a major produce-growing region. They concentrated on intensive crops such as melons, lettuce and tomatoes.

Hay and field crop growers leased land to Japanese farmers as a convenient way of effectuating crop rotation. As a result, Japanese farm families moved to different locations creating a unique "transient" life style in which even their houses were transported from field to field.

By 1914, the cantaloupe industry was dominated by Japanese farmers who improved methods by introducing "hot capping" and "brush covering" techniques. In 1915, an Issei was the first Imperial Valley farmer to successfully grow head lettuce on a commercial basis. Many Japanese farmers were leased only marginal ground such as desert, rocky, or unlevel areas. Determined to succeed, they spent many back-breaking



hours converting it into fertile farmland, thereby playing a prominent role in desert land reclamation. By 1940, three-fourths of the Imperial Valley's Japanese population was involved in agriculture, operating up to 17,000 acres.

While many Issei succeeded in establishing themselves in agriculture, numerous Japanese grocery stores, restaurants, hotels, pool parlors and other businesses also flourished in the Valley.

Once Issei men had settled in the Valley, they summoned a second wave of immigrants from Japan--Issei women. While many men went to Japan to marry and returned with their wives, others chose wives via the picture-bride system, discontinued in 1921. However, approximately half of the Imperial Valley Issei men spent a life of bachelorhood as the result of the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 which prohibited further Japanese immigration.

The second generation, or Nisei, were the first American citizens of Japanese descent. Their parents instilled in them the importance of two institutions--family and education. In addition to regular school, most Nisei attended Japanese language schools to reduce the communication gap between themselves and their parents.

Community life centered around the Buddhist temples and Japanese Christian churches in Brawley, Calexico and El Centro. Special events and celebrations included New Year's Day, Obon, Hanamatsuri and various picnics. Many organizations and youth activities were formed, such as the Japanese Association of the Imperial Valley, Japanese American Citizens League, Nisei Boy Scout troops, football and baseball teams and kendo and judo clubs.

The outbreak of World War II devastated the Japanese American community. Within days after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, 110 prominent Imperial Valley Issei (large farm operators, priests, martial arts instructors and community leaders) were removed from their homes and imprisoned by the U.S. government. Racial prejudice was unleashed and severe hostility toward the Japanese was rampant. In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 initiated a mass evacuation of all persons of Japanese ancestry, aliens and citizens from the West Coast on the basis of "military necessity." The Imperial Valley's Japanese population was interned at the Poston Relocation Center near Parker, Arizona. The incarceration of these Americans was a great injustice which caused great human suffering and enormous loss of property for individuals of Japanese descent in the Imperial Valley and throughout the United States.

During World War II, several Imperial Valley Nisei served in the U.S. Army and several were killed in action. Many were decorated heroes in such noted units as the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in Europe and the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific Theater.

Following their release from Poston, relatively few Japanese returned to the Imperial Valley. In 1930 more than 2,300 persons of Japanese ancestry inhabited Imperial County. By 1990 there were fewer than 200. In 1952, the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act was passed which, for the first time, allowed

Japanese immigrants to become naturalized citizens. Consequently, 20 Issei in the Imperial Valley became citizens. Their dream, seeded aboard the immigrant steamships that crossed the Pacific at the turn of the century, finally was realized. Their perserverance and diligence will serve forever as an inspiration to future generations of Japanese-Americans. Their efforts and sacrifices were not in vain.

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**[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)**

**[Return to IVC Homepage](#)**

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## Hispanic-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



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In May 1540, Melchior Diaz became the first white man to set foot on what is now known as the Imperial Valley. Captain Juan Bautista De Anza, born and raised in Sonora's Mexican frontier, accompanied by Padre Francisco Garces, led an expedition to the Santa Barbara Mission and crossed the Valley in 1774. Don Pedro Foges crossed the Valley on his way to San Diego in 1782. Wagon trains from Sonora, Mexico traversed Mt. Signal en route to California's gold rush sites in 1849. General Guillermo Andrade was a major role-player in the delivery of Colorado River water to the area of the Colorado desert that was to become the Valley. In 1883, Andrade owned all the Mexican land this important canal crossed to get to the Valley. Early Hispanic involvement with the Valley began 450 years ago and has continued increasingly ever since.

The majority of the founding Hispanic families came to the Valley between 1908 and 1925 settling in Calexico and Brawley. They came for different reasons, all shared the underlying purpose of finding a better life. They were farm workers, shop keepers, businessmen and professionals from every walk of life and economic standing.

Most of the settlers in the Calexico area came from Southern Baja California and Sonora. Although they lived in Calexico, many worked in Mexicali Valley's blossoming cotton industry. Employment in Mexicali meant many professionals were able to work in their professions, trades and businesses. The settlers of Brawley were mostly from Guanajuato, Jalisco, Coahuila and Sonora. These who made their living in the Imperial Valley, found they could not work in their respective trades and professions because they lacked knowledge of the English language and the American culture.

The language barrier limited opportunity and reduced everyone to the status of laborer. The proximity to Mexico, family in Mexico, the Spanish language, the Mexican culture and the feeling that their stay in the U.S. was temporary all worked against their becoming U.S. citizens and absorbing the American way of life. The Hispanic founders from Mexico did not come with the hope of becoming part of the "American Dream." Crossing the border to become legal U.S. residents at that time was simply a matter of registering at the border, so, they came to find work and opportunity to support their families.

The established English speaking community of Imperial Valley did little to embrace the Hispanic settlers. Instead, the opposite was true with segregation of some schools and swimming pools. The Hispanic was looked at simply as providing labor. Ironically "The First Thirty Years," a history of the Imperial Valley, does nothing to recognize the Hispanic as a major contributor of labor in developing the Imperial Valley.

The "American Dream" became part of the Imperial Valley Hispanic's dream when he started feeling he was an American. Although some served in World War I, it was World War II that made the big difference. They learned through serving and dying for this land that the United States was in fact their country. The Imperial Valley Hispanic has served the United States with distinction and honor in every war and military conflict since and including World War I.

The Hispanic founders were excluded, but their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren became the doctors, dentists, attorneys, accountants, businessmen, teachers, property owners, school superintendents, city councilmen, mayors, county supervisors, school and college board trustees of today. It's important to understand that the Hispanic involvement with the Valley that started in May of 1540, continues today. Individuals and entire families arrive daily, beginning the cycle all over again. Lack of the English language continues to mean menial jobs. Each passing day the climb is easier. Now there are role models to follow and mentors to give helping hands.

Comparing the Hispanic's accomplishments with their ethnic groups in Imperial Valley is possible only by isolating the founding group arriving prior to 1910 through 1925. Some of the founding families in Calexico were: Aceves, Acuna, Alarcon, Alvarado, Alvarez, Amador, Andrade, Araiza, Arce, Armendariz, Arrellano, Balderas, Barbosa, Baren, Barranco, Becerra, Bejarano, Berduco, Blanco, Burgos, Cabanas, Cabral, Calderon, Cantu, Carrillo, Cecena, Chavez, Contreras, Cordero, Cordoba, De La Vega, Escalante, Esquer, Espana, Farias, Felix, Figueroa, Galvez, Gallegos, Garcia, Gastelum, Gonzales, Gonzalez, Grijalva, Guerrero, Guilan, Gutierrez, Hernandez, Herrera, Legaspi, Leyvas, Lopez, Lucero, Luken, Medina, Mendoza, Mercado, Monge, Montano, Montejano, Montoya, Necochea, Nogales, Nungaray, Nunez, Padilla, Palacio, Pedroza, Pellegrin, Pereira, Pesqueira, Platero, Rivera, Sanchez, Servin, Soto, Terrazas, Valencia, Valenzuela, Vera, Velasquez, Villareal, Welish, Ybarra, Yrquiaga, Yturalde.

Some of the founding families in Brawley were: Aguilera, Altamirano, Cardenas, Chacon, Curiel, Duarte, Escalera, Estrada, Flores, Gauna, Heredia, Hinojosa, Jauregui, Jimenez, Mendibles, Mendoza, Montoya, Negrete, Noriegam, Padilla,

**Quintana, Real, Reyes, Rodriguez, Romero, Rubio, Santillan, Silva, Soto. The evidence of accomplishment is overwhelming.**

**The future is bright. There is a necessity for the U.S. and Mexico to work closer together than ever before because today's global economy presents an opportunity for the Imperial Valley Hispanics who understand both cultures, to provide the human resources necessary to close any existing gaps.**

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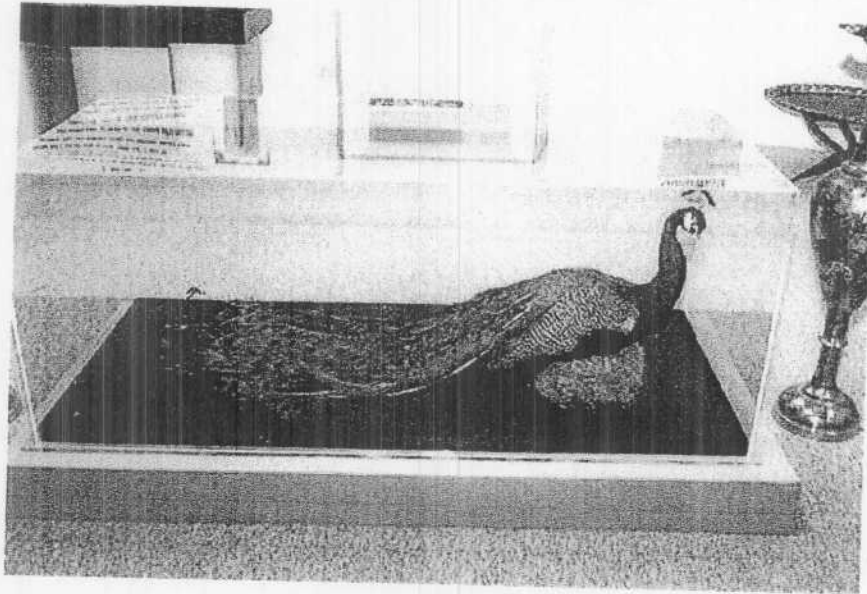
**[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)**

**[Return to IVC Homepage](#)**



# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## East Indian-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



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Men from India's Punjab province were among the earliest settlers in the Imperial Valley. Eighteen Punjabi names were recorded in the 1910 census and by 1920 there were 268 Punjabis in Imperial County. When these first East Indian pioneers arrived, their homeland was still under British colonial rule. Because many of them had previous farming experience, the Imperial Valley was a natural choice. They likened the developing area to the Punjab, both in landscape and climate and though it a promising farming country. Holtville, Brawley, El Centro, Calipatria and Imperial were early centers for Punjabi settlement.

Many mistakenly generalized the Punjabi as "Hindus"; however, they actually came from all three major East Indian religious sects, Sikh, Moslem, and Hindu--each linked by the common language, Punjabi.

As with many immigrant pioneers, the Punjabi were not immune from racial discrimination. During the mid-1920s federal legislation restricted further Asian immigration, preventing the Valley's Punjabi from sending for their families. Further legislation barred these and other Asian immigrants from attaining United States citizenship. As non-citizens, state laws restricted their right to lease and own agricultural land and to marry across racial lines. Yet these men persevered and made many contributions to the Valley.

As the various discriminatory laws took effect, some Anglo neighbors, bankers and lawyers joined efforts to help the Punjabi men remain in farming. With no Indian women living in the Imperial Valley, they often married women of Mexican descent, producing Punjabi-Mexican biethnic families. Catholicism became the dominant



religion of the second generation and most children spoke both Spanish and English, but little Punjabi.

The Luce-Celler Bill was passed in 1946, permitting South Asians to become naturalized U.S. citizens. Not only did this allow many older Punjabi to attain long-desired citizen status, but soon propelled Imperial Valley's Dalip Singh Saund into the United States Congress.

Another important event for the local Punjabi followed in 1947 when British India became two free and independent nations, India and Pakistan. Proud of both their native homeland and their new home, the Punjabi were quick to re-establish meaningful connections with their South Asian relatives.

Recently, new immigrants have come from South Asia, Africa, and England adding to the East Indian community in the Imperial Valley. Although their numbers are relatively small, the Punjabi pioneers and their descendants provide a colorful part of the ethnic picture of the Imperial Valley.

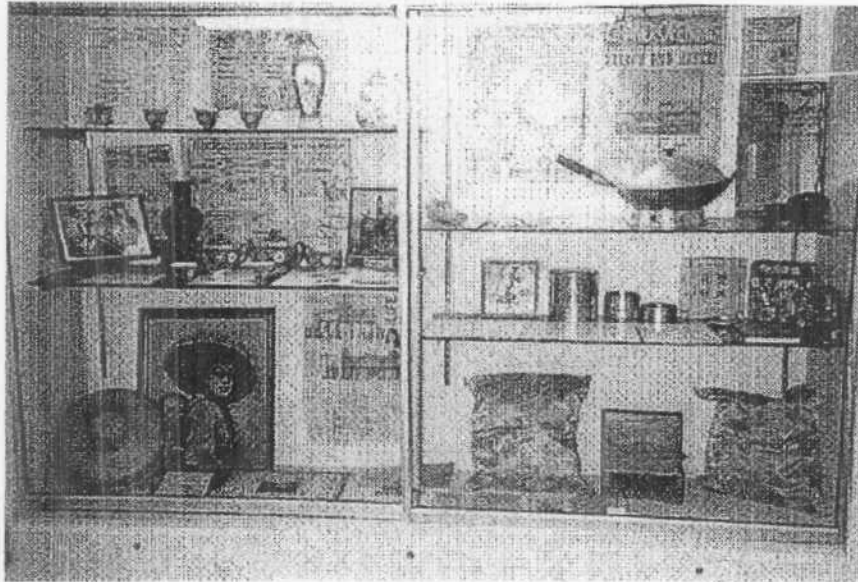
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**[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)**

**[Return to IVC Homepage](#)**

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## Chinese-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



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**"Gum San," in the mother tongue of mainland China, means "golden mountain." These were the words the Chinese used to describe the United States. Their dream of America was of a country where life was good, food abundant, and prosperity available for those brave enough to emigrate to the new land.**

**Early Chinese immigrants in the Imperial Valley mainly were from southern China, originating in the southern Kwong Tong province next to Hong Kong and the Pacific Ocean. Most of these people were poor farmers from rural villages many days journey from the nearest metropolitan area.**

**Entire clans from villages came together and worked together in the new land. First, the patriarchs arrived. These older members, more worldly and wise, established joint business ventures. Later, younger men and boys were sent to supply the strong backs needed to toil long hours in the new ventures. The hard work, harsh weather and tribulations they faced were tolerated because, combined with the dream of bettering themselves, they were among friends and relatives.**

**At first these immigrants were viewed as poor bank risks. They had neither business training nor experience and lacked credit. Nevertheless, determined to succeed, they pooled financial assets and entered the business world.**

**Many of these early immigrants were attracted to food service businesses. After all, if you were from a starving country, naturally you would be attracted to a business dealing in food! Initially these businesses were medium-sized grocery stores: the Hong Kong Market (1920), the Central Food Market (1930) and later the New Star Food**

**Markets (1948). All were managed and owned basically by the Mah or Mar clans of immigrants from the Hoi San village in Canton, China.**

**Some branched out into such restaurants as the Dragon Inn, New Canton Cafe, Dick's Cafe, Tommy's Inn, Holly's Cafe, The Asia Cafe, Bill's Cafe and Mah's Kitchen. Other grocery stores followed, including the Pine Market, Desert Food Center, Union Food Market, National Market, Sunrise Market, College View Market, George's Market and the Capital Market. Other smaller families started farming operations; Louie Toy Farms and Ed Chew Farms for example. One family went into the poultry business, the El Centro Poultry Market, which later became the EDM Market.**

**These businesses provided basic grocery staples to the early Valley residents plus innovative services such as credit for groceries, check cashing privileges, emergency loans, money orders, early fast foods, Chinese food-to-go, and free home delivery.**

**As these businesses prospered, the Chinese helped develop the economic base and ethnic diversity which is such a fundamental part of the Imperial Valley's success.**

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**[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)**

**[Return to IVC Homepage](#)**

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## African-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley



Accounts of African-American arrivals in the Imperial Valley indicate that black families began arriving in the desert as early as 1904 via truck, train and covered wagon. These courageous pioneers came from all over the United States; however, the majority migrated from the South and the Southwest. They were drawn to this harsh country by the American dream. They sought land of their own, good wages and a better life for their children.

Their main goal was acquisition of farm land and financial independence. Many had been sharecroppers or tenant farmers in the South. These people were intelligent, ambitious and politically conscious.

Most African-American pioneer families were large in number. While children were considered a blessing, they were also a necessity as they helped tend cows, hogs, chickens, turkeys, rabbits and pigeons.

Alfalfa became a prized crop as the Valley's long growing season provided for four or five cuttings a year. Growing, cutting, baling and transporting hay to market provided livelihood for many African-American families. Cotton was also a profitable crop, providing a prosperous living for families until mechanized farming machinery made it an unprofitable business for the small farmer. African-American residents also owned and operated dairies with one of the largest belonging to Albert Evans who resided in the Seeley area.

Many black citizens labored with the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe Railroads which were the main arteries connecting the rural county to cities in the north and east.

Employment was also found in cotton gins, lumber yards, delivery stables and ice houses. As a group, African-Americans weren't without entrepreneurs. Barber shops, dry cleaning establishments, grocery stores, bakeries, boarding houses, cafes and pool halls are examples of establishments owned and operated by African-Americans.

In the years between 1904 and 1918, many African-Americans congregated in the Calexico area near Mount Signal, in the Imperial area, near Seeley (Where the Naval Air Facility now stands), and in the rural Brawley area.

Tents served as their first abodes. Water from nearby canals was dipped into huge barrels for washing, cooking and drinking. After bringing in a crop or two, they built wooden shanties with canvas flaps that could be raised and lowered instead of windows. Refinements such as screens would be added as money became available. The summers were hot and dusty and the battle against flies and mosquitoes was unending.

As quickly as possible, a small church was built in each community to serve as both a worship and community center.

El Centro achieved nationwide fame as the only city in California with a high school staffed by African-American and Hispanic teachers. This situation at Douglass High School developed by chance, but the school became a mecca for minority teachers aspiring to work in California schools.

Douglass High School Alumni, children and grandchildren of African-American pioneers, still return for class reunions celebrating their history in this golden desert region with gladness and pride. The school was closed in the mid-1950's; however, the impact of those years is still felt over the entire state of California.

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[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)

[Return to IVC Homepage](#)

# Imperial Valley Historical Society

## Portuguese-American Pioneers of the Imperial Valley

Terra da Promissao. Terra do Oportunidade. Terra da muito uma Abundancia. Land of Promise. Land of Opportunity. Land of Abundance. Singing these praises of America, Portuguese immigrants left their homes on the mainland and its islands to search for the promise of the new world. They left with apprehension, yet anticipation, of new and great discoveries as did Christopher Columbus who once lived in and was married in Lisbon.

Most of these immigrants arrived and established themselves in the New England area. Many soon heard of a new frontier in California where, with an abundant water supply, a desert was being transformed into lush pastures. So again, with great expectations, they came to work very hard in this land so very different from where they came.

These brave and hearty pioneers endured hot summers and enjoyed mild winters. Most became involved in the dairy industry which was blooming in the Valley. Single men soon found wives and those families left in the east or in the "old country" were sent for.

In the early dairies, cows were milked by hand. In the oppressive heat and bitter cold of open corrals everyone in these mostly large families shared milking and daily chores.

Visiting a fellow Portuguese family was an assurance of an invitation to a hearty meal or at the very least a "pre-milking" snack of bread, cheese and coffee, or perhaps, a gift of a live chicken or turkey to take home. Weekends brought families, friends and relatives together to enjoy a meal of a farm raised animal such as a calf or pig. Due to a lack of refrigeration, meats not preserved as sausages, were usually shared by two or more families so as to be consumed quickly.

The difficult time of the Depression was endured by supplementing income with side jobs such as employment with the WPA or construction of the All-American Canal with mule teams and fresno scrapers. In good times and bad, these honest and proud people remained very loyal to their adopted country.

Many Portuguese left the Valley during World War II to find work in factories and other jobs. Yet, despite the decrease in the Valley's Portuguese population, they left an indelible mark on this land we call home.

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[Back to Pioneers Museum Homepage](#)

[Return to IVC Homepage](#)