

## **Sweet marriage: Manteca & Spreckels**

By Dennis Wyatt

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A sugar shortage triggered by World War I indirectly gave birth to Spreckels Sugar – a name that was synonymous with Manteca prosperity for almost 80 years.

At one time Manteca was identified by travelers on both Highway 99 as well as the 120 Bypass by both the sight and smell of Spreckels Sugar. The four 15-story sugar silos were the tallest structures around while the smell from the processing - and the use of sugar pulp to fatten cattle at the adjacent Moffat Feed Lot - created an aroma that penetrated even the thickest fog to let travelers know they were passing through Manteca.

Today, 14 years after the demise of sugar beet processing triggered by increasing air quality standards and the valley's inability to compete with lower wages in the Deep South as well as Southeast Asia shuttered the plant, there are few traces of Spreckels Sugar left.

Its namesake - the 362-acre multi-use Spreckels Park that replaced the factory site - has Manteca's only "history park" with an artistic bent that serves as a monument to the sugar company's contributions to Manteca's growth as a South County trade center during much of the 20th century.

The park created at a cost of \$250,000 by AKF Development and maintained by a private landscape maintenance district is tucked behind the Chevron Station off Spreckels Avenue. It has four pseudo sugar silos designed from over-sized culvert pipe accented with a brick base from the old factory. Plans have been put on hold due to the economy to create an adjoining two-story office structure replica of the brick warehouse complete with display cases of various mementos saved when the factory was demolished and the silos imploded.

You will also find Spreckels Sugar warehouse bricks on the entrance features to the business park as well as along the front entrance in Kelley Brothers Brewing Co. downtown. The only other trace of Spreckels Sugar can be found in the street signs of the 177-home Curran Grove neighborhood that rose out of the old Spreckels almond orchard on the southeast corner of Powers Avenue and East Yosemite. It was named after the former owner of the land that was once covered with Eucalyptus trees. That subdivision has streets named after several popular Spreckels plant managers from over the years.

In addition, the last factory office built in the 1950s now serves as the headquarters for AKF Development. It is just off Norman Drive behind the Yosemite Medical office complex.

### **How it all started with a "sweet land deal"**

Spreckels Sugar sent agricultural scouts out of their Salinas operations in search of a prime location for a second favorite to meet the demand created by the World War I sugar shortage. They needed the right property soil conditions and climate but they also needed an irrigation system capable of supplying farmers with water every eight to 10 days. Thanks to the existence of South San Joaquin Irrigation District, Manteca got a solid look.

The company had shipped 28,000 pounds of seed from Germany to Manteca prior to the war's start as it had already been looking to add additional sugar beet production acreage. The first sugar beets from the South County were tested in 1915 in the Spreckels refinery near Salinas. They showed a high percentage of sugar that averaged about 25 tons per acre earning farmers \$5.50 a ton for their first crop.

By the end of 1916, 60 farmers had 7,000 acres planted.

Spreckels had a dumping station, storage tanks, and tank house in Manteca. Spreckels Sugar decided the freight bill for sugar beet shipping was cutting too deeply into profits.

Spreckels wanted to build a plant in San Joaquin County but Manteca wasn't their first choice. Farmers started a petition on March 17, 1916 to urge Spreckels to locate in Manteca. Meanwhile, Spreckels made it clear they preferred Mossdale near Lathrop or Stockton as both sites had access to rail and water shipping.

Meetings went on for several days with representatives from various nearby communities that met with the company in Manteca's Board of Trade building. Manteca was able to get the upper hand when it offered 449 acres at a below market price just southeast of town for a plant.

The \$2 million plant opened in 1918. There were 400 men by July of that year on the payroll that paid out \$600 daily. By the end of the first season of production and processing, Spreckels Sugar by 1918 standards had paid out a staggering \$40,000 in wages.

### **Spreckels Sugar helps war effort**

Reduced acreage due to World War II triggered a temporary closure of Spreckels Sugar. The machine shop was converted to war production for the Navy while warehouses were used for naval supplies.

Spreckels Sugar opened again in 1946 and was up to full production by 1948.

Manteca joined in the 50th anniversary celebration in 1948 of the founding of the Salinas factory.

Employees received their salaries in \$2 bills to demonstrate how much revenue Spreckels contributed to the Manteca economy.

In the 1980s, Spreckels became a main supplier of liquid sugar for Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Shasta. Spreckels eventually was forced to try to find other markets when bottlers started using cheaper high fructose corn syrup. They found a niche with specialty powdered sugar for large-scale confectioners.

Spreckels spent extensive money putting in place air scrubbers to cleanse 99 percent of the pollution from its stacks to meet toughening [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control standards](#).

Off-shore subsidized sugar, even tougher air quality control rulings, a prolonged drought, combined with cheaper production costs in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas led to the demise of the Manteca plant.

### **Manteca plant closure announced Jan. 9, 1996**

The company announced it was going to pull the plug on the plant costing 100 full-time employees and 120 seasonal employees their jobs by issuing required 60-day notices on Jan. 9, 1996.

By then Spreckels had slipped from the dominant employer to rank as the fifth largest employer in Manteca once the 120 seasonal workers were tossed into the count.

The impact on Manteca's psyche was immense.

Spreckels Sugar and Manteca had literally grown up together.

Claus Spreckels started construction on the sugar beet processing plant the same year Manteca incorporated as a city.

The four sugar silos - 15 stories apiece - were the landmark for Manteca for travelers passing by on Highway 99 and Highway 120.

It was not Christmas in Manteca without the lighted tree atop the sugar silos.

Spreckels Sugar was the victim of changing times. It was the most visible closure in the downward slide of the California sugar beet industry. Spreckels had made a run at trying to stay competitive having invested millions in pollution control devices a few years earlier. But the economic reality was written on the wall.

Two years later, AKF Development imploded the concrete silos as 10,000 people looked on. It took just 10 seconds for what was once the towering symbol of Manteca's economic strength to come tumbling down in a cloud of dust.

Today, those 220 lost jobs have been replaced eight times over at companies such as Ford Motor Co., ADPS Packaging, Target, Millard Refrigeration, Dreyers and numerous other retail and industrial employers.

Developer Mike Atherton likes to point out that it was the sugar company that helped Manteca prosper in its infancy and it is helping it prosper now in the wake of its demise.