Ventura, Agriculture and Lima Beans

Lima bean bunches decorate City Hall's bronze entry gates and heraldic window shields in terra-cotta outside and in mahogany inside the Council Chambers.
Photos by Karen Moser

The House that Beans Built

Lima beans were Ventura County's chief cash crop in 1913. Fifteen "bean bouquets" in bronze, terra cotta and wood adorn the building inside and out as visual reminders that the Ventura County Courthouse was "built by Lima beans."

Agricultural scene from City Hall West (Courthouse Annex) Bronze Entry
Photo by Cynthia Thompson

Ventura County contributed a pagoda decorated in Lima beans to the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, also known as The Chicago World's Fair, marking the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World.
Photo courtesy of the Museum of Ventura County.

Lima Bean Center of the World

A Lima bean ranch nearVentura
Photo courtesy of Glenda Jackson

California was the only state to cultivate this bean native to Peru as a commercial field crop. Ventura and Santa Barbara counties grew 40,000 acres without poles and Ventura alone produced three-fourths of the world's supply: 50,000 tons equivalent to 2,000 train carloads of thirty thousand pounds each. Our unique westward-reaching ocean mesas, dry-topped but with moist subsoil, summer fogs and cool breezes with almost no rain between May planting and November harvest provided perfect growing conditions for this exacting but nitrogenous or soil-enriching vine.

Lima bean threshing
JC Brewster photo
courtesy of Glenda Jackson.

At harvest, horse-driven reapers with fish-fin-like double-toothed blades cut vines at the roots for two or three weeks of curing in the fields. Laborers raked up whole vines, loading them onto netted header wagons to feed special steam or electrically driven threshers that hulled and sacked the beans. At the Dixie Thompson Ranch, harvesters could work its threshing machine late into the night using electric arc lights.

Bonanza in Ventura

Cultivating Lima beans on the Dixie Thompson Rancho, Ventura and the world's largest Lima bean ranch.
Photo courtesy of the Museum of Ventura County.

Sea captain, rancher and hotel manager Dixie Wildes Thompson – the larger-than-life namesake of today's Thompson Boulevard – purchased in 1865 the western half of Rancho San Miguel, one of 18 original Mexican grants. His thriving 2,300-acre coastal Dixie Thompson Rancho and modern dairy extended three miles from today's Sanjon Road to the Santa Clara River to become "the largest Lima bean ranch in the world" until his death in 1903. The farm devoted 1000-1500 acres to beans but also grew corn, sugar beets, barley and pumpkins and raised hogs for market and cattle for meat to feed its 50-100 regular and seasonal workers. Two immense barns with stables sheltered 115 head of horses used for eleven six-horse plow teams and wagons.

Fifty tons of apricots drying, Ventura Avenue.
In 1874 Jacklin Willet bought 51 acres on Ventura Avenue to create what is today's Willet Ranch. The fertile Ventura River Valley yielded bean fields, apricot orchards and, in the 1920s, oil derricks.
Photo courtesy of Glenda Jackson.

City Hall Through the Years
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