RECONSTRUCTING EDEN:
THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY OF YETTEM, CA

by

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Dedication

I’d like to dedicate this thesis to the founders and the community of Yettem, the survivors, and the souls that perished during the Ottoman Massacres and the Genocide of 1915. Despite the adversities faced, this beautiful, unique, and culturally rich community persevered and truly created a Garden of Eden at the footsteps of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.
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# Table of Contents

Dedication ii
Acknowledgements iii
List of Figures vii
Abstract ix

**Introduction** 1

**Chapter 1: Conditions in the Ottoman Empire** 4

- Introduction 4
- Geographic Context 5
- The Armenian Agrarian Landscape And Socioeconomic Conditions 7
- Mobility Control and Travel Restrictions 10
- Chomaklou 13
- Armenian Migration to the United States 18
- Conclusion 19

**Chapter 2: Why California?** 21

- Introduction 21
- The San Joaquin Valley 23
- Central Valley's Agriculture 28
- An Oasis of Opportunity 28
- The Question of Armenian Identity 30
- Armenians in the Central Valley: Fresno 35
- Conclusion 44

**Chapter 3: Replanting Roots** 45

- Introduction 45
- Searching for the Armenian “Colony” 49
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Founding of Yettem</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining the Boundaries of Yettem</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yettem’s Growth and Early Agricultural Successes Post-Genocide</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving to Yettem</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming Successes and Failures</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4: Yettem’s Past and Present: Sites of Heritage</strong></td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Yettem Grammar School</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diaspora Education: AGBU, Armenian School, Sunday School</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in Tulare County</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian School and Sunday School</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and Culture</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intangible Heritage Practices</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel and Pilgrimage as an Act of Heritage</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix A: Deed Transfers, 1903-1911</strong></td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix B: Maps of Tulare County</strong></td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure i.1: Yettem’s Founding Parade 3
Figure 1.1: Color Map of the Eastern Provinces of Turkey 5
Figure 1.2: Map of Caesaria/Gesarya (present-day Kayseri, Turkey) 13
Figure 1.3: Uptown Chomaklou 14
Figure 1.4: Downtown Chomaklou 15
Figure 1.5: Armenian Genocide Deportation Routes of 1915 15
Figure 1.6: Postcard of Chomaklou Armenians on a Picnic 16
Figure 2.1: Federal Map of the Central Valley Project 22
Figure 2.2: Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani (scirpus validus) 25
Figure 2.3: California Indigenous Tribes 26
Figure 2.4: Zaven Arkdian, Fresno resident, with an Armenian Cucumber 41
Figure 3.1: Founders of Yettem 55
Figure 3.2: Yettem fields 59
Figure 3.3: Stokes Mountains 60
Figure 3.4: Chomaklou, Turkey 60
Figure 3.5: Chomaklou, Turkey 61
Figure 3.6: Yettem Post Office 63
Figure 3.7: Map of Yettem and surrounding regions 65
Figure 3.8: Yettem Tomato Label 73
Figure 4.1: St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church 77
Figure 4.2: St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church 81
Figure 4.3: St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church 82
Figure 4.4: Lawrence K. Cone, architect of St. Mary’s Apostolic Church 82
Figure 4.5: Presbyterian Church 84
Figure 4.6: Presbyterian Church 84
Figure 4.7: Bell from the Presbyterian Church 85
Figure 4.8: Presbyterian Church Bell Dedication 86
Figure 4.9: Yettem School, 1914 87
Figure 4.10: Yettem School children, 1913 88
Figure 4.11: Yettem Grammar School, 1921 89
Figure 4.12: School Children in front of the new Yettem School, 1922 90
Figure 4.13: Yettem School, 2021 92
Figure 4.14: Yettem Learning Center, 2021 92
Figure 4.15: AGBU Playbook, 1938 96
Figure 4.16: Charsheli Artin Agha Cast, 1938 97
Figure 4.17: Armenian language Saturday School class, 1960 100
Figure 4.18: Trndez at St. Mary’s Apostolic Church 103
Figure 4.19: Socially-distanced tables for church attendees 104
Figure 4.20: Feast of Assumption/Blessing of the Grapes 106
Figure 4.21: Yettem Grown Grapes 107
Figure c.1: Yettem directional sign 111
Abstract

Armenians migrated to California’s San Joaquin Valley as early as the 1880s, when anti-Armenian pogroms, laws, and massacres were escalating in the Ottoman Empire, first settling in Fresno, and later moving to smaller towns in the region to farm.

As conditions were worsening in the East, a group of Armenians thought of founding an Armenian town in the Diaspora where they could live freely and have opportunities to make a living and own their own land. In 1901, three Armenians were walking southeast from Fresno when they came across a region at the foothills of the Sierra Mountains. They felt an inexplicable connection to the land and began singing songs of their homeland. They set up tents and founded the town of Yettem – “Garden of Eden” in Armenian. It is the only town with an Armenian name in the United States. ¹

While most Yettemites no longer live in Yettem proper, the community's connection to their hometown is strong, and life and heritage in Yettem is still very much alive and active. It is significant that an Armenian named town exists in the United States; it is also important to recognize the efforts of community-driven cultural preservation, memory keeping, and using this as a coping mechanism for overcoming past traumas. In this process, the community of Yettem also developed a heritage that is unique only to Yettem.

Introduction

“Man is transitory, but Mankind is lasting.”

- Revered Garabed Kalfayan (Hoviv Yettemi; The Pastor of Yettem), Yettemagan Hooshardzan, 1950.

Armenian identity has become inadvertently interconnected to emigration and trauma. Although Armenians are an ethnic group native to the Eastern Anatolian plateau and Southern Caucasus, most of the Armenian population currently resides in different corners of the world. Despite the global dispersion of the Armenian population, the international experience of most Diaspora-Armenians is embedded in memories of the ancestral homelands; and in some instances, a reconstruction of Historic Armenian pastoral life.

Memory-building as a form of resistance and community conservation in close ethnic enclaves in the United States is a fascinating phenomenon of displaced and trauma-endured peoples. Cultural erasure and heritage eradication at the hands of an oppressor are traumatic, but the slow, trickling loss of heritage through assimilation is risky and even more difficult to process. As future generations become more assimilated, the urgency to protect the nearly lost heritage grows stronger. Although later generations of Armenians refugees in the Diaspora have not physically set foot on their ancestral lands, oral histories, cultural practices, and intangible heritage preserves the sense of belonging and connects their identity to a romanticized, nostalgic idea of historic ancestral homelands.

Many of the Armenian families that settled in the Central Valley of California established family farms, and later went on to play a significant role in California grape
and raisin industries. While the work done secured their fiscal well-being and economic survival, the act of resettling in the Central Valley and establishing agrarian fields is also an act of community-driven heritage conservation.

The first two chapters will provide the global and local context of the significance of Central Valley Armenian agricultural work through an analysis of Armenian agrarianism in the Eastern Anatolia region, historically known as the Armenian Highlands. Though Yettem exists in its tangible form in the Central Valley, it is more than just California heritage; it is a method of preserving a non-Western heritage through the lands of California’s Central Valley. In a sense, the Central Valley became the geographic surrogate for the reestablishment of Armenian culture. The attempt to rebuild the agrarian landscapes of their homelands is an important aspect of cultural identity and heritage conservation and possibly a coping mechanism for trauma endured.

The third chapter focuses on the founding of Yettem and the efforts of reconstructing an Armenian town in the Central Valley. It traces its conceptual roots and the collective dream of finding a suitable place to buy tracts of land to resettle. It also documents the town’s history prior to the Genocide, and after the Genocide. The chapter also documents the economic and agricultural activity, as it is interwoven with the history of the town. The fourth chapter focuses on community driven efforts of cultural preservation through tangible and intangible means. It identifies some sites of significance, both extant and demolished, as well as highlights some organizations which helped maintain the spirit of the Armenian heritage through arts and culture in the Diaspora. Although many Yettemites no longer live in Yettem proper, they still make the
pilgrimage there for church on Sundays, special events, marriages, and funerals. The community is closely knit and maintains contact despite living outside the physical boundaries of the town. The church actively engages the community through social media, which has been an important vessel of community connections through the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Although Yettem is physically a very small place, its heritage is so incredibly rich and dense that a simple thesis, nor a book, would not suffice to document all that the town has to offer.

Figure 1.1: Yettem’s Founding Parade, 1980s. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menendian.
Chapter 1: Conditions in Ottoman Empire

Introduction

This section provides historical context on the conditions of Armenians under Ottoman rule through a few focused lenses. Firstly, I will briefly provide a geographical description of the region for context, which is important in understanding the reasons as to why some Armenians chose to settle in California’s San Joaquin Central Valley. Then, I will analyze the sociocultural, economic, and political conditions in Eastern Anatolia, also known as the Armenian Highlands, that have defined the Armenian heritage and cultural identity. It is important to understand the travel restrictions placed on Armenians, beginning with the Armenophobic policies and legal methods of suppression under Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s rule. Later, to contextualize the migration to the Central Valley, this section will also focus on agrarian Armenians of the Ottoman Empire and specifically, Armenians from Caesaria’s town of Chomaklou, because this thesis primarily focuses on the experiences of the Armenian farm owners and peasants that were uprooted due to the anti-Armenian pogroms, massacres, and oppression under Ottoman Rule.

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2 From this point on, I will only refer to the Eastern region of the Ottoman Empire as the Armenian Highlands or the Eastern Provinces as an attempt to decolonize the geopolitical region. The term “Anatolia” was introduced later on as a method of “othering” Armenians and other ethnic minorities, and was introduced as a method of unifying the various regions of the Ottoman Empire into a homogenous identity. Prior to this change of name, the region was either called the “Armenian Highlands,” “Turkish Armenia,” or “Ottoman Armenia.”


3 Armenians under Ottoman rule were not all agrarians; some held high positions in government, others were business owners in larger cities, etc. This chapter does not disregard other Armenian social classes or occupations but focuses on one specific demographic’s experience.
Geographic Context⁴

Armenians are an ethnic group of people native to the Armenian Highlands.⁵ Prior to its designation as Eastern Anatolia, mapmakers outside the Ottoman Empire had considered the region as Armenia, or Turkish Armenia.⁶ The region consisted of six provinces - or vilayets, in Turkish; Erzrum, Van, Bitlis, Sivas, Kharpert/Harput (Mamuret

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⁴ While I initially planned on a closer analysis of two or three specific regions, it would be a disservice to not discuss the region and cultural heritage as a whole in this context, as closer analysis of specific regions would require a more finite focus that would extend far beyond the scope of this thesis.
Al-Aziz), and Diyarbakir.\(^7\) Cilicia (Adana) historically had a significant Armenian population prior to the massacres and migrations of the 1890s. Although this region was formally considered the Armenian Highlands, Armenians lived in other regions of the Ottoman Empire as well.\(^8\) Most Armenians of the Eastern Provinces were agrarian by the nature of the economic opportunities provided by the landscape. Armenians, Kurds, Turks, Assyrians, Jews, and Greeks lived harmoniously under Ottoman rule. The region is situated between the Black, Mediterranean and Caspian Seas. (Figure 1.1) Most of the mountainous region is currently within the borders of the Republic of Turkey; despite this fact, many Diaspora Armenians still refer to the region as Historic Armenia, Western Armenia, Armenian Highlands, Armenian Plateau, and the provinces by their historically Armenian names.

The diverse continental climate and geographic location of the region allowed for the cultivation of economically important crops and livestock, which became the primary economic resource for Armenians in the region, who depended on crop and dairy product farms and land ownership. The area is predominantly steppes, high peaks such as the symbolic Mount Ararat, and large lakes, such as Lake Van, another region of significant importance to Armenians. The area is ideal for growing varieties of grains, fruit trees, and also for breeding livestock.\(^9\) Archaeobotanical excavations have also shed light on the historic presence of grapes and viticulture in the area. Large clusters

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7 Armenians did live in other regions of the Ottoman Empire, but the heaviest concentration was in the Eastern Provinces, which were historically always occupied by a significant Armenian population.  
of grape remnants dating back to the first and second millennia BCE expressed the significance of grape vineyards and grape processing in the region.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{The Armenian Agrarian Landscape and Socioeconomic Conditions}

Anti-minority and anti-Christian acts of violence, pogroms, and anti-minority propaganda began many decades prior to the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Conditions for ethnic and Christian minorities had always been less than second class.

While some Armenians in the cities were businessmen and some maintained a higher social status with heavy restrictions, the majority of Armenians in the Eastern Provinces were farmers. Since international trade and the demand for agricultural goods counted for 56\% of the Ottoman Empire's national income by 1914, agrarianism was more notably a predominant lifestyle for Armenians living in the Highlands. Initially, many Armenians were agrarian landowners; living, owning, and working on their own fields. Despite later attempts through data misrepresentation to eradicate Armenians as active participants in the Ottoman Economy, many Armenians contributed financially to the economic stability to the Ottoman Empire through agrarian means before the land confiscations and violence of the Hamidian Massacres; this gave way to the elusive and discouraged use of the phrase “Armenian Economy.”\textsuperscript{11}

Around the same time, the Ottoman Government under Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s rule wanted to tax nomadic Kurdish residents, and encouraged settlement and the


takeover of Armenian agrarian lands.\textsuperscript{12} Russian newspapers often wrote about the economic and cultural conditions in the Ottoman Empire, and one noted: "It is useless to raise the question of restoring to the true Armenian owners the lands that have been seized from them by the Kurds. The Armenians must give up all such hope."\textsuperscript{13} Tensions between Kurdish\textit{aghas} (landowners) and Armenian and Assyrian rural farmers began to rise when the government began collecting same-rate taxes from all residents in the region. Muslim landowners did not appreciate being equated to lower ranked Christian minorities, and same rate taxes amongst citizens was regarded as offensive. As a result, the\textit{beys} (provincial governors) made Armenians pay up to three-quarters of their harvest as taxes and with heavy interest on loans.\textsuperscript{14} Armenian landowners and farm workers in the provinces were essentially left with no substantial means of self-support, as lands were stripped away and all profits were forcibly handed over to\textit{beys}. High taxes, land grabs, and governmental loopholes were intended to destabilize the Armenian landowners’ economic and land-owning power.\textsuperscript{15}

The agrarian landscape was Ottoman Armenians’ financial livelihood, their sense of belonging, and their heritage. The direct hit on the agrarian landscape was destructive to their geospatial affinity, particularly since their identity was so ingrained in

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Hamidian} is used in a descriptive manner to distinguish between the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s rule, as opposed to the Ottoman Empire’s reformed state after the Young Turks rose to power. This chapter primarily focuses on the conditions of Armenians prior to the Genocide since Yettem was established before the Armenian Genocide of 1915 perpetrated by the Young Turks regime.


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Beys} were provincial governors in the Ottoman Empire. Armenians were eventually forced into a serf-like relationship with their landowners. See more: George N. Shirinian, “The Background to the Late Ottoman Genocides,” \textit{Genocide in the Ottoman Empire}, January 2017, pp. 19-81, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctw04g61.6, 24-25.

\textsuperscript{15} It is important to note that Assyrians also faced similar impositions, and were also regarded as “Zirr Kurr” - slaves, but throughout this chapter I will only mention the Armenian trauma as this follows the Armenian migrational patterns and Agrarian Heritage. See more: Shirinian, \textit{Genocide in the Ottoman Empire}, 24-25.
their cultural lands. Due to the lack of data that remains and the altered Ottoman history for ethnic minorities from the time period, it is difficult to precisely pinpoint the numbers, but evidence points to an overall changing of the region’s agrarian landscape through the usurpation of Armenian agrarian landowners, farmers, and peasantry.16

Because of the consistent oppression many ethnic minority groups began to develop nationalist movements to protect their communities against the Ottoman rule, and subsequently attempted to breakaway to create their own independent states. Two Armenian agrarian regions in the Highlands, Sassoun and Van, are significant to note for their attempts at self-defense and failed attempt at protecting the Armenian peasant. These events were noted by Ottoman officials as the reasons for the Armenian deportations and anti-Armenian violence, even though the government-mandated violence predates the Armenian attempts at self-defense. The ever-growing threat of Armenian revolt against the State was inadvertently connected to migration to Europe and North America. The first Armenian political party was established in Geneva by a group of Armenian students who had travelled to Switzerland from the Ottoman Empire for education. The political revitalization amongst educated Armenian youth was a perceived threat to Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s rule, and ultimately led to the attempted ban of nearly all Armenian travel to the United States, with exceptions made for trade.17

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Mobility Control and Travel Restrictions in the Ottoman Empire

As a result of the insecurity in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian National Assembly presented reform requests to the government in the 1870s, which were ignored by the government.\(^{18}\) The Ottoman government associated Armenian migration with the rise of Armenian political and revolutionary organizations, which they feared would create instability among the Armenian peasants in the Eastern Provinces. The presence of missionaries from the West and their influence, the thought of a more stable life, and better economic opportunities was enticing to young Armenians looking to better their financial conditions in the economic disparities caused by legal limitations and implications placed upon Armenian laborers. As a result, the State created a system of documentation, *mürmûr tezkeresi*, to control internal travel and prevent overseas migration among the Maronite Christians in Mount Lebanon and the Armenians in the Eastern Provinces.\(^{19}\)

Ottoman officials were concerned that Armenians who were leaving for the United States for work would “fall under the sway of ‘seditious’ Armenian political organizations operating in an environment of ‘complete and total freedom.’”\(^{20}\) Because the government felt that the Armenian revolutionary groups were a threat to its stability, they attempted to implement methods of geographical control within the country as well.

Yet, despite the bans, Armenians found alternate ways of receiving documents to help migration to the United States. To reduce Armenian travel, the State began

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\(^{20}\) Gutman, “Travel Documents,” 359.
unsuccessfully imposing cash bonds only on travelers of Armenian descent.\textsuperscript{21} According to Gutman, about 75,000 Armenians migrated to the United States from the Ottoman Empire from the 1880s through the onset of World War I. Yet, this number does not take into consideration the forceful migrations for the sake of refuge due to the Hamidian Massacres, nor does it take into consideration the possibility of crypto-Armenians travelling under the guise of other identities. The passports system was a method of policing communities and keeping records on individuals, particularly those who were poor, migrant, and seasonal workers. Due to the violent outbursts and massacres of the 1890s, many Armenians attempted to flee without registration.\textsuperscript{22} As a result, even within the Ottoman Empire Armenian seasonal workers were deported from Istanbul to their hometowns, resulting in a loss of their jobs. Another aspect of mobility control was also preventing travel through port cities, as they had the highest mobility rate of people and ideas.

As the Ottoman Empire's power slowly started to crumble, Sultan Abdul Hamid II began to promote the concept of a “Turkey for Turks” that eliminated ethnic and Christian minorities from the landscape of the Ottoman Empire, resulting in a Pan-Turkish empire spanning from sea to sea. Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Assyrians, and eventually Kurds became victims of rising tensions and violence. The Hamidian Massacres of 1894-1896 perpetrated by the Sultan resulted in the death of about

\textsuperscript{21} Migration limitations on Armenians was a complex situation, because although it was a form of social control to keep Armenians from becoming enlightened overseas, the Ottoman Empire's economy relied heavily on Armenian and Kurdish migrant workers who traveled to work in different farms across the Highlands. Erzrum, at the time, was one of the highest production centers for cotton, which relied on the travel and migration capabilities of Armenian farmworkers. Herein lies the predicament and challenging relationship of attempting to impose travel bans on Armenians, yet understanding that the nature of Armenian migration and travel is necessary for the economic wellbeing of the State.

\textsuperscript{22} Yılmaz, “Governing the Armenian Question Through Passports in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876–1908),” 394.
300,000 Armenians, 50,000 orphans, and the displacement and flight of thousands of others to other countries for survival.\(^{23}\) After the violent uprisings and massacres, travel was legalized for Ottoman Armenians, but with strenuous requirements, including forfeiture of their property, their Ottoman citizenship, and a vow to never return to their homeland upon their decision to leave. Considering the deep connection and relationship of the Armenian population with the natural landscape of the Highlands, the legality of travel under these requirements was essentially another method of Government-sanctioned cultural erasure of Armenians from their landscape.

With the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908 who overthrew Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the prospect of a new, modernized Ottoman Empire with better opportunities for ethnic minorities was promised. Yet, although policy reform allowed easier travel and movement, the continued threat of political instability due to the emerging Armenian political organizations created deeper tensions between the State and the Armenians in the Eastern Provinces. As Gutman argues, by 1914, “as the Young Turk government sought desperately to prevent the departure of military-aged men, its stance towards migration was in some ways more restrictive and illiberal than its Hamidian predecessors.”\(^{24}\)

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\(^{24}\) Gutman, “Travel Documents,” 367.
Chomaklou

Located south of Caesarea, north of Evereg-Fenesi, below the peak of Mount Argaeus (Arkeos, to locals), Chomaklou was a village founded by Armenians who arrived from the Eastern regions of the South Caucasus. (Figure 1.2) It is surrounded by rolling terra-cotta-colored hills, green pastures, and dark caves carved by volcanic activity of Mount Argaeus. (Figures 1.3 and 1.4)

Although Chomaklou was founded by Armenians in the 1700s, remnants of past habitation, dating back centuries, were evident. Today, the region surrounding Mount Argaeus no longer has the same thriving Armenian population as it did prior to 1915, as Chomaklou was a targeted center for mass killings and deportations of the Armenian
population. (Figure 1.5) Remnants of Armenian owned homes and churches can be found hidden beneath overgrown weeds. Chomaklou, in the regional dialect, refers to the trunks of the decaying trees that were present when it was first inhabited by Armenians.

Figure 1.3: Uptown Chomaklou, 1910. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menendian/ Reverend Garabed Kalfayan.
Figure 1.4: Downtown Chomaklou, 1910. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menedian/ Reverend Garabed Kalfayan.

In 1930, Revered Garabed Kalfayan, a native of Chomaklou and later the priest of St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church of Yettem, CA, published the most comprehensive book about Chomaklou, including geographical location, rituals and diet, economics, education, and stories of survivors of the 1915 deportation routes. Chomaklou was a small town with roughly 300 homes and about 2,000 residents. Though small, the community was tight-knit and proud; life, as described by Reverend Kalfayan, was filled with pleasantries, cultural and religious celebrations, and opportunities for social gatherings in the vast open fields, even though the threat of dwindling income and consistently rising tensions with the Aghas was constantly looming in the background. (Figure 1.6)

Figure 1.6: Postcard of Chomaklou Armenians on a picnic, circa 1800. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menendian.
Most economic support for Chomaklou Armenians came from farming, and sometimes animal husbandry. Reverend Kalfayan notes that the once fertile soil no longer yielded the same quality and quantity of produce, resulting in less work and income for residents. Despite the weakened labor force and shrinking incomes, Armenian farmers were still expected to pay landlords the same taxes, pushing them into economic despair. In the hopes of finding new streams of income, farmers began bush cropping a small, thorny bush called the French tamarisk, to harvest the eighth layer of the plant’s sweet sap with a sharp knife. The process was exhausting and damaging to health, but had become the only source of income for families. Pay continued to decrease, and after the taxes, barely any amount remained to justify a meager lifestyle for a family; eventually, children also had to work with their parents. Due to rising tensions and disdain over the decreased production, landlords began looting the fields and subsequently burning them, cutting off one of the last remnants of economic sustainability for residents. Eventually, these issues were taken to the courts, and after lengthy battles against the intolerant behavior of Aghas, Chomaklou Armenians received some form of temporary justice through limited freedoms over their land.

Similar to other Armenian towns and communities, Chomaklou Armenians were eager to join the self-defense movement to protect its citizens. Rev. Kalfayan in his memoir recalls the red and black smokey hue of Evereg in 1895, as Turkish raiders pillaged through the town, where the “unarmed Armenian population was being rounded

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25 In Armenian, this process is called gazagortsutyun, which roughly translates as “gaz labor.” In Farsi, Gaz is the sap of the French tamarisk plant and the term for Persian nougats that originated in Isfahan.
up and slaughtered like sheep.”

The experience of Chomaklou Armenians during the Hamidian Massacres and the 1915 Massacres parallels that of Armenians from other regions as well; but it is important to note the sense of regional pride and community that survivors held on to as a method of identity protection and community rebuilding in the Diaspora. Chomaklou identity remained strong despite the different paths survivors took to escape the dire situations at the turn of the century, and later established the Chomaklou Compatriotic Society in the Diaspora, which still functions today.

**Armenian Migration to the United States**

Although Armenian migration to the United States and elsewhere increased due to the Hamidian Massacres of the 1890s and the Armenian Genocide and mass deportations of 1915, Armenians began to arrive in the United States in smaller numbers much earlier, usually in search of economic, educational, and business opportunities. The first recorded Armenian in the United States, “Martin the Armenian,” who arrived in New England and became a tobacco farmer in Virginia in 1618 became the first encounter that many would have with Armenian merchants and tradesmen in the continent. Armenian migration continued, but in relatively small numbers throughout the 19th century. Although Armenians travelled from the Ottoman Empire for various reasons, their connection to their Armenian identity remained strong. The work done in the Diaspora ultimately returned people, or the products of their work, back to the homeland. For instance, a group of Armenian students studying in Geneva, Switzerland founded the oldest continuously operated Armenian political party, the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party of 1887. Many Armenian men who had the opportunity to leave the

27 Kalfayan, *Chomaklou*, 79.
Ottoman Empire and reestablish themselves in the Diaspora before World War I returned to the Eastern Provinces of the Ottoman Empire, also known as the Armenian Highlands, to find themselves an Armenian bride, or attempt to find any surviving members of their family to take with them back to their new homes. In fact, most Armenians who did travel to North America initially did so in an effort to find economic opportunities, with the intention to eventually return back to their homelands. This strong sense of identity that was interwoven with their community and landscape, and the act of a pilgrimage to the homeland, is still prevalent today in the Armenian Diaspora’s intricate relationship to both the historic Armenian Highlands in present-day Turkey, and modern day Armenia.

While Armenian migrational patterns and reasons have many overarching similarities, regardless of their social status and occupation under Ottoman rule, each class and region also had their own unique set of experiences. For Armenians who escaped persecution prior to the forced deportation paths of 1915, trade, labor, and education became a predominant factor in where they eventually settled in the Diaspora.

**Conclusion**

Numbers of Armenian emigres surged because of two seminal moments of violence in the Ottoman Empire, but many Armenian farmworkers and landowners who could no longer sustain themselves and had the means to escape persecution found themselves resettling in other countries, primarily in the United States. First settling in East Coast states, Armenians eventually moved and resettled in California due to what
they recognized as geographic and climate similarities to the Armenian Highlands. Although conditions, according to surveys by residents, were not great in California for Armenians, and many eventually faced discrimination for their ethnicity, the risk of moving to the States was still a better probability for Armenians under Ottoman rule during that time.28 Because the experience of the agrarian Armenian was so intertwined with the land, settling in a region that was idyllic and reminiscent of the landscape in their homeland was a potential coping mechanism for the trauma endured and the restrictive life in the decades leading up to the 1915 Genocide.

Chapter 2: Why California?

Introduction

In his 1939 book, *Factories in the Field*, Carey McWilliams described California as “a fabled land...rich in the stuff of which legends are made.” This myth that positions California to be an oasis of many sorts - financial success, health, and happiness - has long attracted hopefuls to its idyllic lands. The promise of potential wealth as a result of California's Gold Rush of 1849 attracted thousands of hopefuls looking to strike gold, but beyond the promise of financial success, the attraction of California derives from the fabled belief that “life has always been easier and abundance an acknowledged historical fact.” Yet beyond the illusion of this romanticized California, there is a hidden history and the traces of land and racial exploitation, and American romanticism. And yet, even the retelling of California’s dark past has morphed into a comfortable narrative to justify the existence and occupation of this mythical land.

The myth of California attracted not only Americans from the eastern states, but hopefuls from around the globe who sought to reestablish themselves in an area whose only constant is change and novelty. California in and of itself is a large state so historians have often suggested that geographically, the dividing line between the North and the South is the Tehachapi mountains, and the two regions are culturally distinct. Between the Coastal metropolitan regions of Northern and Southern California, the Sierra Nevada mountain range to the east and the Coast Ranges to the west is a nearly

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30 McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 3.
40-50 mile wide and 450 mile long stretch of land known as the Central Valley. The Central Valley can essentially be divided into two main parts; the northernmost third of the land is the Sacramento Valley, and the southern two thirds of the land is called the San Joaquin Valley. Furthermore, the San Joaquin Valley is divided into the San Joaquin Basin and the Tulare Basin. (Figure 2.1) While it is important to take into consideration the entire Central Valley, most of the focus of this chapter will be on the industrialized agrarian landscape and the multicultural communities of the San Joaquin Valley, particularly the Tulare Basin, where most of the early Armenian population settled.

Figure 2.1: Federal Map of the Central Valley Project. Source: Wiki Commons/Shannon1. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central_valley_project-01.png)
To understand the significance of the Central Valley to the Armenian community, and others alike, it is important to first understand Central Valley’s significance as a center of agrarianism in California, and why it was so attractive to so many minorities. Furthermore, it is also significant to contextualize the Armenian move to the Central Valley. Yettem was not the first Armenian settlement in the United States -- in fact, it was not even the first Armenian settlement in California. Many Armenians had already settled into East Coast states and the Midwest. In California, Armenians were primarily settling in Fresno, located just forty miles north of Yettem.

To the eyes of the Armenian Diaspora outside of the San Joaquin Valley, Yettem and other Central Valley Armenian-populated towns such as Cutler and Fowler live in the shadows of Fresno’s significance in the Armenian community. It is important to understand the history of Fresno to contextualize the migration to, and establishment of, the Armenian diaspora in towns surrounding Fresno, and extending into Los Angeles.

Armenians in Fresno faced a unique set of paradoxical challenges. While they were successful in owning land and making money, most Armenians arrived with little to money in their possession. Neighbors in Fresno, and the political conditions at the time, viewed Armenians as “others.” Although their identity was questioned, Armenians succeeded to “prove” and maintain their whiteness through the United States Courts.\(^3\) Furthermore, while Armenians were pushed into isolation from their neighbors and interdependence, attempts were still made to participate and assimilate in American

culture, while maintaining their ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{32} For some, the challenges of assimilating into American identity in the pace that was expected of them was difficult to endure. By the 1920s, 55\% of the Central Valley’s Armenian community did not live in Fresno. Fresno’s Armenian population, by that time, had dwindled to 7,919, as Armenians sought better economic and social conditions.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{The San Joaquin Valley}

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish Missionaries and Americans from the Eastern states, the Central Valley was home to the Yokuts and Miwok tribes. The Yokuts lived in the region that can be traced from present-day Bakersfield to Stockton.\textsuperscript{34} The Miwok lived north of that region, from the Fresno River into the Sacramento Valley. (Figure 2.3) The valley was abundant with fertile soil, game for hunting, seeds, and roots, which made it relatively easy for people to settle down in a specific region, rather than travel in pursuit of food and shelter. Around the edges of the valley’s streams and rivers grew a specific type of bulrush, known as the tules. When the Spanish missionaries arrived, they called the Indigenous folks \textit{Tulareños}, after the tules.\textsuperscript{35} (Figure 2.2)

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Jendian, \textit{Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic}, 73.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Jendian, \textit{Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic}, 65.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Wallace Smith and William B. Secrest, \textit{Garden of the Sun: A History of the San Joaquin Valley, 1772-1939} (Fresno, CA: Linden Pub., 2004), 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Smith, \textit{Garden of the Sun}, 3.
\end{itemize}
The Spanish missionaries first arrived from the northern regions, encountering the Miwok tribe before the Yokuts. According to Wallace Smith, in *Garden of the Sun*, the Yokuts were unlike all other California natives, because they were “divided into true tribes.” (Figure 2.3) Each of the fifty Yokuts tribes had their own dialect, name, and specific territory on which they lived, but the dialects were still close enough to each other that social conversations were completely possible. The relative regions in which communities lived can be drawn today. The Yokuts heavily relied on seed-gathering,

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36 The words Miwok and Yokuts both mean “people.”
37 Smith, *Garden of the Sun*, 4.
acorns, wild plants, and berries. The region was not used for farming prior to the arrival of Columbus. All aspects of Yokuts life, including food, shelter, and clothing, were reliant upon the valley’s land. Dress and shoes were made from bark, grass, or animal furs for cold winters. Jewelry often was made with seeds and feathers. When there was the risk of starvation during lengthy drought periods, people turned to fishing as another source of food. There was a close relationship between the communities that lived in the Central Valley and the land.

Figure 2.3: California Indigenous Tribes. Source: Kathy Moskowitz. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jokut_tribe.jpg).

39 Smith, Garden of the Sun, 31-33.
The missionaries first encountered the Miwoks in the Central Valley as they moved towards the West Coast.\textsuperscript{41} There were no missions built in the Central Valley. All the missions constructed during the Mission period were along the Western coast. As a result of this contact, most of the Miwok perished or were missionized to the point of nearly complete eradication because nearly whole villages were taken to the missions along California’s coast.\textsuperscript{42} Aside from harsh mission conditions and physical and cultural erasure, smallpox, Spanish influenza, and syphilis that were brought by the Spaniards became detrimental to the communities who had never encountered such diseases before.

Despite having to pass through the Central Valley to get to the coast, the valley was referred to as “terra incognita” in official documents by the Missionaries.\textsuperscript{43} The first colonizer, Pedro Fages, set foot in the region in 1772, three years after the founding of the first mission in San Diego. Spanish Californians began settling in the region from 1836 to 1846, and the Gold Rush began in 1849.\textsuperscript{44} Not only did the indigenous communities perish, but the development of missions and the incoming white settlers depleted the natural resources and supplies of wild animals by trappers and hunters.\textsuperscript{45} Though the Gold Rush brought many people to California, many of whom trickled into the Central Valley, one can argue that agriculture was California’s first industry, and the Central Valley’s sun-drenched golden fields were more valuable than the nuggets of gold that were discovered under the rich soil of California.

\textsuperscript{41} Smith, \textit{Garden of the Sun}, 2.  
\textsuperscript{42} Smith, \textit{Garden of the Sun}, 3-5.  
\textsuperscript{43} Hubert Howe Bancroft, \textit{History of California}, vol. 2 (Irvine, CA: Reprint Services Corp., 1840), 43.  
\textsuperscript{44} Smith, \textit{Garden of the Sun}, 116.  
\textsuperscript{45} Smith, \textit{Garden of the Sun}, 105.
Central Valley’s Agriculture

However, unlike the rest of the agrarian United States, rather than California’s agricultural industry growing because of homesteads that were owned and operated by small families, California agriculture stemmed from large ranches that evolved from the early land grants. After the Mexican-American War of 1846-1846, the Governor of California Pio Pico began making hasty land grants to friends and family whose patents did not properly go through when the United States acquired California. Twenty-four out of the thirty land grants from California’s Mexican sovereignty were patented by the United States. The expansive lands of once Mexican-owned cattle ranchers eventually evolved into large agribusinesses, which led to Carey McWilliams’ to aptly title his book about the region, Factories in the Field, specifically exposing the land monopolizations, expansive fields, migratory work, and the produce factories that have defined more recent history of the San Joaquin Valley.

An Oasis of Opportunity

Ethnic communities migrated to the region looking for agricultural work. The Central Valley’s soil was ideal to grow different types of produce, and various communities seized the opportunity to reestablish themselves or find work on one of the expansive farms in the region. The Central Valley has the world’s largest patch of Class I soil, which has few limitations that restrict its use. Class I soil is productive and suited

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for intensive cropping, perfect for farming. As a result of this, Central Valley was ideal for fruit and vegetable production. Over 250 different crops are currently grown in the Central Valley, yielding about $17 billion dollars’ worth of produce that provides nearly a quarter of the nation’s food. Approximately forty percent of the fruits, grains, and nuts consumed in the United States originates in the Central Valley. Many of the produce grown are not native to California, but the Class I soil can nurture various crops from around the globe. News about California’s fertile lands and opportunities for work spread rapidly.

California’s economy at that time was just developing. In *Changing Faces of the Valley*, Sally Miller states that California’s agri-economy was growing alongside the other economies across the nation. Similar to the rest of the nation, the Central Valley’s ultimate success as the center of agribusiness was heavily indebted to the consistent flow of incoming migratory immigrant farm workers. The first large ethnic community to arrive in the Central Valley as agricultural workers were the Chinese. By 1880, thirty percent of the Chinese immigrant community lived in the Central Valley. By 1900, forty percent of the Chinese community lived in agricultural regions, including the Central Valley and other agrarian areas in California. However because of federal exclusion laws and xenophobic sentiments, the Chinese population gradually began to decline.

Armenians, Sikhs, Japanese, Filipino, Basque, Italians, and other communities also began to arrive in the area as early as the 1840s. Migrant farmworkers brought

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51 Jendian, *Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic*, 64.
with them seeds and plants from their homelands, many of which grew well in the Valley. Many immigrants drew on knowledge of agriculture from their homelands and utilized it in California. This is not to say that small farms or cultivation did not exist prior to the arrival of immigrant farmworkers, but that they simply grew exponentially.

The Question of Armenian Identity

Until today, Fresno continues to be considered the heart of the Armenian Diaspora in the Western Hemisphere, paralleling the significance of Bourj Hammoud, Lebanon, as the center of the Armenian Diaspora on the other end of the globe. Despite the entrepreneurial successes of Armenians in Fresno, many were met with mixed sentiments from their neighbors, which became one of the reasons that many Fresno Armenians eventually began to move away to look for new opportunities and work. According to Jendian, Professor of Sociology in California State University Fresno, Armenians in Fresno were met with both prejudice and discrimination, as opposed to Armenians in other states who were often met with indifference.

A number of factors may account for this: 1) the rapid and unrelenting pace of Armenian immigration combined with their clustering together in the city’s southwestern area (just south of the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks); 2) their relative economic success (although less than 10% of the population, Armenians accounted for 25% of the country’s growers and owned 40% of the county’s raisin acreage by 1930); and 3) their differences in skin color, dress, and language.52

In 1930, Richard Tracy LaPiere conducted a research survey in Fresno and interviewed 474 non-Armenians to understand white Fresno residents’ attitudes towards

52 Jendian, Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic, 66.
Armenians. Many anti-Armenian sentiments were recorded in his survey. White neighbors did not want their children to play with Armenian neighbors and they advocated for barring them from becoming citizens. His study found that Armenians’ Christian beliefs did not ease those tensions either. Ironically, Armenians desired to become naturalized citizens quicker than other immigrant groups, because they were found in a “stateless” position. Despite the attempts Armenians were often excluded from social groups, activities, and events.

In addition to general anti-immigrant sentiment in Fresno, racial covenants were put into place specifically targeting Armenian, Indian, Chinese, African American, and Japanese communities. According to Bulbulian, it took nearly half a century from the time of the arrival of the first Armenian before an Armenian public school teacher was hired. These racial covenants barred individuals from owning homes, working, or living in certain regions. Housing discrimination existed event before the legally sanctioned Racial Covenants. Discriminatory additions were included in deeds that did not allow the property to be sold or rented to ethnic groups. Until the covenants were lifted, Armenians were able to buy homes by utilizing the same methods that Armenian farmowners used to purchase lands - offered to pay much higher than asking price so that sellers have no choice but to accept, leaving them in debt.

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56 Barkan, “Land Labor, and Immigrant Communities,” 172.
Armenians, along with Japanese and Indian immigrants, would eventually challenge the perceptions and the legal definition of “whiteness” through the court system. Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant, was granted citizenship on the basis of his Caucasian background, but government lawyers argued against his whiteness and eventually won against him, further imposing a “common knowledge” test for determining the whiteness of immigrants.\(^{59}\) According to Ian Haney López, the United States Courts offered different rationales to justify racial divisions, and two central methods were the “common knowledge” and “scientific evidence.” The common knowledge was arbitrary and focused on popular conceptions about race and racial divisions in the United States. Someone’s citizenship appeal, for instance, could be denied because of what the public’s held common beliefs about race were at the time of the ruling.\(^{60}\) Ultimately, the test was just another method of discrimination, as it was not based on any evidentiary support because it was simply based on the commonly held misconceptions about race held by average American citizens. Armenians entered the United States under the racial perception of being Asian. However, due to the Cartozian case, Armenians were eventually considered “legally white” because of their features and Christian beliefs.\(^{61}\) Because of this test, as well as the prejudiced views about Armenians in the Central Valley, Armenian-Americans straddled the fine line of being accepted as white by the legal system and being the “other” in their communities. Matthew Garcia states that Armenians were able to see success because this case


\(^{61}\) Garcia, “The Importance of Being Asian,” 100.
opened the door for them to experience white privilege through a performance of whiteness, which benefitted them more in business ventures than it did socially.\(^{62}\)

Despite the challenges of citizenship and discrimination that Armenians faced in their day to day lives, the discriminatory and prejudiced conditions in the United States were still preferable to the conditions in the Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, the Armenians who were standing trial at risk of deportation won their court case, but not necessarily because of an understanding of the Armenian ethnicity and identity, but because Cartozian’s lawyers argued that Armenian men marry American women, which therefore was seen as a sign of whiteness.\(^{63}\) Armenians did eventually somewhat cross the racial divide and reap the benefits of white privilege, but the perception of Armenians as the “other” - both in the Ottoman Empire and in the West, remained predominant.

Legalities aside, Armenians faced discrimination in Fresno on a regular basis. In the Midwest, “Starving Armenian” became a popular saying among families around the dinner table to encourage their children to eat, while in Fresno, residents called them “Dirty Armenians” or “Fresno Indians.”\(^{64}\) Armenians had a reputation in Fresno of being dishonest bargainers and were frowned upon for speaking their native-language by some English speaking people.\(^{65}\) When residents of Fresno were asked about their perceptions of Armenians, 92.5% stated they would refuse to accept a marriage between Armenians and their own, and many did not want their children to play with Armenian children, nor did they want them to attend their churches, despite the fact that

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\(^{62}\) Garcia, “The Importance of Being Asian,” 100.

\(^{63}\) United States vs Cartozian of 1925 was one of the first cases to challenge the citizenship of Armenians in the United States. See more: Garcia, “The Importance of Being Asian: Growers, The United Farm Workers, and the Rise of Colorblindness,” 99.


\(^{65}\) Bulbulian, The Fresno Armenians, 111-113.
Armenians were Christian, just like the majority of white Americans in Fresno. Through the 1940s and the 1950s, many Armenians were also not allowed to hold certain jobs. Central Valley Armenian residents recall relatives not being allowed to become teachers because of the “ian/yan” of their last names. Civil rights attorney and legal counsel for the Black Panthers, Charles Garry, whose original name was Charles Garabedian, grew up in the Central Valley. Despite graduating at the top of his class, Charles was not allowed to speak as the valedictorian of his class because of his Armenian last name. The principal of Selma High School stated, “Mr. and Mrs. Garabedian, I want you to know that anyone with Garabed’s grades would normally make the valedictorian’s speech at graduation. But of course you understand that it is impossible to have an Armenian do that.”

The feeling of isolation in a foreign land was further enforced by the prejudiced perceptions of neighbors in Fresno, and as a result Armenians became even more interconnected, with lessening communication and interactions with odars (non-Armenians). Furthermore, since Armenians often purchased farms at higher prices, they had to capitalize on communal family work to ensure that they received a quicker return on their investments. All Armenian family members worked together on their ranches, and some family members would take on a second job by working in packing houses or other nearby ranches. Organizations such as the Sun-Maid Raisin Growers Association and Armenian raisin farmers butted heads in a court case in 1923. The Sun-Maid Raisin Growers Association was founded by local farmers to promote fair prices for growers. An Armenian farmer, Mr. Papazian, refused to join as he voiced

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67 McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 121.
concerns regarding who the organization is intended for - large or small farmers. After threats of foreclosure, threats to their safety, and eventually having his house burnt down, he adamantly argued in court that these conditions are methods in which the organization would try to force small farmers into signing. 68

Armenians in the Central Valley: Fresno

Shortly after landing at the Fresno Yosemite International Airport during his first official visit in 1998, Armen Melkonian, the consul general of the Republic of Armenia stated: “I supposed that Fresno was in Armenia.” 69 The San Joaquin Valley, Fresno in particular, is a special place for Armenians in the Diaspora because it is one of the oldest Armenian communities in the United States. Often called “the capital of Armenia outside of Armenia,” the significance of Fresno (and by extension, the San Joaquin Valley) in the attempted rebuilding of Armenian life and culture outside of the Armenian highlands is incomparable. For the longest time, Fresno had the largest population of Armenians in the entire United States.

Fresno, located just north of Visalia, became the center of Armenian immigration and farm ownership. When Fresno was founded in 1872, there were grain and wheat farms, which required a lot of acreage. With the introduction of irrigation, people were able to make more feasible sense by farming in smaller acres, although permanent crops were still not planted. The economic opportunities that came with land owning and farming were attractive to many people.

68 McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 122.
The first Armenians to arrive in the Central Valley, particularly Fresno, was Mardiros Yanikian in 1874. When Mardiros first arrived in the United States, he felt like a new man, and in celebration of his newfound persona, he changed his name to Frank Normart, which literally translates as “new man” in Armenian. Though he returned back to the East Coast, he boasted about the fertile lands to his peers, potentially igniting a spark for them to move to California. Mardiros eventually moved back to Fresno in 1885 and established a bicycle shop and later a taxidermy store which was family operated until the 1990s.

When Armenians began to move to the region, often on the encouragement of friends and family who had already moved to the region, many made risky financial decisions in purchasing their own parcels of land. Armenians that moved to Fresno in the 1880s often came as complete family units, contrary to the immigrant group that followed after the massacres. The Armenians that settled in Fresno differed from other communities and later Armenian immigrants because they often came from commercial backgrounds and arrived with capital and were capable of purchasing land. Some of the early Armenians who bought land were not as familiar with farming, but did so regardless seeking not just financial stability, but a sense of ownership after feeling tremendous loss of having to escape hostile living and work conditions in their native homelands.

The migratory patterns here are important to note. Many Armenians who connected, or in some instances reconnected, with one another, had ended up in the

United States for similar reasons. Since only those who received permission to travel on the basis of trade or education were allowed to visit the United States, this led to others finding alternative or illegal avenues of travel to escape the harsh economic and racial conditions in the Ottoman Empire. A class divide was automatically created within an already oppressed community, as many Armenians were unable to have the legal permissions to seek better opportunities. Although migratory patterns of Armenians varied, ultimately, the goals for the migration were not just for financial reasons, but safety as well.

Similar sentiments can be said about land ownership in the Central Valley. Since economic opportunities and financial health was diminishing in the Ottoman Empire, and Armenians in the States were reading letters from family about land and furniture confiscations, purchasing land in the United States was a risky but important maneuver for incoming Armenians. Some had an understanding of farming, but others did not. Many Armenians who arrived in the United States as refugees were working in factories on the East Coast, and the promise of potential land ownership was well worth the risk.

Although the Hamidian Massacres and the Armenian Genocide had not yet happened yielding a refugee crisis, early Armenian travelers had set a precedent for those who were to come afterwards due to the anti-Armenian violence. Furthermore, because there were comparatively fewer Armenians entering the United States, establishing relationships and remaining close to other Armenians helped create and foster a sense of community and family in a foreign land.

74 Those who travelled on the basis of education did so partly due to the Western missionaries that had been established in the Ottoman Empire. Some students who went to missionary schools would subsequently get acceptances to Harvard, Yale, etc, and move to the East Coast States to pursue higher education. See more: Smith, Garden of the Sun, 598.
The first Armenians to have bought land and settled in Fresno were the Seropian brothers from Massachusetts in search of better climate conditions for Hagop’s (Jack) health, who was suffering from tuberculosis.\(^\text{75}\) It is uncertain if all the brothers, Hagop, Garabed (Gary), and Simon, and their half-brothers Kevork (George), and Hovhaness (John), arrived together or separately as multiple accounts have been documented regarding their arrival. However, it is unlikely that Hagop travelled alone, since he was gravely ill. After experiencing the success of the positive health benefits, the brothers wrote letters to community members in New England and family in the Ottoman Empire’s Marzovan region to encourage moving to the San Joaquin Valley. Initially, the Seropian brothers worked odd jobs to make ends meet. Furthermore, the language barrier made it even more difficult to communicate and assimilate in Fresno while maintaining their identities. Not only were the Seropians the first Armenians to reside in Fresno, but they were also the first Armenians to establish a business in the region. First, they began selling fruits from a wagon, and eventually saved enough to invest in a store.\(^\text{76}\) Unfortunately, due to an adjoining restaurant catching on fire, their first store burned down. Yet, the brothers continued selling fruit on the streets until they saved enough money to open another store, with an Armenian coffee shop right next door.\(^\text{77}\) In between the two ventures, the brothers also began expanding on a tract of land that they had purchased after saving up, growing about thirty acres of raisins, figs, tobacco, and other fruits.\(^\text{78}\) They began other businesses, including drying fruits, fruit packing,

\(^\text{75}\) Bulbulian, \textit{The Fresno Armenians}, 17.
\(^\text{77}\) Bulbulian, \textit{The Fresno Armenians}, 23.
and shipping. They were the first to ship oranges and dried figs, a fruit that grew very well in the Historic Armenian Highlands. In particular, Armenian immigrants helped boost the production of Smyrna figs and white Adriatic figs in the Central Valley, as well as grape and raisin varieties, and bulgur (cracked wheat).\(^7^9\) Dried figs did not take off immediately, as the public was unfamiliar with the fruit. In a quick and clever marketing solution, the brothers wrapped the figs around nuts and marketed them as sweet fig “dolmas.” While their fruit ventures were successful, their tobacco crops burnt down, destroying the entire crop. Despite the troubles of having to experience two unrelated fires destroying their businesses, the brothers continued to independently operate fruit packing and shipping businesses.

While these statistical successes are impressive for new refugees fleeing from an oppressive state, the choice in the fruits grown and choice in business are an interesting point of analysis. Armenian figs, for instance, are a symbol of peace; grapes are a symbol of wealth, abundance, and later adopted as one of the symbols of the Armenian church; walnuts, a symbol of intelligence, possibly inspired by its physical resemblance to a human brain. The choice to practice the culturally significant act of growing grapes in Fresno is firstly out of necessity and survival. But considering the historical significance of growing grapes in the Armenian Highlands throughout millennia, a fruit that is so deeply rooted in the landscape and the Armenian culture, I am inclined to note the symbolic growth of grapes in the Central Valley as a mode of resistance and rebirth in a new region and a symbolic form of heritage conservation that is rooted in the landscape. The physical act of growing and nurturing the fruits, and the establishment of

\(^7^9\) Nicole E. Vartanian, “A Fruitful Legacy,” *Cobblestone* 21, no. 5 (May 2000). Figs were already grown in Fresno, including Smyrna figs, but Armenians successfully developed the commercial fig farming into a lucrative enterprise.
farms reminiscent of their homelands, was a method of keeping that connective thread between their new lives and old.

Armenians had a reputation of having a great understanding of viticulture and other fruit and nut production when they first arrived. While Armenians brought some new varieties to Fresno, grapes were already farmed. Armenians introduced the specific sulphur-bleaching method to make golden raisins. Paul Boghosian created a raisin seeding machine in 1904. Armenians also introduced or catapulted the production and shipment of certain fruits and nuts. In 1884, Arshag Peters planted the first pistachio trees of the region in a nursery, which was then moved to Yettem and developed into a commercial orchard by A. Minasian. Armenians also introduced certain varieties of melons, and Krikor Arakelian became known as the “Melon King” throughout the Central Valley. Armenians also introduced the Armenian cucumber in Fresno around 1910-1911 with seeds brought from Armenia. The Armenian cucumber is slender and pale green, with a soft, edible skin and is technically part of the melon family. The average Armenian cucumber is ten to twelve inches, but can grow up to forty inches. (Figure 2.4)

83 Bulbulian, The Fresno Armenians, 72-73.
Prior to the arrival of Armenians, there was a fig boom in the Central Valley. However, figs are a tricky fruit to farm commercially. They can be easily damaged during the picking process and while they’re on the tree. It requires delicate but harsh labor, which left some farmers discouraged and began farming Alfalfa. Armenians began farming figs and fig prices became five times more expensive than they were before.\(^{84}\)

In 1902, Henry Markarian became the largest fig grower in the United States with an estimated twenty percent of fig production of the United States. The Markarians

\[^{84}\] “A Fight for the Armenians,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 3, 1921.
introduced tree spacing and irrigation techniques to boost production of figs. They were also experts in packaging and marketing, and introduced “fancy packs,” a dried fruit variety pack sold during the holidays. In a 1921 Oakland Tribune article, the anonymous writer of “A Fight for the Armenians” expresses their disdain for Armenian and Japanese farmers, and states that “the interior valleys of California, great and small alike, can never be in the fullest sense, a white man’s country, for he cannot do an honest day’s work in the field.”

Armenian farmers, such as the Markarians, who had humble beginnings, were now living lavishly and enjoying the fruits of their labor, which was frowned upon by other farmers.

It would be erroneous to make the assumption that Armenians established family farms in the region as a grand symbolic gesture of preservation, when it is first and foremost for the financial survival of the family. However, in the act of establishing agricultural fields in Fresno as a means of survival, these farmers inadvertently conserved a very significant aspect of their heritage - one that faced eradication through land confiscations and persecution in their homelands, re-establishment of the landscape architecture in a new region, and now, the dwindling number of Armenian farmers in the wake of rising urbanization. Oftentimes, the early Armenians in the Central Valley are lauded for their business skills and resilient spirit, but they deserve recognition for their preservation of lifestyle through the rebirth of the Armenian agrarian landscape in the west.

Between 1885 and 1890, Armenians moved to Fresno in small, but steady numbers. By 1894, there were 360 Armenian-identifying individuals in Fresno County.

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85 “A Fight for the Armenians,” Oakland Tribune, April 3, 1921.
86 Jendian, Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic, 64.
In the next decade or two, Armenian presence in the Central Valley, and in general the United States, began increasing steadily, particularly due to the rising violence and massacres of 1894-1896. The first Armenian Church was established in 1897, and just a year later, the Armenian National Church in America was established in the United States. By 1897, most of the Armenians in Fresno were merchants or artisans. Moushegh Seropian’s almanac recorded 329 Armenians in Fresno in 1897, of whom there were 14 tailors, 8 watchmakers, 7 secondhand dealers, 5 produce men, 1 grocer, 1 stockman, 1 bicycle seller, 1 dentist, 1 pharmacist, 1 midwife, 1 printer, 1 singer, and the rest of the Armenians farmers, or owned orchards and vineyards. By 1900, there were 1,326 Armenians in Fresno. By 1910, Armenians in California had grown to 4,441 residents, with at least 85% living in Fresno.

While many Armenians were tradesmen, businessmen, and educated in the cities, a vast majority of Ottoman Armenians were simple village folks. Because of the restrictions on passports, most Armenians that had the earliest opportunities to escape the Ottoman Empire were more financially stable with a pre-existing background in business. So while assimilation and finding a sense of community was difficult in the United States, some early Armenians, such as the Seropians, already had some specific skills and assets that did help them in their establishment of businesses and growing their wealth. On the other hand, according to LaPiere’s dissertation, between 1898 and 1928, there were 58,456 adult men and unaccompanied women and young boys to arrive in the United States. Over 78% of those who arrived during those two

89 Jendian, Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic, 61.
decades had less than $50 in their possession. There is a significant discrepancy between the successes of Armenians that arrived in the United States prior to the Hamidian Massacres and those that arrived within the era of the Massacres and the 1915 Genocide. While some initially had commercial backgrounds and money upon arrival and were able to buy land and establish businesses, most Armenians were farm workers or worked in the packinghouses. Many accepted hard labor in unpleasant circumstances to make a living. Despite the difficulties, there was an overall sense of gratefulness for the opportunity to work. Yet, by 1908, Armenians owned about three-fifths of the land in Fresno County, which was about 25,000 acres of land. Armenians were ambitious in their desires to own land, often paying a higher price per acre for their farms compared to other groups that were investing in land in the Central Valley.

Conclusion

California has a lot to offer to communities looking for work and to reestablish themselves, but underneath the romanticization of the West lies the struggles and challenges that many newcomers endured in settling down in the state. California’s heritage is due to the various ethnic enclaves that have brought with them not just their culture but their native farming techniques and agriculture to grow in California. While Armenians settled in other states, California’s vast landscape provided various opportunities for economic and cultural security.

90 LaPiere, The Armenian Colony in Fresno County, California
91 Jendian, Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic, 65.
Chapter 3: Replanting Roots

Introduction

California - particularly Central California - attracted many communities looking for agricultural work. Central Valley’s multicultural enclaves have yielded the creation of a very distinct Californian agricultural heritage. While some communities moved into established cities, others sought to create their own self-sufficient towns. For instance, Allensworth was the first town in California founded, financed, and governed by African Americans, established in 1908. Yettem, similarly, was established by Armenian refugees around the same time period in the same general region.

According to Reverend Nazareth Spenchian’s account, he and two Armenian friends were wandering forty miles southeast from Fresno in the San Joaquin Valley, when they came across a region at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. At that moment, the three friends felt an inexplicable connection to the land, and each burst into folk songs about the agrarian fields of their Armenian homelands. Spenchian sang “I Long to See my Cilicia,” Baghdoian sang “Oh, Majestic Mount Alagyaz,” and Jenanian sang “I Come Wandering on the Waves of the River Mother Araks.” Driven by song and nostalgia of their birth countries, they made their way towards the mountains and set up their tents in the region. The land, they said, was so similar to Historic Armenia that the three began purchasing acreages with the intention of selling tracts of

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95 History of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, 1911-1976 (Yettem, CA: St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church of Yettem, 1977), 43.
land to Armenian farming families. Eventually, this region was named Yettem - Eden - in Armenian. This was a utopian dream for Armenians who had left their homeland and now had an opportunity to recreate an idyllic home in a region similar to theirs.

While the story has truth in the description of the feeling, reasons, and the landscape that drew farming Armenians to the area, the establishment of Yettem, and what was in the region before the arrival of Armenians, was not happenstance. The dream of a utopian Armenian community was a concept that existed prior to the establishment of Yettem, driven by the trauma of the massacres and hardships faced in the Ottoman Empire, magnified by the Hamidian Massacres in the 1890s. As news was coming in from overseas about the worsening conditions for Ottoman Armenians, early Armenian migrants worked towards financial security in the United States to help their family and friends in Ottoman Turkey leave and find refuge in the States. Armenians remained in close quarters when they moved here, which provided cultural retention, but made assimilation a little bit more difficult.

Because some Armenians found assimilation to be challenging, there was a yearning for the homeland. Hagop Nshigian arrived in California in 1884 and documented his firsthand experience in 1912. Armenians had arrived bearing the trauma of conditions under Ottoman Rule, in a “desert-like country, unfamiliar surroundings and people, homeless and unprotected, under a burning sun, they were scattered a lot.” The language barrier became challenging in their journey into California. Because of the tremendous effort and financial stress it took to get to

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California, as well as the conditions back in the homeland, Armenian emigrants had no choice but to stay and continue to work. According to Nshigian, some who were able to save money were able to purchase lands and begin farming, while others began to work at their previous trades. It was only after they established themselves when they invited other Armenians to join. The struggle endured by early Armenians became subdued by the prevailing stories of success.

The social conditions that were outlined in the previous chapter for Fresno Armenians, as well as the nostalgia for the homeland that was heightened by challenges of assimilation, became some of the reasons why many Armenians not only left Fresno for better opportunities, but left Fresno with the dream of establishing an Armenian community. This dream was not exclusive to Yettem’s founders. Other Armenian community members had similar desires, and actively searched for tracts of land to purchase in different regions, focusing their efforts in the Central Valley.

Some of the early history of Yettem is hazy, as it was passed down orally and many of the earliest settlers were predominantly focused on self-reliance, and financial and mental well-being as they journeyed to the region to become a part of this community. The children of the founders - second and third generation Yettemites, began documenting the town after the fact and published a few information-rich texts about the founding of the town in local publications. Perhaps the most thorough documentation of Yettem, however, was conducted by Reverend Garabed Kalfayan of St. Mary’s Apostolic Church.

Reverend Garabed Kalfayan wrote a cursory overview of the town in 1947, and in 1950 wrote Yettemagan Hooshardzan (Yettem Memorial and Memories of
Echmiadzin), dedicated to the 50th anniversaries of the founding of Yettem and the Pastor of Yettem’s educational career. When writing the book, Reverend Kalfayan took into consideration the fact that some of the precise dates and occurrences of events or names of the earliest pioneering Yettemites might not have been meticulously documented. Other significant sources of documentation of the town include personal memoirs of residents, and an impressive map from 1915 created by Arshalous Menendian Chitjian and Lucinne Menendian Bennet, children of one of the pioneering families of Yettem who contacted and documented the precise locations of Yettem families and important structures as they happened to be in 1915. Parishioner and architect Michael Tellian transcribed their rough draft of the map into its final form for the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Church.  

This chapter consults the aforementioned documentation by townsfolk, maps, personal accounts from residents from memoirs and oral interviews, as well as local publications from the founding of the town to construct the narrative of the town’s founding. The Armenian population of Yettem declined eventually, but some residents still live in or near Yettem. Since the town is so small, many of the residents in the area live steps away from the recognized boundaries of Yettem. Those that do remain, are the children of the pioneering families of town, who live in their parental homes on the remnants of their acreages. This chapter will also look into the latter years of Yettem and the decline of the Armenian population.

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98 History of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, Yettem, California, 1911-1986 (Yettem, CA: St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, 1986).
Searching for the Armenian “Colony”

The aftermath of the 1890s Hamidian Massacres and premonitions of larger orchestrated attacks on Armenians prompted Armenians in the “old country” to meet in an undisclosed location to discuss means of protecting the Armenian community from other massacres. During that meeting, participants, including Reverend Nazareth Spenchian, proposed a committee to select land in the San Joaquin Valley for Armenians to flee to, “especially those from the laboring and farming classes” and to “establish a thoroughly Armenian community as a little Armenia in America.” The members of that committee were Protestant Minister Reverend Jenanyan from Adana, Nazareth Spenchian of Malatya, and Gabriel Baghdoyan of Malatya. The committee members communicated with San Joaquin farmers and officials prior to their visit to Visalia. In addition to the committee that Spenchian was a member of, there were also other Armenian civic leaders that were noted by local papers who intended to purchase tracts of land with the hopes of establishing an Armenian community. There is a chance that they could have been part of the same committee, but there is no concrete evidence in the documentation about the relationship between the founders of Yettem and other individuals searching for land in the Central Valley.

Armenians from the Historic Homelands, the East Coast, and Fresno were visiting different areas in the Central Valley looking for potential agrarian areas in which they could buy large acreages. Those who had capital would purchase the properties, and later entice Armenian refugees to settle in the community with opportunities for work to promote self-sustainability, economic development and financial well being.

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99 History of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, 1911-1976, 43.
100 Note: In Yettem Memorial, it is noted that Spenchian was from Adana, but the Church’s yearbook states he was from Malatya. Refer to Figure 1.1 for the map of Historic Armenian Highlands.
There was communication between Diaspora Armenians on both coasts, as well as Armenians who were still in the homeland. Furthermore, their American neighbors also had an understanding of what was happening, because local newspapers from both coasts where Armenians had settled down were reporting on the killings happening in the Ottoman Empire. There was an alertness about the conditions that were driving the Armenian refugee crisis.

Many communities immigrated to Central and Southern California during the agricultural boom of the late 1800s. By the 1900s, Swedish, Portuguese, Italian, Armenian, and Norwegian communities had arrived in the Central Valley and established small farming colonies, contributing to the multi-ethnic agricultural history of the San Joaquin Valley. The colony system was a method of land transfers and land use generally under the operation of one community leader.\(^{101}\) There are various interpretations in what defines a California farming “colony.” For instance, William H. Bishop states that farming colonies were not necessarily founded by groups “bound together” but that the lands were sold to whoever wanted to buy them. John Haes states that a colony is a “company or association of settlers, who buy their land in one block and divide it themselves.”\(^{102}\) The colony system was encouraged for individuals who depended on labor for financial security. In Benjamin C. Truman’s *Homes and Happiness in the Golden State of California*, the author states:

> The colony system is one of the special boons to a poor man whose capital is his labor. He cannot buy a farm, establish a manufactory, purchase a stock of goods,

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102 Winther, ”The Colony System of Southern California,” 94.
or pay for opening a mine; but he can buy ten acres of land in a colony, where capital has brought out the water to the door of the settler…  

Generally, colonies were advertised by groups promoting the economic benefits of purchasing acreage in the tract, organized and led by a representative. Abiko Kyutaro, for instance, purchased tracts of land and established the Yamato, Cressey, and Cortez Colonies in the late 1900s and 1910s to entice Japanese Americans to return to farming in the Central Valley.  

Similarly, Armenian leaders who had capital attempted to establish a “colony” that would entice Armenians to work and eventually purchase land, while also providing a community for Armenians refugees. The colony system was not just for economic well-being, but also to establish and foster a sense of community.  

There were mentions of Armenian activity in Central Valley newspapers about the intent of establishing an “Armenian Colony” as early as 1901. On a nearly parallel timeline, both Tulare and Stanislaus County newspapers were reporting of Armenians shopping to purchase tracts of land in their respective counties. More than likely, this could have been the same committee sending different representatives to look for ideal acreages for Armenians to settle down in. In January of 1901, the Stanislaus County Weekly News reported of three Armenian councilmen looking to buy four sections of land in the Mitchell tract of the Turlock district of Stanislaus. They regarded

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104 Barkan, "Land, Labor, and Immigrant Communities", 164.  
105 Prior to 1901, there was little to no mention (if any) of Armenian intent to establish an entirely Armenian community in American newspapers, although discussions about it existed within the Armenian community. Armenians who had settled in established cities and towns such as New York, Boston, and Fresno were discussed in local news, but there was no reporting of the desire for an isolated community. According to the dedication on the old Presbyterian Church’s bell, Armenians arrived in the region in 1892. (Figure 4.7)  
106 There is an established Armenian and Assyrian community in Turlock with active community churches to this day. Many Armenians and Assyrians in the region arrived due to the Genocide with agricultural skills looking for work.
Armenians as “good workers and intelligent crop raisers,” urging community encouragement of a potential Armenian farming community. Similarly, the Visalia Daily Times reported of a potential Armenian community being established in Stanislaus County in the northern Central Valley. In the Daily Delta, N. H. Soogian alerted the local bank of an estimated 300 to 1000 Armenians coming to California during winter and spring of 1901 and that “their intentions are to form colonies and settle on desirable tracts of land in the valley.” Bishop Soogian was working with Mr. Nishkian of Fresno and Bishop Saradjian from the east coast in their search.

Similar to the development in Modesto, officials were also welcoming the investment of Armenians in Tulare, who they considered to be “an industrious folk.” These sentiments were appreciated and vastly different from those experienced in Fresno, but did not actually acknowledge the struggles which Armenians endured in order for their capital to become well-respected in the Valley, including purchasing lands at higher prices from non-Armenians. Dick Iskenderian, for instance, purchased a twelve acre peach orchard for $5,000 from Joe Zindell and George D. Smith in the Yettem region in 1912, paying double what the sellers bought the land for.

Another brief in the Visalia Daily Times in January of 1901 vaguely references a “colony project” in Modesto, as well as reports on the arrival of Bishop Saradjian to Visalia, who was the chief of the Armenian Church in the United States. Bishop Saradjian was welcomed by Armenian families who were already living in Visalia, and

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108 Visalia Daily Times, January 18, 1901.
109 Daily Delta, January 17, 1901.
110 Daily Delta, January 17, 1901.
111 Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin, 18-19.
112 “Made Nice Profit on Investment,” Tulare County Times, March 21, 1912.
113 Visalia Daily Times, January 18, 1901.
he was shown around the county for prospective tracts of lands where a new Armenian community could be established.\footnote{Visalia Daily Times, January 3, 1901.} If he was satisfied, it was estimated to have resulted in the sale of 5,000-6,000 acres of land.\footnote{Visalia Daily Times, January 3, 1901.} The efforts of this visit were successful, as the Visalia board of trade adopted a resolution on January 16, 1901 and extended a cordial invitation for Armenians to settle in Visalia County. In January, Bishop Saradjian wrote a letter of appreciation to Mr. S. Mitchell, president of the Visalia board of trade thanking him for the moral assistance and welcoming atmosphere.\footnote{Visalia Daily Times, January 3, 1901.} The bishop concluded his letter:

\begin{quote}
Hoping that through the efforts of your esteemed board a desirable location for my people may be secured, and that this undertaking may be brought to a successful issue,

I remain, Yours very truly,

H. Saradjian, Bishop
\end{quote}

The potential land transactions were not as desirable as the Bishop had hoped, but the welcoming atmosphere from the board was very much appreciated by the community after experiencing persecution. In March, \emph{Visalia Daily Times} reported that Armenians still have not given up the concept of looking for land in the region, and inspections of potential tracts of land to purchase were ongoing.\footnote{Visalia Daily Times, February 22, 1901.} In 1902, \emph{Visalia Delta Times} reported on a third potential of an “Armenian colony.” M. Markarian, a resident of Fresno since 1882, visited Tulare’s lake country looking for a place suitable for 300 to 400 Fresno Armenians to move to and establish their own community.\footnote{Visalia Times-Delta, November 4, 1902. It is important to note that newspapers would often spell Armenian names and last names incorrectly, and the inconsistencies will be noted. In this instance, Markarian was erroneously spelled “Markarin.”}
newspapers spoke about the Armenian capital, and the preparedness to purchase property, painting an image of pre-existing wealth, without acknowledging that the majority of those arriving were poverty-stricken laborers lured by financial independence and labor.

There is no indication in Yettem’s documentation that the land committee led by Spenchian and the individuals discussed in the Valley’s newspapers were all connected, but there is no doubt that there was, at the very least, communication between different members of the community in realizing this shared dream. There is also the possibility that they could have all been a part of the same committee. The Armenians involved in the search for a colony in Stanislaus County and Lake Country were not documented as the founding members of the town of Yettem. Furthermore, those individuals are also not documented as early Yettemites. Local newspapers also do not mention them in the forthcoming years as residents of Yettem. Ultimately, those early searches for desirable locations in California were not fruitful, as the committee members were unable to come to an agreement on which region was right.

**Founding of Yettem**

The earliest Armenians known to have visited Yettem proper are Yettem’s three founders: Reverend Haroutiun Jenanian, Reverend Nazaret Ispechnian, and Kapriel Baghdoian. (Figure 3.1) In his book *Yettem Memorial*, Reverend Garabed Kalfayan does note that he is not entirely certain on either the exact founding date of Yettem or other potential founders because he documented first-hand eyewitness stories of residents, whose memories could have been hazy. In addition, most of the founders of
Yettem had died by the time that the story of Yettem was being documented, and early settlers did not necessarily pay attention to very specific details about Yettem’s early days. However, the aforementioned story about the founding of Yettem, though undated, happened prior to either in 1900 or the first half of 1901. After this initial visit, the committee came to the region several more times, but could not agree on a specific parcel of land to purchase. By mid 1901, the founders had already returned to the region and set up tents. This was the humble beginning that was considered the founding of Yettem.

Figure 3.1: Founders of Yettem, Top Left: Arshavir Kemalian; Top Right: Reverend Jenanian; Bottom Left: Kapriel Baghdoian; Bottom Right: Nazaret Isbenchian. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menendian.

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120 Kalfayan, *Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin*, 24. Note that Yettem was not yet officially recognized by the county of Tulare.
Revered Spenchian once told Reverend Kalfayan:

During the trip when we turned east at the sight of the present Calgro station and turned our windblown faces towards the snowy Sierra Nevada Mountains on whose crests the emerald woods stood like a sparkling necklace, we saw the red soil of this wondrously beautiful God-made valley under our feet. In that moment, I thought that an ocean burst forth from the depths of my soul.\textsuperscript{122}

In 1901, Baghdoyan purchased eighty acres of land and built a small house on his property two and a half miles north from the town of Churchill. His property was mostly dry bog when he purchased it; by 1904 he was able to cultivate the land and have vines that grew three feet in the season. The \textit{Tulare County Times} considered his vineyards to be “the prettiest vineyards in all this section of the country.”\textsuperscript{123} In the same year, Movses Jenanyan built a large house on his newly purchased 140 acres. Nazareth Spenchian purchased eighty acres near the other committee members. Shortly after, Spenchian’s cousin Haig and his son-in-law Misag Jeirian joined.\textsuperscript{124}

In 1902, the \textit{Tulare County Times} reported that an Armenian “colony” was established south of Cutler station, and that more Armenians were expected to move to the region and participate in grape and fruit farming.\textsuperscript{125} In 1903, Reverend Jenanian and the other founders purchased 320 acres of land northeast of Visalia, near Monson. By 1903, the founders had already purchased about 1,600 acres of land.\textsuperscript{126} After this purchase, Jenanian travelled to Philadelphia with the intention of bringing Armenians to the growing community. The first of twenty-five Armenian families from New Jersey that

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{122} \textit{History of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church}, 1911-1976, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{123} \textit{Tulare County Times}, May 5, 1904.
\item \textsuperscript{124} \textit{History of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church}, 1911-1976, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{125} \textit{Tulare County Times}, September 25, 1902.
\item \textsuperscript{126} \textit{Tulare Advance-Register}, November 12, 1903.
\end{footnotes}
were expected to arrive did so shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{127} By 1904, there were fifteen Armenian families in the region.\textsuperscript{128} As more families arrived, the founders began purchasing more tracts of land. In 1904, Yettemites purchased 2,600 acres of land east of the town of Churchill.\textsuperscript{129}

Before Armenians began purchasing acreages, the land was completely dedicated to wheat farming, and later was left unattended or used for grazing. Locals believed that the land was untenable and did not pay much attention to it. Therefore, many did not believe that the Armenian land purchases at such high costs would yield any crops. Yet, in 1904, the \textit{Tulare County Times} stated,

These people, in a small way, have demonstrated that the soil is adapted to grape culture, and the Wheelock orange grove is evidence of what can be done there in that industry. In a few years from now that section will be one of the most prosperous parts of this end of the county, and some of our old-timers will be wondering how they let such a good thing slip through their hands.\textsuperscript{130}

Yettem resident Haig Eginian recalls that their American neighbors thought that the Armenians must be crazy, because the soils were considered to be poor when they first began cultivating.\textsuperscript{131} Another Yettemite, Hovhanness Nazaretian, recalled:

Before we came here Yettem was a genuine desert, covered with indigenous grass and weeds. And an expanse of hardened soils. Here and there there were solitary trees, oak and juniper. The nearby hills were swarming with snakes and the canyons were the dens of thieves. To turn this place into a Yettem (paradise) required superhuman effort. This the Armenians tried to do. They had no resources - no tractors or machinery of any set. Our muscles were our tractor and our machinery our patriarchal plow shares.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{127} "Orosi News," \textit{Tulare County Times}, November 26, 1903.
\textsuperscript{128} "The Armenian Colony," \textit{Tulare County Times}, March 3, 1904.
\textsuperscript{129} "North End News," \textit{Tulare County Times}, March 17, 1904. See appendix A for land transfers.
\textsuperscript{130} "The Armenian Colony," \textit{Tulare County Times}, March 3, 1904.
\textsuperscript{131} Kalfayan, \textit{Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin}, 30.
\textsuperscript{132} Kalfayan, \textit{Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin}, 30-31.
In retrospect, many of the Yettemites wished that the founders would have chosen more fruitful lands, which would have helped make farming easier; but the nostalgia-driven decision was already made, and the seeds for Eden eventually prospered with hard work. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with laws, in addition to weather conditions, poor roads, and inadequate tools became exhausting barriers. Nevertheless, the community persisted. Eginian recalls that “families lived on their land in houses they themselves built. Very few had planted their own vineyards, instead had bought them at high prices from non-Armenians.” These are all firsthand accounts, and are based on when the individuals arrived, and what they remember. It is possible that some purchased empty tracts of land, while some newcomers purchased existing farms with their own vineyards at high prices. In the deeds that were publicly available, some individuals purchased lands from farmers, while some were purchased directly from the Bank.

There are no photographs of the earliest houses that residents built themselves, but Nazaret Isbenchian’s writings suggest that they were made of twigs and mud, most similar to homes made by the Apache. One side of the homes were for people, while the other side was designated for animals.

Some Yettemites recall that the land was truly so similar to that in the Historic Highlands, it may not have just been hard work, but an understanding of what the soil needs in order for it to be properly nourished after being used for cattle grazing for so many years. The comparative photos of present-day Yettem and the photos of Chomaklou taken by Mari Louise Menendian, the daughter of Reverend Kalfayan, display the uncanny similarities in the landscape between the two regions and bridge

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133 Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin, 20-21.
134 See Appendix A.
135 Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin, 32.
the cultures of Yettem and villages in the Homeland. (Figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5) Yettem resident John Farsakian recalls visiting his ancestral village of Chomaklou in Ottoman Turkey and being surprised at the very obvious similarities between Yettem and Chomaklou. The red claylike soil, which Spenchian noted in his account of the Valley, was exactly the type of soil that Farsakians' relatives would have cultivated in the town of Chomaklou.¹³⁶

![Yettem field, view facing east. 2021. Photo taken by author.](image)

¹³⁶ Ani Mnatsakanyan, Interview with John Farsakian and Alan Farsakian, March 25, 2021. Due to limited availability of resources, I was unable to trace soil map comparisons of Chomaklou and Yettem from the late 19th and early 20th centuries and present-day conditions. It would be worthwhile to analyze this comparison once resources are available again.
Figure 3.3: Stokes Mountains photographed on Avenue 384, view facing east, 2021. Photo by author.

Figure 3.4: Chomaklou, Turkey. Source: Photo taken by Mari Louise Menendian.
Some residents had previous farming knowledge, but others did not and learned when they arrived to capitalize on the opportunity. Some of the earliest residents had already grown accustomed to city life on the East Coast, and learned how to farm on the job. Others arrived with only pennies and relied on the generosity of friends to get on their feet. Armenians were enticed by a community where they could live and work with other Armenians. Onnig Dzerounian, an early resident of Yettem recalled, “We imagined that Yettem was a large and prosperous town where we could live comfortably amongst Armenians.” Every Armenian that arrived came with preconceived notions of how Yettem would be based on memories of their hometowns, but upon getting off the train at Yettem Station only found desolate lands. Because of the lack of shelter,

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137 Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin, 33.
residents either stayed in homes of Yettem’s founders or pioneering families, or squatted in broken down stables, and used discarded tin cans for kitchenware.¹³⁸

Within five years, there were about twenty-five families in the region. According to the Yettemagan Hooshardzan, when Armenians established themselves there, the government gave them permission and necessitated that the community determine a name for the settlement. The founding members held a meeting to settle on the name of the town, and ultimately Yettem was chosen. There is no documented record of this meeting other than its happening being passed down through oral histories, and therefore the date, the participants, and other options for the name are not precisely documented. Hovhanness Nazaretian’s testimony states that the names were Cilicia, Marash, and Yettem. Yezigiel Gendigian’s testimony states the names were Cilicia, Ararat, and Yettem. Isbenchian remembers the three options being Adana, Masis, and Yettem. Perhaps, driven by nostalgia, each individual remembers a name connected to their past. Charles Davidian recounts that Hagop Effendi Hamalian, the storekeeper and postmaster, Yezigiel Gendigian, and Devlat Agha Moorsalian were instrumental in changing the name to something that would honor the Armenian community, as well as foster a sense of comfort, considering that the conditions were increasingly becoming more harrowing in the Homeland.

Yettem translates to “Garden of Eden,” which they felt was more fitting and inclusive. Choosing a name selected after a region does not encompass the geographical unity of Armenians from different regions who have found comfort within the company of one another in the Diaspora. In 1905, the Armenian Community in the region got permission from the government to establish a post office called Yettem in

¹³⁸ Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial, 34-35.
the Churchill region as Yettem. The post office therefore was established, and J. H. Hamalian was the first postmaster of the town. In 1912, Yettem adopted its official town slogan, “Get ‘Em to Yettem!” The current post office in Yettem was built by Ed Tellalian of Orosi in 1961. Before the structure was built, the Yettem post office was usually inside of different grocery stores. To this day, the Yettem post office is the only one in the United States that bears an Armenian name (figure 3.6).

![Figure 3.6: Yettem Post Office, 2021, view facing northwest. Photo by author.](image)

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140 *Tulare Advance Register*, February 21, 1912.
Determining the Boundaries of Yettem

There are conflicting stories as to what was there prior to the land purchases made by Yettemites. Some stories state that the region chosen at the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas was primarily undeveloped land, although some families lived scattered throughout the region. Other accounts state that the town was initially known as Churchill, which had gotten its name because there was a church atop a nearby hill, where residents from the past gathered to pray there. Another potential of the name was after the former owner’s name of the land, Churchill.142 Charles Davidan’s autobiography and account of his life in Yettem, A Warm Wind Through Yettem, states that the town was called “Lovell.”143 Reverend Kalfayan, author of the only existing book documenting the history of the town, also suggested that it was known as Stone Corral or Seville by locals who lived north of the region.144 However, there is truth to all these accounts, and together they construct the regional narrative.

Towns in this region of Tulare County are all so close to each other, that it is no surprise that there may be some overlap in the description of historical and present-day boundaries between towns. Today, Calgro abuts Yettem to the west, Seville to the east, and Cutler and Orosi are located northwest of the town. Some addresses in Yettem may fall under Cutler, even though residents technically consider themselves to live in Yettem. Present-day Yettem is only 98 acres, even though the early residents of Yettem purchased more acreage than is recognized within the boundaries of the town today.

144 Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial and Memories of Echmiadzin, 30.
(Figure 3.7) The conceptual boundaries of Yettem extend beyond the actual recognized boundaries of the town.

An 1876 map of Tulare County indicates that the region is subdivided into plots, some vacant. The 1884 map shows that the Churchill Post Office is in the general vicinity of present day Yettem, in Stone Corral Townsend. The 1900 map shows Churchill to the east of Monson, near the Santa Fe Railroad. There is a stronger possibility that the first acreages purchased by Armenians were not in Churchill proper, but at the outer boundaries of the town. As more Armenians arrived, they slowly trickled into the town of Churchill. Through the early 1910s, some accounts in the papers mention both Churchill and Yettem. But there is no indication, unless specifically noted
in the papers, whether or not they used the names for the same region interchangeably or as two distinct geographic regions.¹⁴⁵

When Yettem was established, Lovell was not a town. Rather, it was the Lovell Station for the Santa Fe Railroad, which was about three miles away from Yettem proper. In June of 1910, the Visalia Times reported that the Lovell Station was from then on known as the Yettem Station in recognition of the Armenian community in Churchill.¹⁴⁶ However, in 1911, a new town was established near the train station, called Lovell, where they established the Lovell School District. Although the station is currently gone, Lovell High School is currently part of the Orosi-Cutler school district located three miles away from Yettem proper. Because of the distance and to avoid confusion, residents petitioned to change the name of the railroad station back to Lovell Station.¹⁴⁷

Yettem’s Growth and Early Agricultural Successes Post-Genocide

Since the beginning of Yettem’s founding, the town’s history has existed in two places at once; because Yettem’s story is not just about the actual town, but the conditions that yielded the founding of the town and the individual migrations that resulted in the establishment of the community. It is, therefore, both local and global at the same time, for the local history would not exist without the simultaneous treks that survivors were on in order to reach this Garden of Eden. In addition, the knowledge, the memories, and the trauma from the East carried over to their new lives in the West. Some unfortunately were so grief stricken by the conditions, that they saw tragic fates.

¹⁴⁵ See Appendix B for Maps of Tulare County.
¹⁴⁶ “Lovell Station Henceforth Known as Yettem,” Visalia Times-Delta, June 15, 1910.
¹⁴⁷ “Town to Be Started at Lovell Station,” Visalia Times-Delta, August 15, 1911, p. 5.
Jacob Gazarian was a well-off attorney in the Armenian Highlands but was incarcerated for many years and later exiled to Macedonia. Upon arriving in Yettem, he was committed to the asylum twice and eventually committed suicide at the age of 55. Gazarian’s story was not unique; many others saw similar fates but were often overlooked by local reports due to the stories of rapid financial success.

This was exacerbated in the 1910s as conditions worsened in the homeland. Armenians arrived escaping the traumas of intensified persecution, and many Yettemites sought to help in any which way possible. Many Armenians sought orphaned or widowed brides from the Ottoman Empire to help them find safety. Furthermore, Yettemites also sought financial help from local charitable organizations. The connection between the two extended far beyond the similarities of the landscape; Yettem was not truly a “Garden of Eden,” or a land of opportunity, if their families and neighbors were suffering overseas.

Moving to Yettem

As financial independence seemed to be more of a security than a gamble in Yettem, more Armenians began arriving to escape the conditions of the Ottoman Empire. By this time, many of the Armenians had been deported from their homelands for some time. It is important to note that because of the conditions and deportation routes of the 1910s, Armenian refugees were not able to make the direct journey to the United States in the same manner that the Armenians who arrived in the 1880s-1890s did. Oftentimes, their journeys, if they survived, took a few years until they reached a destination where they could resettle. Some were able to escape quickly and settle in

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different parts of the United States before moving to Yettem, and others had wandered for years in Syria and other countries or moved from one orphanage to another prior to arriving to Yettem.

It was also during this time period were many Armenians who were escaping the 1915 Genocide, particularly Chomaklou Armenians, began to arrive in Yettem.\footnote{Along with the Armenians from other regions surrounding Chomaklou. Mnatsakanyan, Interview with John Farsakian and Alan Farsakian.} “They drew each other like magnets,” said John Farsakian, a Yettemite whose ancestral home was Chomaklou.\footnote{Mnatsakanyan, Interview with John Farsakian and Alan Farsakian.} Hrant Farsakian, one of the pioneering Chomakloutsis, considered himself one of the fortunate ones to have escaped the Ottoman Empire in 1913 before the organized Genocide of 1915. He lived in New York until August of 1935 when he and his wife Mayreni moved to Yettem where they stayed with the Simonyan family. Although they moved to Visalia in 1937, the Farsakian family, to this day, is very much active in Yettem social and church life.

Siranoush Gashian (nee Barsamian) of Evereg, was deported through the deserts of Der Elzor in 1915. After five years of homelessness, she arrived in Adana, and met Onnig Zarounian who had returned to the region to find a wife. They married and came directly to Yettem to establish their lives.\footnote{History of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, Yettem, California, 1911-1986 (Yettem, CA: St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, 1986). 19.} Sark Davidian arrived in the United States as a two-year old in 1923, escaping the Genocide. They traveled immediately to Yettem and established their roots, where he dedicated his life to ranching. Mary Boudakian was born in Chomaklou to Armenag and Shatene Elikouchoukian. Her father was jailed in 1917, and a month later her mother, her five brothers, and herself were deported. Four of her brothers died along the way. After a
year in Damascus, Khacher Majanian became their sponsor and helped them journey to
the United States. After a brief stay in Ellis Island, the three survivors travelled to
Yettem, arriving on March 30, 1921, where they were greeted by the Yahnian brothers.

Armenians began focusing on bettering physical conditions in Yettem as well. In
1920, work had begun to pave the road (Avenue 384) to Seville. By 1923, the number
of Armenians had grown to 1,500. However, repatriating and reconstructing life in the
Ottoman Empire appeared to have been a dream that many Yettemites had not
forgotten. Yettemites, led by S. H. Artinyan, H. Nazaretian, and A. Simonian, wrote a
telegraph to the Near East Conference, stating:

To the president Near East Conference, 
Lausanne, Switzerland:

We, the Armenian people of Yettem, California, numbering 1500 souls
appeal to you for the sake of justice and peace to provide for us and the eight
hundred thousand refugees a national home, independent of the unbearable
Turkish rule, on some part of our historic land that we may return and begin
reconstruction work. After all the barbarities the Turkish government perpetrated
upon us it is impossible for any Armenian to live under Turkish rule. In the name
of our one hundred million martyrs we ask you to solve the Armenian question
once and for all.

Armenian Colony of Yettem, California.

Farming Successes and Failures

Isabelle Menendian, the daughter of one of the pioneering families of Yettem,
recalls, “Money was at a premium. It must have been the love of the soil and the desire
for financial independence that urged them on to another day and still to another.”

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152 “Yettem Road to Seville is Started,” Visalia Daily Times, June 3, 1920.
153 “Yettem Colony Asks Conference to Save Armenia,” Visalia Times-Delta, December 27, 1922. The
contemporary estimate of massacred Armenians in the 1915 Genocide is 1.5 million. The hundred million
can possibly be a number that includes those that were forcefully deported, escapes, and earlier
massacres and pogroms leading up to the 1915 Genocide.
This parallels the farmers’ relationship to the land back East. Recall the conditions of Armenians as described in the first chapter, where conditions were dire, financial freedom was dwindling, and the land was becoming untenable when beys were burning peasants’ lands. Despite those struggles, Armenian farmers continued on with the labor to revive the soil and hope for financial security. Young Armenians who arrived in Yettem to farm, either persuaded by the opportunities for labor or the landscape’s similarities to their homeland, began declaring their intentions to become citizens of the United States. The Adalian brothers who had arrived in New York in 1897, declared their intentions to become citizens in 1911 after settling down in Yettem to farm.\textsuperscript{155}

For a brief period of time, Yettemites found success in growing tobacco. However, the small farms could not compete with the well-established and controlled tobacco industry. Armenians also experimented with growing cotton, as some would have been familiar with growing and harvesting cotton due to cotton production in the Highlands, as well as citrus trees such as lemons and oranges. Yettemites also attempted to grow 200 to 500 acres of sugar beets because a new beet sugar factory was erected nearby.\textsuperscript{156} However, the soil seemed best suited for grape production, which became the primary source of financial security.

Yettem quickly became the center of grape production, but some residents also grew lemons and oranges. Most of the residents grew Thompson seedless grapes. Nazareth Spenchian, for instance, grew Tokay, Zinfandel, and Thompson grapes. Most of the residents grew Thompson seedless grapes successfully. P. Yeramian was noted in \textit{Visalia Times-Delta} for bringing in the first batch of grapes in 1912, which were only

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Tulare County Times}, October 11, 1911.
\textsuperscript{156} “2000 Acres of Sugar Beets will be Planted,” \textit{Tulare Advance-Register}, December 22, 1905.
planted in March of 1912. The paper applauds Yeramian for bringing in the first grapes
from a sixteen month old vineyard. The paper states that a twelve year old field in
Fresno would ordinarily yield a ton and a half of grapes per acre, but Yeramian was able
to cultivate a ton and a half per acre of grapes with such a young vineyard.\footnote{157}

Local papers often boasted about Yettem’s successful raisin crop, and farmers
were often the first to pack and ship their grape and sun-dried raisin varieties. However,
many of the farmers wanted to process grapes as they had done in their native country.
In this method, the raisins were treated with a lye solution extracted from ashes to
produce a lighter-color raisin. After experimentation, Krikor Arslanian was the first to
prepare the sulphur dipped bleached raisins in 1909. He travelled to New York to sell
the new variety there, and the new method of bleaching raisins took off.

Sulphur-bleached raisins were regarded as “fancy” in local papers, distinguishing
them from other soda-bleached raisins. In a single year, about six thousand tons of
sulphur-bleached raisins were produced in Yettem. However, the profits came to a halt
during the Great Depression. The work to bleach raisins was expensive and tedious,
and were not able to survive the conditions of the Depression. Natural processes
succumbed to mechanical farming. Yettem farmers began using dehydrators so that
grapes can be dipped and dried quickly and easily for a more affordable price. In 1938,
Yettem farmers began using dehydrating warehouses to produce their golden-bleached
raisins, which quickly spread through the region. The new sulphur-bleached raisins
used less sulphur and direct sunlight to create, resulting in a raising with a darker
shade, but one that was of better quality. The traditional methods became obsolete by
1953, and in 1954, about 26,000 tons of grapes were produced using dehydrating

warehouses. Today, these Yettem-native raisins are known as the California Golden Seedless.\textsuperscript{158}

Although refugees were arriving through the mid-1920s, World War I and the Great Depression brought a lot of challenges. As it was, plant diseases, droughts, and extreme temperatures were a challenge in the region, and raisins were the primary source of revenue for Yettem farmers. Since many farmers and ranchers had purchased lands at higher prices and often were in debt, they were unable to meet their obligation during the Great Depression. As a result, the earliest pioneers of Yettem farming were forced to leave the town and seek employment in the cities, particularly Los Angeles. Those who did stay struggled throughout the Depression years. Some of the more successful farmers moved to Visalia and operated stores on their fields. Around the mid-1920s, the oversupply of raisins in Yettem lowered the price of the product and farmers became dependent on bank loans, or begged the National Bank of Visalia to extend pre-existing loans. Charles Davidian recalls that it was a common site to see a group of Yettemites waiting every morning for the National Bank of Visalia to open its doors.\textsuperscript{159} Around 1932, some of the farmers had given up on their raisin crops and dedicated themselves to cotton farming. Conditions were slightly better because land improvements had become possible and the Alta Irrigation District allowed for more water availability. As prospects were looking up, Armenians from the eastern United States started making the journey to the region. However, as Yettemites were spreading out to other towns in the region, the newcomers were not compelled to stay in Yettem proper, although they still participated in Yettem events. They were still Yettemites, even

\textsuperscript{159} Davidian. \textit{A Warm Wind Through Yettem}, 43.
though their addresses did not reflect that. During this time, many other nationalities also started arriving in Yettem, and it became, what Isabelle Menendian considered “a melting pot.”\textsuperscript{160} By the 1950s, Yettemites began farming vegetables. In the 1960s, they started planting pistachios that were native to the Middle East.\textsuperscript{161} In the 1970s, tomatoes became the main source of work and income in Yettem. Mari Louise Menendian, granddaughter of Reverend Garabed Kalfayan, recalls her childhood in Yettem and spending summers putting sticker barcodes on the tomatoes to prepare for shipment. (Figure 3.8) Although conditions changed, and many of their children eventually went to different universities and left the family farms, the relationship between neighbors in Yettem remained the same. Families helped each other farm, spent evenings and days together, celebrated as a community, and mourned as a community. No matter where they moved to or travelled, they maintained contact. Mari Louise Menendian, for instance, travelled for decades and lived overseas before returning to Yettem to live in her parental home and participate in community life.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{yettem_pride_label.jpg}
\caption{Yettem Tomato Label. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menendian.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{161} Mnatsakanyan, Interview with John and Alan Farsakian.
Conclusion

While memories have put at the forefront the romanticized version of the founding of Yettem, it was mostly strategic and planned. The town’s history and heritage are inextricably connected to the conditions that were continuously developing in their homeland. Despite all the changes happening, Yettem’s existence in the Central Valley seemed to be the only constant. Residents who remained after the Great Depression continued to work in the fields and earn a living. This chapter was primarily concerned with the early roots and the conditions during the formative years of Yettem; the next chapter will identify sites of heritage and focus on social and cultural events and practices of heritage in and around Yettem. Mari Louise recalls that although farming was a method of conserving and continuing the old peasant life in the Highlands, there was more to life in Yettem than just agriculture. Yettemites developed a rich thriving cultural center to preserve language, food, and traditions. Most of the businesses established and structures built by Armenians don’t exist in Yettem anymore. The fields and the Church, as well as the school and a general store are still there, but Yettemites are no longer predominantly of Armenian heritage. But the children of early Yettemites still make the pilgrimage to the town for events, celebrations, deaths, and more.
Chapter 4: Yettem’s Past and Present: Sites of Heritage

Introduction

Economic stability was important, but the concept of reconstructing a utopian Armenia in the United States was a dire effort at community-driven cultural preservation. Livelihoods in the Ottoman Empire were at risk due to a direct threat of cultural and ethnic cleansing. In the Diaspora, finding the balance between cultural retention and assimilation would have posed a risk of a longer, slower acting cultural erasure, should certain aspects of heritage not be practiced. Establishing an Armenian town was possibly associated with the feelings of isolation and assimilation difficulties in Fresno, but it was also a method of preserving identity and way of life in a foreign land. While farming was a means of financial security in Yettem, it was not the cultural aspect of Yettem.

Although Yettemites lived together in close quarters and found comfort in being with their own communities, especially since many were reunited after escaping the conditions in the Ottoman Empire, they were not isolated from the rest of Tulare County. Some Yettemites owned businesses in Visalia and were able to find a better balance between cultural assimilation and cultural retention compared to Armenians who were living in other cities. The community organized cultural events and festivals, participated in local events, and oftentimes, Mari Louise Menendian recalls how Yettemites of different nationalities would participate in each other’s cultural events and celebrations.\(^\text{162}\)

\(^{162}\) Mnatsakanyan, Interview with Mari Louise Menendian, April 27, 2021.
This chapter focuses on life in Yettem, spaces created by Armenian Yettemites, intangible heritage and cultural practices, and the community’s efforts at preserving Armenian heritage. Some aspects of heritage and culture from the Ottoman Empire were lost, while others were preserved, which is a natural outcome of constant uprooting and migration-based trauma. Each subsection focuses on an identified aspect of Yettem heritage that is either no longer there or has been rebuilt. It begins with the establishment of the Churches; through the various challenges faced by the community, the Armenian Church has always been the epicenter of cultural preservation in the Diaspora. It is the root of religious ceremonies, but also hosts cultural events, community educational classes, and is an important asset to any Armenian who has newly arrived in a foreign land. In addition, it is important to note that Yettem’s Armenian community established a general store, packing houses, a Hotel and a Cafe, and other sites of livelihood that are no longer extant.

However, the largest and arguably most important part of heritage conservation in Yettem is not in the buildings, but the active and conscious efforts in keeping cultural practices alive. Although many Yettemites no longer live in Yettem, they still make the journey to participate in Yettem Church life, weekly Church visits, special events,

163 Although each Armenian Diaspora community has their own unique culture and characteristics, which is an amalgamation of their regional heritage in the historic Armenian Highlands, their surroundings, and their unique heritage created by the blend of various cultural elements of the old and the new, some aspects of Diaspora heritage are similar across all communities. For instance, my own family arrived in Los Angeles in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They found their first home near the local Armenian church and school. As they did not know the English language and had few relatives here, they were able to find comfort and solace in St. Garabed’s Armenian Apostolic Church. They began attending services in Los Angeles and making friends through the church, even though they were not devoted Church goers in Soviet Armenia. The Armenian church always preserves aspects of culture that are instrumental to the survival of the Armenian people, including religion, language, cultural dance and song, and more.

164 Due to the limitations because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I wanted to recognize these sites but the thesis will primarily focus on two significant aspects of heritage conservation - the church and education, and the activity that sprouted from those two sites.
weddings, and more. To focus on the preservation of structures in an Armenian community would be admirable, but mostly challenging for a community that has been constantly uprooted, migrated, and had to preserve their heritage while traveling from one part to another. Therefore, a focus on aspects of intangible heritage and ritualistic practices that are preserved in the Diaspora, which are not always entirely reliant on the existence of a physical structure, provides context into the Armenian Diaspora community. The final and most significant aspect of Armenian heritage may arguably be the act of pilgrimage - whether it’s pilgrimage to the Historic Highlands in present-day Turkey, contemporary Armenia, or to Yettem from various parts of the United States.

Figure 4.1: St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Church, Yettem, 1911. (Photo courtesy of Lucinne Bennett). Source: Tulare County Library.
Churches

The church is a significant aspect of Armenian heritage. As the first state to adopt Christianity in 301 AD, the church has always been a pillar in Armenian heritage.\(^{165}\) The first church in Yettem was not a church at all - rather, a group of the early residents met under shady fig trees on Tateos Davidian’s property on Pentecost Sunday in 1903 to pray.\(^{166}\) All residents, despite their congregation, met together in the beginning before the erection of their churches.

St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church

The Blessing of the Stones for the foundation of the new church was conducted by Archbishop Hovsep Sarajian in May 1909 on Green Sunday (Ashkharhamadran). A building committee was selected, consisting of Krikor Arslanian, Nazaret Spenchian, Boghos Simonian, Mike Dervishian, Hovhaness Nazaretian, Melik Agha Sahroian, and Eskender Iskenderian. Krikor Arslanian purchased the three acres on which the church ground still stands.\(^{167}\) The area surrounding it was sold to other Armenians so that the Armenian community thrives around the church. According to the St. Mary Apostolic Church’s Anniversary Book (1911-1976), the lands were purchased by Aram Kekligian, Arshavir Kemalian, Boghos Simonian, Armenag Simonian, Hovhannes Nazaretian for $60 each. Bishop Moushegh Seropian consecrated the church on July 3, 1911.\(^{168}\)

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\(^{166}\) Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial, 39-41.

\(^{167}\) See Appendix A for early deed transfers.

\(^{168}\) Revered Father Archpriest Vartan Kasparian. “St. Mary, Yettem,” St. Mary Apostolic Church, Yettem, 2011, 50.
(Figure 4.1) The original church cost $2,378.67 and was a wood frame construction.

(Table 4.1)

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<td>Collections from Fresno</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collections from Yettem</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Donations from Dinuba</td>
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<td>$1,889.32</td>
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<td>Religious Vessels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plates and books</td>
<td>$231.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Announcements and travel expenses</td>
<td>$114.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Cost:</strong></td>
<td><strong>$2378.67</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Income and Expenses for the construction of the first Church of Yettem. Figures supplied by the Old Church’s architect, Krikor Arslanian. Source: Kalfayan. Yettem, A Cursory Overview, 1947.
The church was entirely designed, contracted, and built by the Armenian community. Krikor Arslanian was the architect and Boghos Simonian was the builder. Hovhannes Nazaretian, Sarkis Fereshetian, and Harry Adalian were the helpers. Everyone in the community came together to carry stones and dirt and help build the church. Unfortunately, the first church burned down in 1945 after a farmer lost control of his trash burn. When the fire happened, Reverend Kalfayan was in Echmiadzin, in Armenia. He returned on August 6, 1946. Upon his return, a group of parishioners met for the second time and decided on rebuilding the church on the site of the old church. The foundation of the new church was to be made of sixteen uncut stones, and with each stone was a glass bottle with the name(s) of the Godfathers (sponsors of the church), in it a handful of soil from Armenia. The stones were washed with water, wine from Ararat winery in Armenia, and Holy Oil (Muron). The blessing of the stones occurred on September 26, 1946. The total cost of rebuilding the new church was $44,671.56.

The architect for the new church was Levon Kandourajian. (Figure 4.2 and 4.3) Kandourajian also designed the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church in Fresno, which bears resemblance to the Church in Yettem. (Figure 4.4) In addition, he also designed the Yettem School. In the 1920s, he changed his name to Lawrence K. Cone. Cone was predominantly a residential architect who designed modest bungalows for immigrants in Fresno, including Armenians, Russians, Assyrians, and

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169 Kalfayan, Yettem, 11.
170 History of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church, 1911-1976 (Yettem, CA: St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church of Yettem, 1977), 54-56.
172 In Armenian-English translations, there are often differences in spelling. Both Condradjian and Kandourajian are spellings that were used in texts about him. His Anglicised name was Lawrence Karekin Condrajian. He later changed his name to Cone in the mid-1920s. From this point on I will refer to him as Lawrence Cone.
Italians. Most of his residential properties do not exist, and the Yettem school he designed was torn down. However, examples such as St. Mary’s Apostolic Church are some of the few remaining examples of his work that must be preserved to demonstrate his importance as a figure in Armenian-American history. Furthermore, the church is the anchor of the community. It preserves cultural and religious traditions, has space for educational purposes, a banquet hall, and a library.

Figure 4.2: St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church. Photo by author.
Figure 4.3: St. Mary’s Armenian Apostolic Church, 2021. View facing east. Photo by author.

Figure 4.4: Left: Lawrence K. Cone, architect of St. Mary’s Apostolic Church. Right: Architectural drawing for Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church. Source: The Fresno Bee.
**Presbyterian Church**

On September 10, 1910, the Armenian Presbyterian community purchased land to build their own church. The articles of incorporation for the Presbyterian Church were filed in September 1911. The trustees were Melkon S. Jenanyan, M.M. Philips, E. G. Meldonian, B. Yeramian, and Samuel Chevidzian. The cornerstone of the Armenian Presbyterian Church was laid on May 12, 1911 and the building was completed in 1912. The original building was a two-story stone building, where the second floor was for worship and the bottom floor was for religious and social meetings, including the Women’s Society, Sunday Schools, and the Young People’s meetings.

The first reverend of the Presbyterian Church was Reverend Melkon Jenanyan. The Presbyterian Church’s Sunday School hosted picnics and other social and fundraising events. In 1923, a new church organization was formed, known as the Calvary Presbyterian church of Yettem. Twenty-four of the former members of the Presbyterian church formed the new church and thirty-four charter members were accepted upon its establishment. Unfortunately, the Presbyterian Church of Yettem also succumbed to a fire in 1955, similar to the fate of St. Mary’s Apostolic Church. The new church, which still stands today, was built in 1956. (Figure 4.5 and 4.6) The old bell from the first Presbyterian church was one of the few pieces of the old Presbyterian Church that was saved. In 1997, the Bell from the Presbyterian Church was donated to St. Mary’s Apostolic Church. It is currently on display near St. Mary, situated to the west of the Church. (Figures 4.7 and 4.8).

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173 “Armenian Church Formed at Yettem,” *Tulare County Times*, September 14, 1911.
174 Kalfayan, *Yettem Memorial*, 63.
175 “Yettem Organizes a New Church at Recent Meeting,” *Visalia Times-Delta*, June 16, 1923.
Figure 4.5: Presbyterian Church of Yettem, 2021. View facing south. Photograph by author.

Figure 4.6: Presbyterian Church. Photo by author.
Figure 4.7: Bell from the Presbyterian Church, view facing west. Photo by author.
Education

The Yettem Grammar School

The Churchill School house was built in December of 1887.\textsuperscript{176} It was a one-room building which housed seventeen students, and Mrs. Ida Gilliam was the first teacher.\textsuperscript{177} As the population was growing quickly, a single room schoolhouse no longer sufficed. The Yettem School District’s Board of Trustees was established in August of 1912. A meeting was held on August 31, 1912 to decide whether seven bonds totaling $3,500 in

\textsuperscript{176} “Notice of Sale of Real Property,” \textit{Tulare County Times}, November 13, 1913, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{177} Menendian, “The Story of Yettem,” 3.
gold should be issued and sold to raise money to build a new school building, insure the building, and properly supply the school with furniture and other necessities. The first members of the Yettem School District’s Board of Trustees were M. S. Jenanyan, Trustee; Fred Sahroian, Trustee; and J. H. Hamalian, Trustee and Clerk.\textsuperscript{178} In October of 1912, Visalia architects Davis and Pennebaker began work on the new two-room schoolhouse with a budget of $3,000.\textsuperscript{179} By November, the Yettem School’s Board of Trustees had announced their call for bidders to work on the new schoolhouse.\textsuperscript{180} The new schoolhouse’s teacher was Mrs. Abbie Godfrey. (Figure 4.9 and 4.10)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{yettem-school.jpg}
\caption{Yettem School, 1914. Source: Tulare County Library.}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{178} “Notice of Yettem School District Bond Election,” \textit{Tulare County Times}, August 8, 1912.
\item \textsuperscript{179} “New Elk Bayou School Contract Is Leg,” \textit{Visalia Times Delta}, October 24, 1912, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{180} “Notice to Contractors,” \textit{Visalia Times-Delta}, November 19, 1912, p. 7.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Just six years later in 1921, the population had grown so much that Yettemites found it necessary to expand the school once more. They held an election on January 31, 1921 to vote on issuing and selling bonds in the amount of $14,000 to raise money to purchase lots for the school, build one or more school buildings, insure the schools, supplying the schools and general improvements to the school grounds.\textsuperscript{181} The new school's plans were drawn by architect Lawrence Cone.\textsuperscript{182} The old two-room schoolhouse was removed from the grounds and sold to accommodate the new three-room school. It opened for fall semester on Monday, September 19, 1921 with Miss Susanne Phillip as the principal, who had been the Yettem teacher for three years prior.\textsuperscript{183} The school also had its own bus for school field trips with a capacity to transport

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{181} “Notice of School Bond Election,” Tulare County Times, January 8, 1921.
\textsuperscript{182} “Notice to Contractors,” Visalia Times-Delta, May 1, 1921.
\textsuperscript{183} “Yettem School Opens Tomorrow,” Visalia Times-Delta, September 18, 1921.
\end{flushleft}
thirty students. By 1922, over twenty students in Yettem grammar school were Armenian, and twenty-eight Armenian students attended the Visalia High School. (Figure 4.12)
School extracurriculars at this time included basketball, football, and baseball. Armenian students at the Yettem Grammar School also organized Armenian cultural heritage performances. Yettem school’s Armenian students Queen Soldorian, Lucille Menendian, Mary Kindigian, Margarite Findley, Mary Cole, Victoria Talelian, Ireta Clayton, Hesta Hardy, Elfreta McQuone, Buelah Hardy, Mildren David, Vera Thompson, and Rosie Garabedian had organized an Armenian dance with cultural garments and presented it at the 1929 May Day Festivals at Mooney Grove, which became the featured event of the festivities.186 The schoolhouse evolved slightly in the 1930s and

1940s. Some lumber was stolen from the school in 1934, and a basement explosion in 1946 caused $750 worth of interior damages to the schoolyard. Through the 1950s, Isabelle Menendian, one of the members of Yettem’s pioneering families, was a teacher at the school, and in 1954, she became the principal.\(^{187}\) In 1959, the school once again expanded with a $42,000 bond for a two-classroom addition, which was serving 90 students by then.\(^{188}\) In 1965, the Yettem School District was absorbed into the Orosi Unified School District, along with Orosi, Cutler, Lovell, and Sierra Joint.\(^{189}\) In 1983, arsonists set fire to the Yettem Elementary School, resulting in $175,000 worth of damages and hundreds of books and school materials destroyed. Presently, the old schoolhouse has been demolished. (Figure 4.13) The Yettem continuation high school closed down in 2014. The Yettem Learning Center, which opened in 1980, is the only educational institution that remains intact in Yettem. (Figure 4.14)


Figure 4.13: Yettem School, 2021. Photo by author.

Figure 4.14: Yettem Learning Center, 2021. Photo by author.
Diaspora Education: AGBU, Armenian School, and Sunday School

Although farming was the primary interest when Armenians settled upon the land, Reverend Jenanyan also had a dream of establishing an Armenian school. He had hoped that the establishment of an Armenian school would draw in more Armenians as there was a potential to retain the Armenian language and culture in the Diaspora. After the Genocide, there was a concern that the Armenian language would be forgotten, contributing to the erasure of Armenian culture in the Diaspora. This concern was widespread after the Genocide, and many Diaspora Armenian communities attempted to preserve Armenian heritage by establishing a unified Armenian School system.

Since Genocide refugees had arrived from different parts of the Ottoman Empire, they often spoke different dialects, wore regional traditional Armenian clothes, and ate regional foods. Chomaklou’s dialect was unique, for instance, but very few, if any, speak the dialect today. Some Armenians who were just arriving from the Ottoman Empire spoke only Turkish and had nearly forgotten the language, and Armenians who were already settled were primarily speaking English out of necessity. The issue of language is quite complex. In most families that were just arriving to the United States, Turkish and Armenian were spoken equally, as they used both languages to communicate amongst each other and with their neighbors in the Ottoman Empire. Some Turkish speaking Armenians stated they only forgot the language because “if they or their parents have forgotten Armenian, it was because if they spoke Armenian the Turks

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192 Ani Mnatsakanyan, Interview with Mari Louise Menendian, April 20, 2021.
would cut out their tongues." This trauma trickled into Diaspora communities; there was a concern that the Armenian language was at risk of erasure if not preserved. On the other hand, many Armenians continued to speak both Turkish and Armenian in Yettem without any issues, since they were both considered their native languages.

To maintain and preserve Armenian culture groups such as the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the Chomaklou Compatriotic Society, the Church, the Armenian Relief Society, and other organizations began sprouting in the Diaspora. An important part of cultural retention in the Diaspora, closely associated with the Armenian Church, was the establishment of Armenian schools, Sunday schools, and libraries. Presently, there are twenty-one full time privately-funded Armenian schools in the United States that function five days a week, predominantly located in Southern California, Massachusetts, and New York. In addition, there are various Armenian schools that also teach Armenian language and heritage classes out of their facilities on Saturdays, catering to Armenian students that attend American schools through the school week. On Sundays, Armenian churches usually host Sunday Schools to teach the bible. Depending on the community, different organizations lead the Armenian educational mission.

**The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in Tulare County**

The Armenian General Benevolent Union, in addition to the Armenian Church, is one of the most significant and largest organizations in preserving Armenian education.

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193 Kalfayan, Yettem Memorial, 75.
194 Mnatsakanyan, Interview with Marie Louise Menendian, April 20, 2021.
195 Four of the full-time Armenian schools were closed by 2018.
and heritage. The AGBU was established in Cairo, Egypt in 1906 as a non-profit organization to preserve and promote the Armenian Heritage, as well as help support the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire at the onset of the First World War. AGBU helped Ottoman Armenians receive seeds, establish schools and orphanages, and other necessities in the Ottoman Empire. By 1914, the AGBU had 142 branches across the globe.

The Tulare County Branch of the AGBU was established in 1911 and had four branches: Yettem, Tulare, Dinuba, and Visalia. The Yettem branch was established July 17, 1911. The Tulare County Branch of the Junior League was organized in Cutler Park on June 12, 1932. Elected officers were Sarkis Besoyian, president; Jack Peloian, vice president; Zabelle Menendian, secretary; Aram Iskenderian, assistant secretary; and Alice Koobatian, treasurer. With the establishment of the AGBU came the establishment of the Junior League, where young Armenians had the opportunity to host social functions and outings such as a Halloween Party, Armenian Plays, camping trips to Sequoia National Park, and "Kef" Night (Armenian party night). Armenian party nights often involved folk dancing, a shish kebab dinner, traditional museum, and more. The proceeds from the ticket sales went to charity, scholarships, and educational and cultural projects undertaken by the organization.

The first meetings were held in members’ homes, but later moved to the social hall of the Armenian Presbytarian Church. The branch also began publishing their own newsletters in 1939. Since membership decreased overtime, the Junior League evolved into the Intermediate League, and continued to organize and host the more popular

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197 Kalfayan, Yettem, 15.
198 Dinuba Sentinel, November 6, 1975, p. 3.
events. Many of the cultural preservation practices, including the Armenian school and Sunday schools, were the responsibility of the AGBU. The Junior League also organized annual plays. The plays were not hosted in Yettem; they were generally set in Visalia or the Orosi High School Auditorium. (Figure 4.15 and 4.16) The plays performed by Yettem youth were usually written by the great Armenian satirists and playwrights of the Ottoman Empire.

Figure 4.15: Charsheli Artin Agha (Mean Artin Agha), AGBU Playbook, 1938. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menendian.
Figure 4.16: Charshell Artin Agha Cast, 1938. Source: Courtesy of Mari Louise Menendian.
Top Row: George Zarounian, (unknown), Nishan Majarian, Armen Menendian, Simon Simonian, (unknown), Vasken Sadoian.
Seated: (unknown), Simon Kashian, (unknown), Clara Simonian, Jack Peloian, Lucinne Menendian, Harry Marashlian, Vernon Zobian.

Armenian School and Sunday School

The non-denominational Sunday School was founded in 1909, according to Mrs. Marian Pilbosian. The first Sunday School teachers were American preachers, who taught the children the Bible in English. Mrs. Pilbosian taught the Bible in Armenian to the girls, and Mr. Hamalian, the postmaster of Yettem, taught the boys.

The Armenian School was established in St. Mary’s Apostolic Church in 1912, as documented by Hovhannnes Nazaretian, who was in charge of the school until 1917.
His wife continued his work until 1923. For the first thirty-five years, Armenian education was sparse.\textsuperscript{199}

Revered Kalfayan recalled that the early Armenian schools were inadequate to the task. Armenian and Sunday school were only taught on the weekend, usually for a few hours per day, and only for six months at a time. Initially, Armenian and Sunday school teachers taught without pay. The Women’s Society, which has been active in Yettem since 1914, was also instrumental in the Armenian education in Yettem.

Language classes assured that one part of the Armenian-American students’ hyphenated heritage would not be forgotten. Interest in Armenian language classes increased after World War II, when Armenian-Americans went overseas during the war and returned to the States with a newfound interest in learning the language.\textsuperscript{200} The Armenian classes were taught for two hours on Saturday, and included reading, writing, and conversational lessons. Students also learned Armenian poems, folk songs, and prayers from the Armenian liturgy.

By 1932, there were three Armenian schools in the region which were under the supervision of the Women’s Society and Trustees. The Tulare School was established in 1931, and Goshen’s school was established sometime prior to the Tulare Armenian School, but after the Yettem School. By the 1930s, the Armenian teachers of the Yettem and Goshen schools were paid, though little, as opposed to the Tulare instructor who was not paid yet.

Mrs. Maritza Chakmakjian, wife of the Presbyterian Church pastor Revered Hagop Abraham Chakmakjian of Yettem, also taught Armenian language classes

\textsuperscript{199} Kalfayan. \textit{Yettem}, 18.
through the 1960s. (Figure 4.17) Mrs. Chakmakjian was born in Kharpoot, Turkey in
around 1902-1903.\textsuperscript{201} She received her education at the Euphrates College and taught
at an orphanage for the blind in the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{202} After the Genocide, she
migrated to Syria.\textsuperscript{203} She also taught at the Near East Relief Orphanage at Ghazir,
Lebanon, the Danish Bird’s Nest Orphanage of Sidon, and the Sidon Refugee Schools
of Syria and in churches. Mrs. Chakmakjian stated,

\begin{quote}
Because language becomes the tool that binds the present with the past, the
Armenian language has been one of the few factors (with church and family) that
has been instrumental in preserving the identity of the Armenian people
throughout its almost 3,000 years of history.\textsuperscript{204}
\end{quote}

In addition to learning language and history, the students of both church’s schools often
hosted cultural events, dances, performed plays, and hosted picnics.\textsuperscript{205}

Many Yettemites learned the Armenian language through these classes. Classes
are currently halted because the Church is searching for an Armenian language teacher
and the pandemic has significantly stunted many activities for all communities.
However, there is the desire within the community to restart Armenian and Sunday
School classes at the Church.

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\textsuperscript{205} “Yettem,” \textit{The Fresno Bee}, June 20, 1938.
\end{flushleft}
Community and Culture

The Church is very active to this day and continues the tradition of Armenian celebrations and festivities that are tied with the church. For some time, there was uncertainty if tradition would continue in Yettem as they did not have a priest, however, the Church’s new priest has brought new energy and has revived many cultural and religious events.206 Although the COVID-19 pandemic significantly shifted the way in which Church services occur and cultural celebrations happen, the Church adjusted and found methods of continuing services. During the pandemic, Church services happened outdoors in a safe, socially-distant setting. For those who were not comfortable

206 Mnatsakanyan, Interview with Mari Louise Menendian, April 27, 2021.
attending Church in person during the Pandemic, Myron Sheklian, on behalf of St. Mary’s, actively updated their Facebook page and streamed services and celebrations through Facebook live every week. In addition, Myron took photos and documented the events, which are available on the Church’s social media pages.

**Intangible Heritage Practices**

Two notable events that are practiced by the Armenian Apostolic Church, but have roots in ancient Armenian paganism, are the Feast of Purification (*Trndez or Tearnyndarach*) and the Feast of Assumption of the Virgin Mary/Blessing of the Grapes (*Khaghogh-orhnek*). Despite the Pandemic, St. Mary’s Apostolic Church found methods of observing these practices safely following proper masking mandates and procedures.

The Feast of Purification is celebrated forty days after Jesus’s birth, usually happening on February 13-14 at the Armenian Church. After Church, a bonfire is lit, upon which a prayer is said by the Reverend. Oftentimes the event can last through the evening. In the Diaspora, although the Church lights the bonfire in the morning, some

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207 There are many other events that happen that are both religious and cultural. I unfortunately was unable to make it to the 110 anniversary celebration of the founding of Yetem on July 18, 2021 due to limitations of the pandemic. This section covers two significant Church practices that I had the pleasure of experiencing in person.

208 *Trndez* literally means “the Lord is With You,” and *Tearnyndarach* translates as “to come to meet the Lord.” *Khaghogh-orhnek* literally translates as “blessing of the grapes.” Prior to adopting Christianity in 301 AD, Armenians were sun-worshipping pagans. Many Armenian Church observances have roots in Armenian pagan practices. *Trndez* is associated with the coming of spring and fertility. It incorporates elements of fire, which have roots in Zoroastrian. *Khaghogh-orhnek* also has roots in Armenian paganism. It is celebrated during *Navasard* (New Year) from August 11 to September 9, which is when Armenians celebrated the New Year prior to adopting Christianity. The grape blessing was a celebration of earth’s bounty and giving thanks to the gods that provided the harvest for the year. *Navasard* is a cultural tradition that is still celebrated in Armenia and in the Diaspora with olympic-like sports competitions for youth, concerts, festivities, and Church activities. My personal favorite that is practiced predominantly in Armenia is *Vartavar*, a country-wide water fight. In Pagan times, this was done to celebrate the goddess of water Astghik, who symbolized beauty, love, fertility. *Vartavar* is not generally practiced in the Diaspora as wide-spread and under the organization of the Church as other observances, but some kids and adults still indulge in the festivities in smaller groups.
families continue the celebration in the evening by burning another bonfire at their homes. *Trndez* is also considered a celebration of young love, marriage, and engagements. In the evening, young couples hold hands and jump over the fire together (or go around it) to symbolize their burning love for one another and to ward off bad energy as they join hands in matrimony. Although it is generally practiced by couples, everyone tends to join in on the festivity. Event-goers also sing folk songs and dance around the fire. In the practice observed by the Armenian Christian church, the fire symbolizes the Lord’s love and warmth for his followers. A candle is lit from the blessed fire and people take home the blessed Church candle. Finally, a bountiful feast is set and attendees enjoy a spread of traditional Armenian foods, fruits, and nuts. St. Mary’s Apostolic Church observed the practice this year and live-streamed it for the public’s enjoyment. (Figure 4.18) In addition, rather than hosting a feast in person, the church prepared takeout lunch boxes so that members can either enjoy with their family units in the church’s yard or at home. (Figure 4.19)
Figure 4.18: Tróndež at St. Mary’s Apostolic Church, 2021. Photo by author.
The Feast of Assumption of the Virgin Mary/Blessing of the Grapes is a tradition that usually happens the second week of August. (Figure 4.20 and 4.21) Since Pagan times, the grape has held spiritual and symbolic meaning. It was said that one should not eat the new bounty until the grapes are harvested and blessed first. In the context of the Armenian Church and Christianity, the grape is also significant because Jesus blessed the wine as a symbol of his blood. Since wine comes from grapes, the grapes also represent Jesus Christ. Reverend Father Mashdots Keshishian, who assumed his role as Parish Priest in Yettem on September 13, 2020, discussed the significance of the grape for the community and contextualized the history of the blessing of the
grapes. According to the Reverend, it is said that the first thing that Noah did when he stepped off the Ark and onto the foothills of Mount Ararat was plant grape vines. After the sermon, the priest blessed the grapes and invited everyone to take home as many grapes from this year’s blessed harvest as they would like.

After Church, Yettemites had organized a bake sale and proceeds were donated to the church. The bake sale is also symbolic of the year’s beautiful harvest. The grapes that were blessed were all donated by local farmers, a tradition upheld in Yettem since its founding. The items in the bake sale included peaches, nectarines, lush tomatoes, and herbs from people’s gardens, delicious homemade jams, and freshly baked Armenian sweets and breads. The Church banquet occurred right after the bake sale, where each attendee was served a traditional dish of Armenian rice pilaf, chicken kebabs, and vegetables. The entire event, including the decorations, food, and tables, were organized by the Yettem community. The sense of unity and community in Yettem is strong, and everyone works together to ensure the successful execution of cultural events and practices.
Figure 4.20: Feast of Assumption/Blessing of the Grapes, August 15, 2021. Source: Courtesy of Myron Sheklian.
Travel and Pilgrimage as an act of Heritage

In Resmaa Menakem’s book *My Grandmother’s Hands*, the author discusses intergenerational trauma and how, when the trauma is continued from generation to generation, it evolves into *historical* trauma. Oftentimes, when trauma is endured from generation to generation and gets passed on, it begins to look like culture. He argues that it isn’t culture, but rather, traumatic retention that has lost its context overtime. He states, “Traumatic retentions can have a profound effect on what we do, think, feel, believe, experience, and find meaningful.”²⁰⁹

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²⁰⁹ *Body to Body, Generation to Generation*, p 32-33.
Travel, migration, and the act of pilgrimage have become ingrained within the Armenian experience. The association of place and belonging is significant to the community. After being uprooted and displaced countless times, the only permanent aspect of Armenian heritage existed through our bodies and practices of intangible heritage.

One of the most significant aspects of the Armenian Genocide were the Deportation Routes through the Der Eir-Zor desert in Syria that Armenians were forced to take by the Ottoman government in 1915. Those that survived took multiple migratory patterns, arriving at various destinations before finally settling somewhere in the Diaspora. Similarly, after the Soviet Union began allowing repatriation after the Second World War, many displaced Armenians who had settled in the Diaspora travelled to Soviet Armenia. Migration and uprooting during the Soviet Union occurred often as people tried to flee the harsh conditions and Soviet oppression. Another mass immigration wave occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when many families fled the country in the early 1990s in search of better opportunities. Every era of modern Armenian history includes some aspect of migration and travel.

Presently, Diaspora Armenians travel to Armenia or other Diaspora communities where their families arrived after the Genocide. Although many Armenians fear traveling to their ancestral towns in Turkey, some make the journey in small, organized tour groups. This has become nearly a pilgrimage, during which Armenian individuals are able to reconnect with their ancestors, and thread together familial histories that have been defined by migration. Migration has shaped the experience of being an Armenian. What asked about nationality in the Armenian Diaspora, Armenians always hyphenate
and include where their ancestors were from before the Genocide, where they settled after, and where they are now. It does not suffice to say that one is simply an “Armenian-American.” Armenian identity can be as multidimensional as being “Armenian, with ancestral roots in Adana, family in Bourj Hammoud, currently in Los Angeles,” even if the individual has not set foot in any of the places mentioned, location and place are ingrained in our identity because it is a part of what has shaped that individuals experience, cultural practices, and traditions. In the case of Yettem, one is not simply an Armenian-American, there is pride - and rightfully so - in recognizing that one is an Armenian with Chomaklou roots from Yettem. Though Armenian mobility has roots in trauma, the recognition of places and the pilgrimage to those places can be a coping mechanism in retaining identity once at risk of erasure, and preserving Armenian Diaspora culture that is constantly evolving with every new generation. The act of pilgrimage and migration, therefore, is a significant, yet often unspoken, act of intangible heritage that Armenians practice.

Many Yettemites no longer live in Yettem. Regardless, they travel to the Church for events, celebrations, and funerals from Visalia, Fresno, Los Angeles, and other towns. The act of traveling to Yettem is almost like a pilgrimage, just as traveling to Historic Armenian towns in present-day Turkey, or visiting Echmiadzin in Armenia is. Yettem is a significant site in California’s Armenian Diaspora history. Although travel and migration within Armenian history has roots in historical trauma, returning to familial and bountiful agrarian lands reclaims that ancestral trauma of forced migration and can be a source of healing and power.
Conclusion

Yettem was founded from the desire to live free of persecution, to regain a sense of belonging, and to have the opportunity to reconstruct an idyllic Armenian agrarian community in the Diaspora. Yettem was not closed off from its surrounding neighbors or other ethnicities, but it provided opportunities to practice economic, agrarian, and cultural heritage in the Diaspora and preserve a specific way of life that would have been eradicated in the city. Few original structures currently exist in Yettem, but the community still practices Armenian traditions, and continues to do so despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.
For Armenians as with many other cultures, nature, native lands, and their heritage are all interwoven. Although the Historic Armenians Highlands are no longer inhabited and barely accessed by Armenian people, pre-Genocide Armenian pastoral life lives through memory, song, art, and literature.

Transplanted heritage like that of Armenians and other displaced communities exists in a constant limbo; between multiple geographic points, locality and globality,
permanence and temporality. People want to experience the comfort of belonging to a place. For uprooted communities, this may be a utopian myth.

The intangible heritage of creative outlets for Armenian peasants working on the fields often resulted in arts, music, and poetry about the highlands. Most songs mention a farm, a mountain, or the lakes. That adoration for the landscape manifested through tangible means as Armenian farmers, who were uprooted from their agrarian lifestyle in Eastern Provinces, restructured their lives in the West around the land first as a form of economic sustainability and secondly, for a sense of connection to their homelands.

William Saroyan, a Fresno-born Armenian descendant of Genocide survivors from the Bitlis region east of Lake Van, wrote extensively of the Armenian situation and often made references to the Armenian cultural landscape under Ottoman Rule. The most quoted excerpt from his short story “The Armenian and the Armenian,” states:

I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose history is ended, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, whose literature is unread, whose music is unheard, whose prayers are no longer uttered...Burn their houses and their churches. See if they will not live again. See if they will not laugh again...See if you can stop them from mocking the big ideas of the world, you sons of bitches, a couple of Armenians talking in the world, go ahead and try to destroy them.  

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To discern the depth of Saroyan’s words requires a restructuring of our geospatial grasp of global heritages and possibly in this case, definitions of indigenous and native landscape architecture. Because even though geographical location is significant in most cases, the overwhelming pressure of it puts displaced and transplanted communities in a precarious position; the complexities of transplanted heritage stand to

challenge our traditional understandings of the aforementioned terms.

When writing this thesis, I wanted to focus on transplanted heritage and cultures of resilience after traumatic experiences. Yettem was founded by a group of hardworking Armenians with a dream to live a life free of persecution, comfort, and have the opportunity to own their own land without the risk of being uprooted. The story of Yettem does not begin with its founding in the Central Valley in 1901. Rather, the story of Yettem, similar to the story of countless other Diaspora communities scattered around the globe, begins in the homeland, when the roots of oppression and persecution were planted. The migration west was a method of physical survival, but the choice in resettling in the Central Valley - beyond the economic implications - was also a rekindling and cultivation of landscapes of Armenian heritage. This was an Eden born out of necessity, cultivated by labor, and flourished through resilience.

Further Research and Questions

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, there were many things that I would have liked this thesis to achieve but did not have the means to. Many resources were unavailable at the time of my research and prolonged wait times for other resources proved to be a challenge. University of California, Santa Barbara, Riverside, Merced, as well as California State University of Fresno have archives of Armenian history and studies that are worthwhile to look into for further in-depth research that was stunted due to the very sudden changes caused by the pandemic.

Therefore, this thesis evolved into a rather cursory overview of the roots of Yettem and identification of significant sites of Armenian life in Yettem. I am thankful for the
opportunities I had to meet, interview, and mingle with Yettemites despite the challenges faced during the pandemic. Without the help of the community, I would not have had access to some of the primary resources used in this thesis. I hope to continue my friendship with the community and further learn about this unique and rich heritage.

My trips to Yettem were one day trips, and I was not able to spend more time in the region due to limitations caused by the pandemic. It would be worthwhile to spend a longer period of time in the area and conduct analysis of the soils, fields, and see if there are any agrarian infrastructural sites that are extant and bring the historic roots of farming in Yettem to the forefront. Some packinghouses that were once established and used by Armenians are still extant, but due to pandemic restrictions I was not able to access property deeds and other pertinent information to draw cohesive conclusions regarding the heritage and preservation of the packinghouses.

Yettemites have done an excellent job of documenting their own histories, family narratives, and community events. There are Armenian methods of cultivation and fruits that were grown in Armenia that were brought over to the United States and grown in Yettem that I was unable to fully research and write about. The churches and educational and cultural heritages all deserve their own spotlight as well. Yettem’s community actively worked on maintaining sociocultural aspects of physical and transplanted heritage through farming, familial life, and cultural groups and events. Yet they were in no way isolated from other groups in the Central Valley; there was unity and cross-cultural engagement through county wide events, festivals, and competitions. From my own interviews with Yettemites, I was humbled by the blatant differences between my experience as a Diaspora Los Angeles Armenian and that of Armenians
who arrived nearly a century ago for circumstances vastly different than my own family.

The world of transplanted heritage is just as active and spirited as the individuals that are a part of it. Transplanted heritage is not stagnant; it will always grow and evolve with each community and with each generation within that community. Communities that experience transplanted heritage often face struggles that are unique. The study of Yettem as one of the earliest Armenian communities helps understand the complex social and cultural processes of migration, resettlement, and cultural retention of communities that experienced trauma. One of the key questions regarding transplanted heritage that arose in this thesis, which is also worthy of exploring in other transplanted communities, is the conscious and subconscious decision-making processes on which aspects of heritage are retained as they were practiced, adapted to their new environments, or sacrificed for the sake of protecting one’s identity in a new land. The psychological aspects of community-driven heritage are also important to explore to understand how culture mutates through the decisions made.

In addition, there are some aspects of heritage in Yettem that are uniquely shaped by their ancestors’ journey to the region, as well as the environment of the Central Valley. For instance, experiencing the Blessing of the Grapes in Yettem with locally grown grapes is vastly different from a Blessing of the Grapes that may occur in an urban or suburban environment. While the practice is the same, the experience is vastly different. Comparative studies between different Diaspora communities within the same culture and between different groups can help understand the psychological and environmental factors that go into the preservation of intangible heritage practices.
Lastly, because the Armenian Diaspora community is not a singular homogenous entity, it is important to identify and conduct comparative research between different waves of Armenian immigrants and the geographic and cultural differences between different Diaspora communities. The conditions endured, the migration patterns taken, and the conditions that drove Armenians to their final settling places in the Diaspora are so vastly unique that a single study of Diaspora Culture will not do justice to the experiences of each group. Documenting the transmutations of cultural heritage as a result of uprooting and migration is a question worthy of pursuing.

Finally, I am in awe of each and every family in Yettem. I hope to continue my research on Diaspora heritage long after my graduate career, and continue to learn and write about transplanted heritage. Reverend Kalfayan and his family have such a wealth of knowledge that even an entire thesis will not suffice on discussing his contributions to the Armenian community and the Diaspora. In the original Armenian language book of Yettemagan Hooshardzan, Reverend Kalfayan wrote the following words, which did not make it to the English translation. Yet, if there’s any one clear and concise way to understand the struggle of a Diaspora, it is that quote. And it is only appropriate for Reverend Kalfayan to have the final word.

“We must have one goal - to secure a corner in our Motherland to rest our tortured heads. This is the legacy of our dead, this must be the purpose of the living.”

- Reverend Garabed Kalfayan
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“Real Estate Transfers Filed for Record at the County Recorder’s Office.” *Visalia Times-Delta*, December 23, 1903.

“Real Estate Transfers Filed for Record at the County Recorder’s Office.” *Visalia Times-Delta*, December 9, 1903.

“Real Estate Transfers Filed for Record at the County Recorder’s Office.” *Visalia Times-Delta*, January 11, 1903.

“Real Estate Transfers Filed for Record at the County Recorder’s Office.” *Visalia Times-Delta*, November 11, 1903.

“Real Estate Transfers Filed for Record at the County Recorder’s Office.” *Visalia Times-Delta*, September 12, 1904.

“Real Estate Transfers Filed for Record at the County Recorder’s Office.” *Visalia Times-Delta*, September 21, 1904.


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Appendix A: Deed Transfers, 1903-1911

This a compilation of the earliest available deed transfers for the founding of Yettem from 1903-1911. It is not a complete list. It does not cover deed transfers after 1907. Also, some deeds are not publicly available due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, and early transactions might not be documented with complete accuracy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grantor</th>
<th>Grantee</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Property Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento Bank</td>
<td>Nazaret Spenchian et al.</td>
<td>January 8, 1903</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td>East half of southeast quarter of section 28-16-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Whitendale</td>
<td>H. S. Jenanyan</td>
<td>November 9, 1903</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>Part of lots 138 and 136, Brundage’s Addition to Farmersville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Whitendale</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan et al</td>
<td>November 9, 1903</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>W half of section 33-16-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento Bank</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td>November 25, 1903</td>
<td>$1,600</td>
<td>Southeast quarter of southwest quarter and east half of southwest quarter of section 28; north half of northwest quarter of northeast quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento Bank</td>
<td>Nazaret Spenchian</td>
<td>December 9, 1903</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>North half of northeast quarter of northeast quarter of section 33-16-25; reserving 20 feet off north boundary for road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances E. Yoakum</td>
<td>Krekor Arslanian</td>
<td>December 11, 1903</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>Southeast quarter of northwest quarter and northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quarter of Southwest Quarter of Section 35-16-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Yoakum et</td>
<td>Krekor Arslanian</td>
<td>December 11,</td>
<td>Strip 6 feet wide along east side of southeast quarter of northwest quarter of northeast quarter of southwest quarter of section 35-16-25, for ditch.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ux</td>
<td></td>
<td>1903</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazaret</td>
<td>Elijah G. Melidonian et ux</td>
<td>December 21, 1903</td>
<td>North half of north half northwest quarter of section 35-16-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spenchian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar R. Cross</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td>March 29, 1904</td>
<td>With half of se quar of section 33-16-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et ux.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento</td>
<td>Nazaret</td>
<td>June 6, 1904</td>
<td>Northeast quarter of southwest quarter and 5 acres of 27; ne quarter of 34-16-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Spenchian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. J. Jenanyan</td>
<td>Nahabed</td>
<td>August 1, 1904</td>
<td>South half of northeast quarter of southwest quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Davidian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td>Hagop Fereshotian et al.</td>
<td>March 1, 1904</td>
<td>North half of northwest quarter of southwest quarter; southwest quarter of southwest quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et al.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td>Dr. P. M. Donigian</td>
<td>March 1, 1904</td>
<td>Southeast quarter of southwest quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et. al</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td>Jacob Hamalian</td>
<td>April 15, 1905</td>
<td>South half of northwest quarter of southeast quarter and east half of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Details</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 15, 1905</td>
<td>West half of southwest quarter of southeast quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1, 1905</td>
<td>West half and west half of east half of the northeast half of northeast quarter of the northeast quarter of section 4-17-25</td>
<td>$1,024.50</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan, Peter A. Moosoolian et al.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1, 1905</td>
<td>East half of east half of the northeast quarter of the northeast quarter of section 4-17-25</td>
<td>$341.50</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan, Megerick Thomansian et al.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 21, 1906</td>
<td>Se qr of sw qr of section 28-16-25</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan, Henry Eisentrager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2, 1907</td>
<td>Part of section 33-16-25</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>E. Kendigian, H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2, 1907</td>
<td>Southeast quarter of northwest quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan, Paul S. Iskiyan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 26, 1907</td>
<td>Southeast quarter of the northeast quarter and northeast quarter of the southeast quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan, H.S. Jenanyan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 29, 1907</td>
<td>South half of northeast quarter of northeast quarter of 33-16-25</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan, Abraham A. Davidian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 29, 1907</td>
<td>South half of northwest quarter of section 33-16-25</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>H.S. Jenanyan, Dickran Eskenderian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seller</td>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krekor Arslanian</td>
<td>Hagop Arslanian</td>
<td>June 5, 1907</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>Southeast quarter of northwest quarter of section 35-16-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hagop Arslanian</td>
<td>Krekor Arslanian</td>
<td>June 5, 1907</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>Southwest quarter of southwest quarter of section 35-16-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hagop Arslanian</td>
<td>John F. Adalian</td>
<td>November 30, 1911</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Part of northwest quarter of section 3-17-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hagop Arslanian</td>
<td>Hagop Kamalian</td>
<td>November 30, 1911</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Part of northwest quarter of section 3-17-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nogoghes Stephanian et ux</td>
<td>Harabed Stepanian</td>
<td>November 30, 1911</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Southwest quarter of southeast quarter of section 13, and north half of northeast quarter of section 24-19-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harabed Stepanian et ux</td>
<td>Nogoghes Stepanian</td>
<td>November 30, 1911</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>South half of southeast quarter of northeast quarter of section 29-19-23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Maps of Tulare County


211 The cropped areas that accompany each map represent the general area that Yettem is located in.
Figure B.2: Map of Tulare County, State of California, Bannister, Alfred, Britton & Rey, 1884. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division; Call Number/Physical Location: G4363.T8 1884 .B3. (http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4363t.la000049)
Figure B.3: Map showing location of Big Tree Groves in Fresno and Tulare Counties, California, United States Forest Service, 1900. List No 9892.021. David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.
(https://www.davidrumsey.com/rumsey/download.pl?image=/179/9892021.jp2 target=_blank)
Figure B.4: Tulare County, California Highway Transportation Survey, 1934. California Division of Highways. List No. 6345.076, Map courtesy of David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.