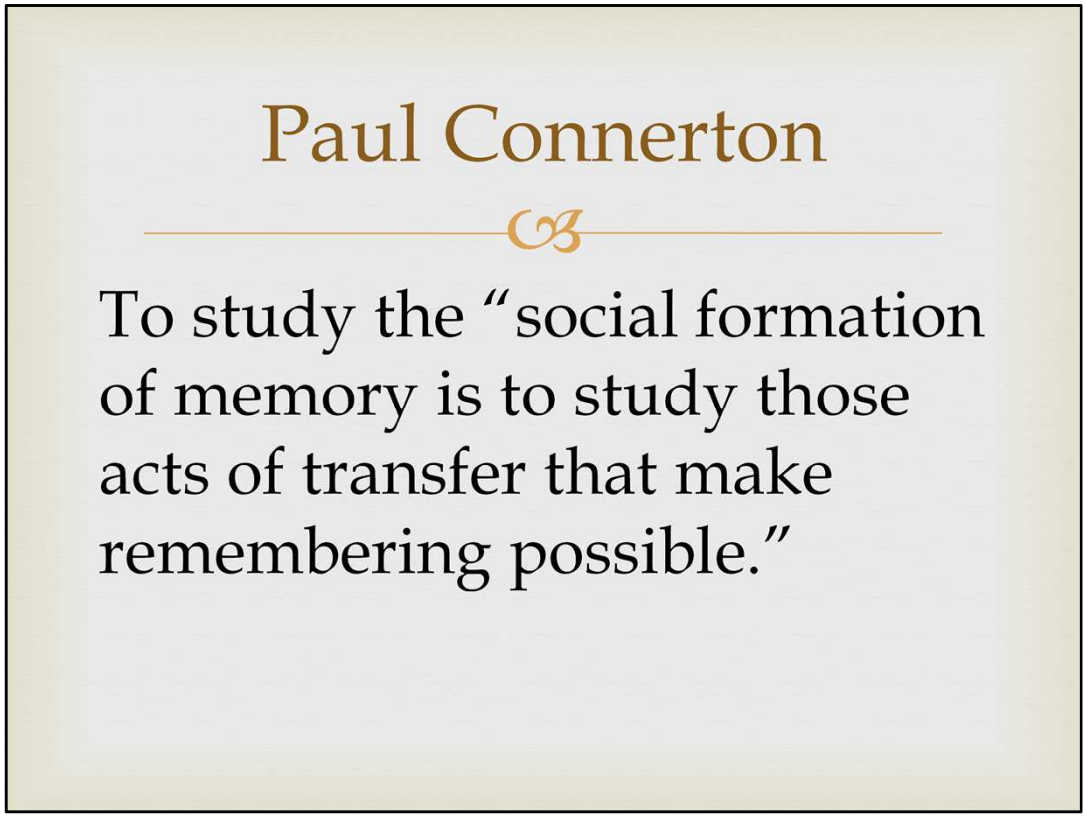
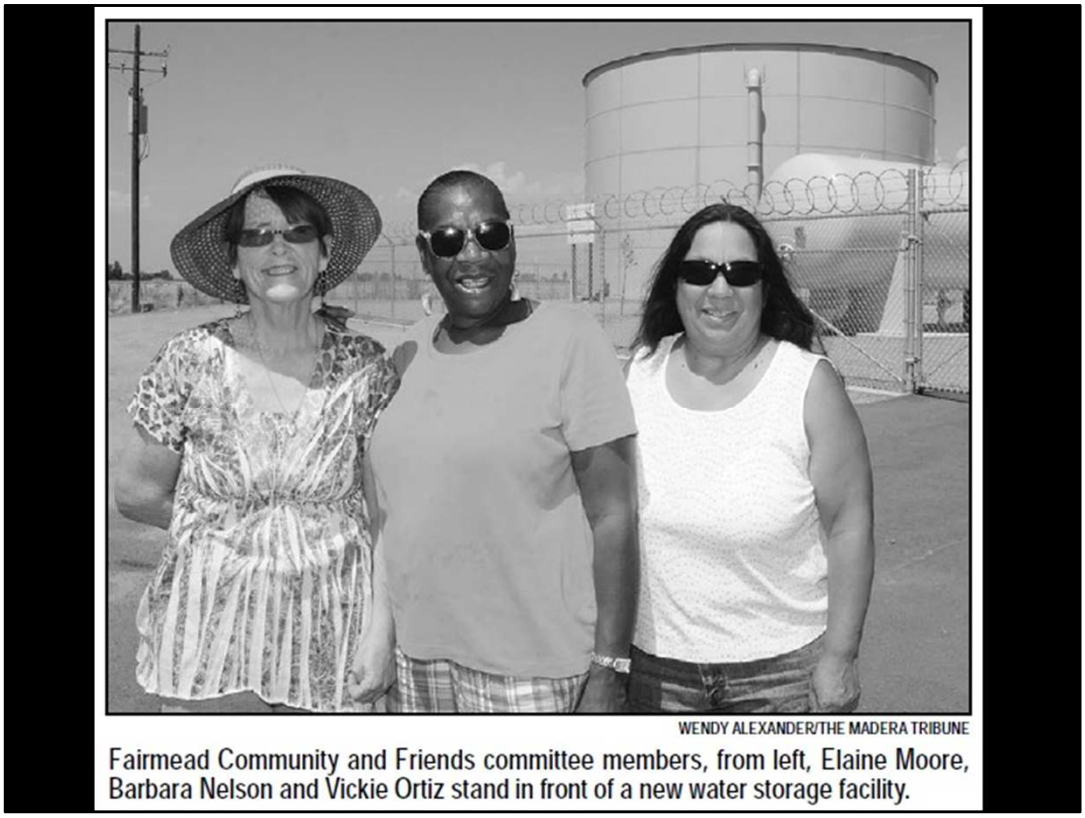
Re-Collecting the Past:

Fairmead Discovers Her History After 100 Years



Paul Connerton has suggested that to study the "social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering possible." I can think of no better example of a transfer of remembering—recollecting—through the mechanisms of public history than what occurred in the small Central California community of Fairmead.



WENDY ALEXANDER/THE MADERA TRIBUNE

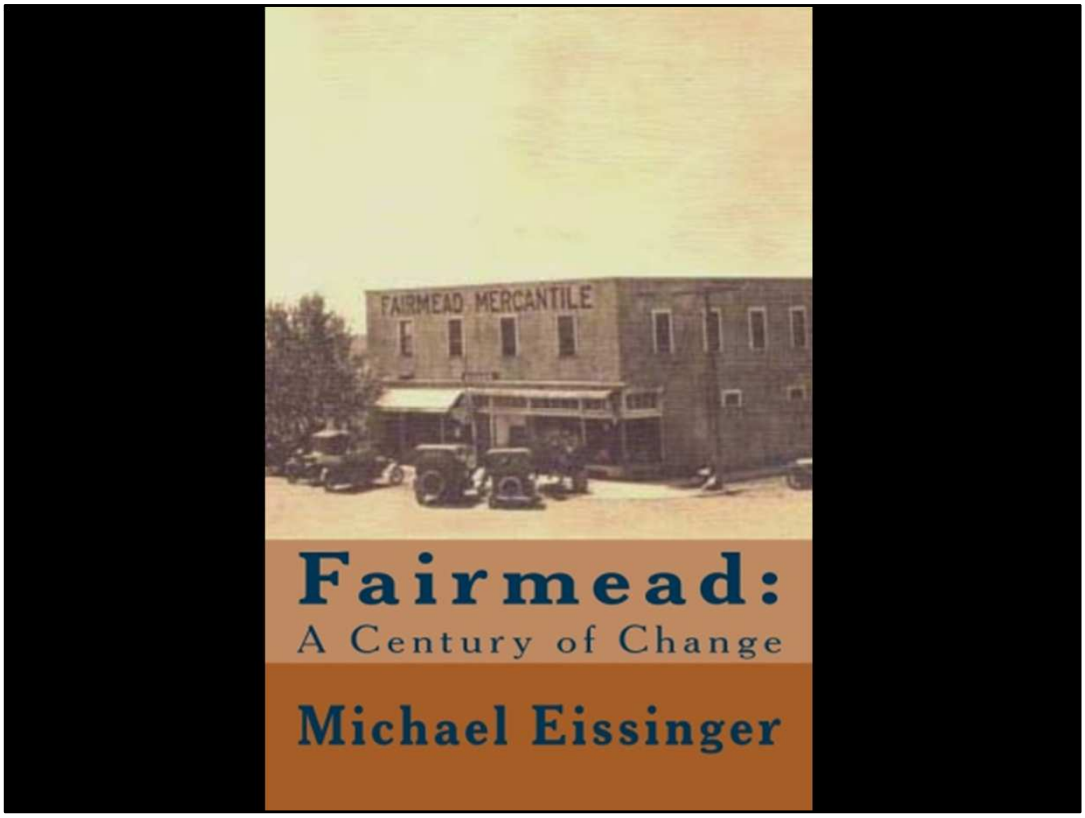
Fairmead Community and Friends committee members, from left, Elaine Moore, Barbara Nelson and Vickie Ortiz stand in front of a new water storage facility.

In 2011, Vickie Ortiz and Barbara Nelson, two Fairmead residents involved with a number of local initiatives in their small, dusty, unincorporated community that sits just off State Highway 99 wanted to draw attention to the fact that their little hometown would turn one hundred years old, the following year. They began organizing and planning, talking to anyone who would listen about their little town. They attended meetings of the County Board of Supervisors, enrolled the support of businesses in near-by communities, and sought the help of long-time, and recently arrived residents.

For several years, I have studied historically African

American-majority rural settlements. One community on my list for future examination was Fairmead. Research and teaching commitments had prevented me from doing any archival or ethnographic work in Fairmead, which, over the prior thirty years had been transitioning from majority-black to majority-Hispanic. In fact, Fairmead was one of the earliest communities I identified. Fairmead's centenary provided numerous opportunities for my on-going research. Through various contacts, I was invited to a planning meeting for Fairmead's Centenary Celebration.

The *locals* knew little of the early history of their town. They considered the part of history in which they or their families participated as less germane than the earlier history. They were interested in what I often refer to as *firsts and exceptions*; a tendency at which I often balk—especially in relation to African American History. People were more concerned about who was the first black janitor or garbage man in near-by Chowchilla than they were about those conditions that precipitated various population and economic changes over the course of the ninety-nine years that preceded that meeting.



I volunteered to write a local history book about the community of Fairmead as my way to contribute to their commemoration. Although much of my motivation was to help out with their event, I also knew that I would have to conduct the same research – archival and oral history/life story – for my own work, so this provided me with the impetus to focus my research on Fairmead for the next year (or so). Such a project benefited me as much as the local community. The committee agreed to provide the help I needed to conduct my research, including logistical assistance in setting up interviews and access to other resources.

The creation of this little book (Fairmead: A Century of

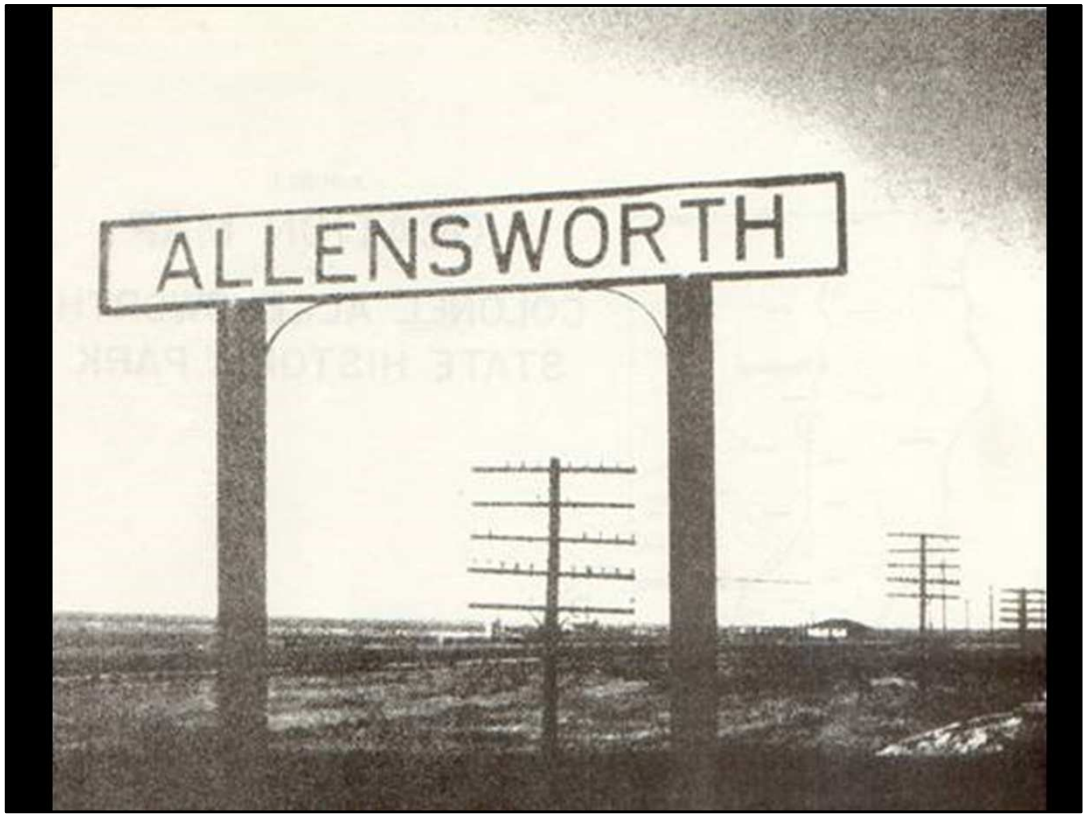
Change) filled several needs.

First, it provided me with access to the local community in ways that might not otherwise have been open to me.

Second, it serves as a focal point for public and social memory – a site of public memory. Area county libraries, as well as the libraries of most regional colleges and universities, now have copies of the book on their shelves – providing academic access to this material. It is also sold in the gift shop of the Madera County Fossil Discovery Center – the site of one of the largest finds of fossils on the West Coast.

Finally, the process of writing the book required a series of recollections, on the part of locals, to reconstruct the past. It is, of course, that third aspect which, ultimately, is the most interesting, and, I believe, the most powerful.

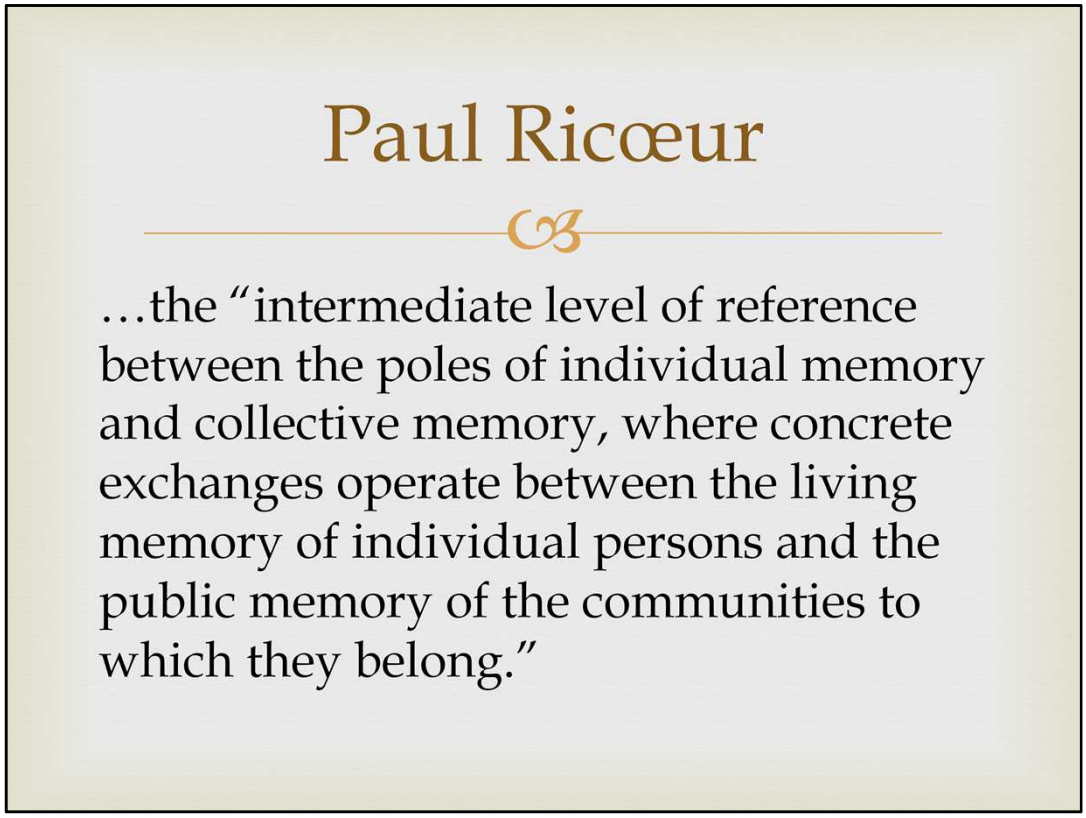
All of the historically black rural settlements that I study—including Fairmead—sit beyond the city limits, on the edge of the cotton fields, orchards, and vineyards that provided work. All of these communities also lie beyond social memory—beyond public recollection.



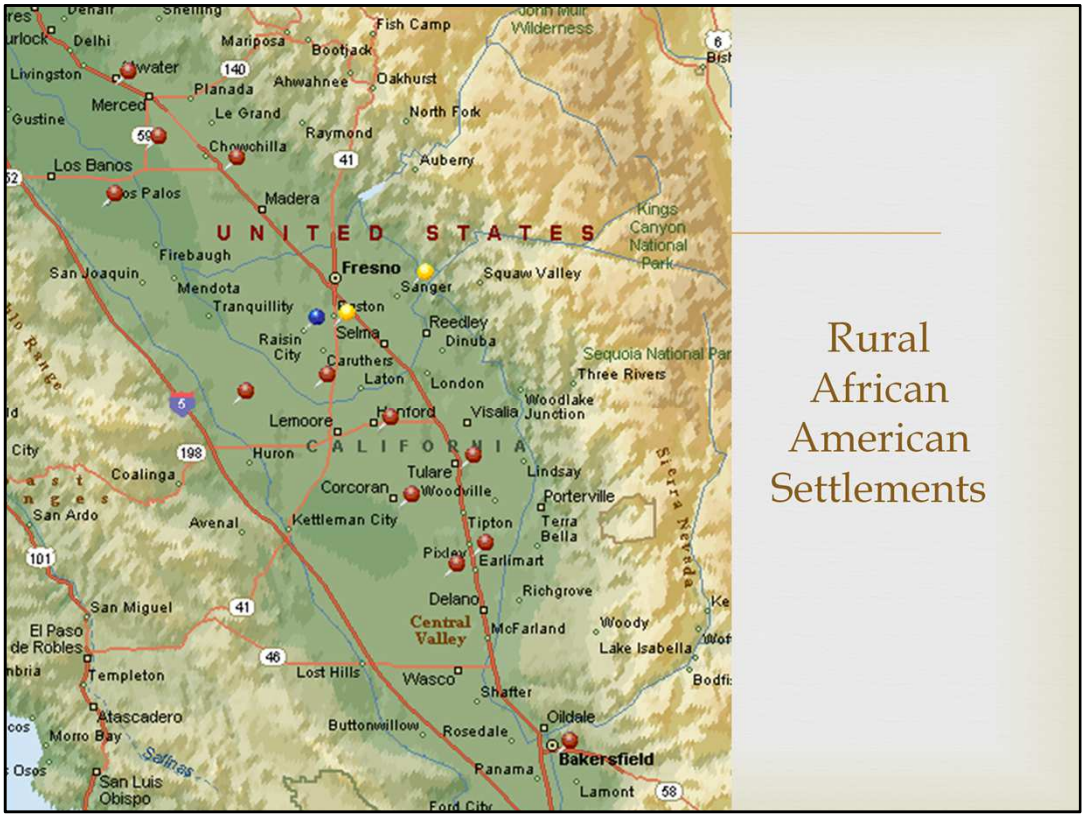
Usually, when I explain that I study Rural African American Communities, I almost universally get a reply like, “Oh, you’re doing Allensworth.” Once I more clearly describe my work, people often volunteer the name of one of these other communities, like Fairmead, Home Gardens, or Lanare.

They are likely to tell me about a friend who grew up in one of these towns, or that their father hired agricultural labor from one, or other stories from their personal, individual memory. Their own recollection of these communities is almost always secondary to the public history of

Allensworth. Public memory trumps individual remembrance. Their personal memories are, to them, less valid than public memory, so they rely on the validation of history, rather than their own experience.



Paul Ricœur described this disconnect as the "intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, where concrete exchanges operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which they belong."



It was through this very process that I first identified Fairmead as one of the communities within which I wanted to do research. Basically, this map of at least fifteen settlements is the result of many variations of this conversation. One-by-one, new communities have been added over the years.

The initial history of Fairmead reflects part of California's history known as *The California Colonization Project*.

In the 1890s, the Colonization Project was a real estate scheme used to transform the Valley from the large landholdings of Crocker, Stanford, Miller & Lux, and the other so-called Robber Barons into a landscape dotted by small farms serviced by small market centers.

Where a town existed, developers divided the surrounding land into five, ten, twenty, and forty acre plots. If no town existed within a

development, they often created one, laying out streets, providing the infrastructure for electricity, phone service, water and sewage, arranging for railroad stations and post offices, or making other improvements to draw new people to their little section of the Valley.

Farm lots were divided, for marketing purposes, into individual sub-developments called colonies. In Fairmead, Colony 13 was marketed specifically to Mennonite Farmers from Germany and Russia. Adverts for and articles about these lands were printed in European newspapers, in German and Russian.

Here you see early Mennonite settlers proudly demonstrating the use of well water to irrigate their Fairmead fields. Initially, colonists hit water at sixty feet. Within a few years, wells to fifteen hundred feet were common. Unlike many colony developers, *the Cooperative Land and Title*

Company, the real estate firm that built Fairmead, left farmers to rely on ground water rather than participate in the irrigation projects that reshaped the semi-arid Central Valley into one of the most productive regions of the planet. Ultimately, it was the lack of water that halted the town's growth.

The first part of my book traces the colonization process in Fairmead. This was a straight-forward, archival research project – utilizing newspaper articles, public records, and other written sources.

The Fairmead Inn, shown here, was a favorite stop for politicians, celebrities, and others, who enjoyed the Inn's world-class chef, and other amenities, often arriving on one of the eighteen trains that stopped in Fairmead, daily.

In the early days, Fairmead was home to several stores…

…a creamery, a cheese factory, schools and churches, the real estate office, and an insurance agent…

…the largest lumber yard in the Central Valley, an irrigation pump and implement dealer, several different weekly newspapers…

…and a modern garage, – in fact, everything that a brand new twentieth century community needed to prosper (except water).

This part of the story of Fairmead's past is typical of the public history put forth by most towns and cities – the community's creation and initial economic development: It's creation myth. This is the history of roots, of growth, of commerce, and, as is common in the case of Central California, of agriculture. This is the history of money and power. This is the story of the glorious past that should have led to a glorious present. There are few people in this story – just business (and their

owners) and growth.

In the case of Fairmead, however, most of this history was forgotten. There are few, if any, alive today who participated in this phase of the community's development which ended fairly abruptly by 1922. This history had to be re-collected directly from scraps of paper onto the pages of the book.

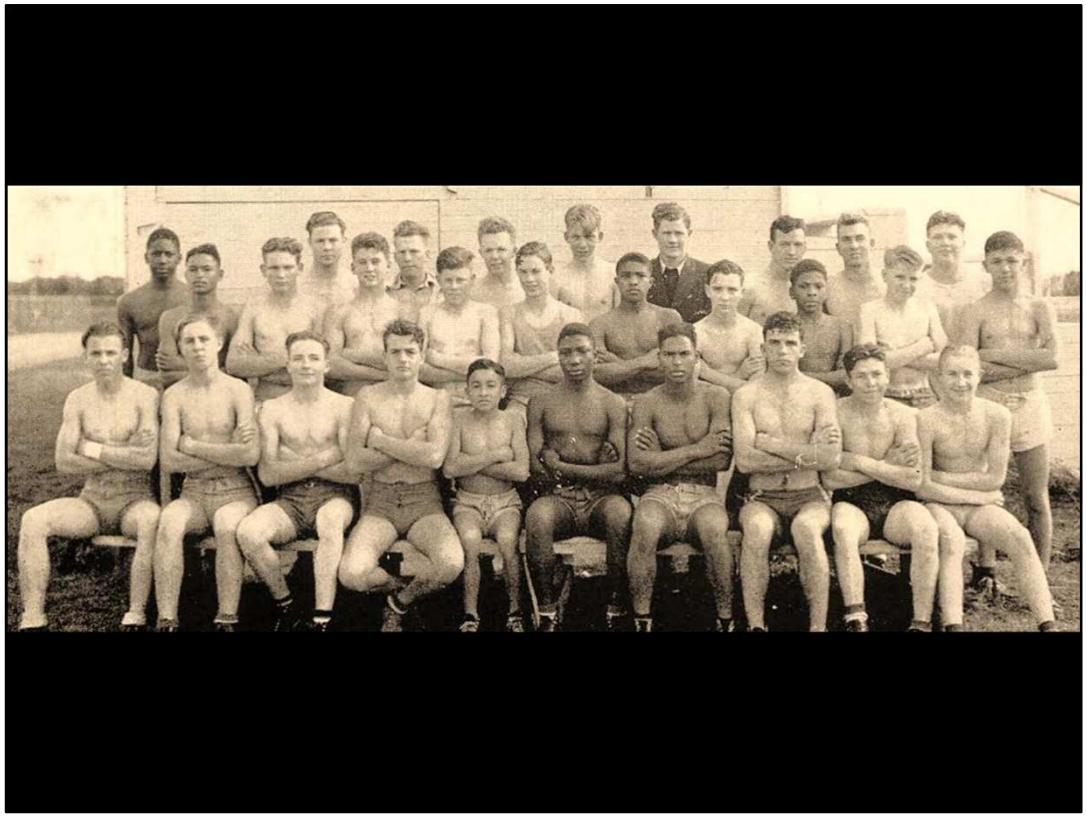
For me, though, the really interesting stuff started when the so-called historical record dried up. Most of the rest of the book is constructed from, and represents, a different form of memory: the actual recollections of people who lived the history.

Normally, San Joaquin Valley history is presented as the history of commerce and agribusiness, the latter being little more than a new name for an old institution: *the plantation*—a system of large farms, whose owners rely on a series of subaltern populations to provide cheap labor to plant, tend, and harvest commercial crops. This includes the granddaddy of all Central California crops: Cotton. Valley farmers have relied on various populations, including African Americans to work the fields that lie between the Coastal Range and the Sierras, even before the first crop of cotton was planted on Kern Island (now, Bakersfield), in the 1860s.

According to historian James Gregory, by the 1970s, sixty percent of the population of the San Joaquin Valley could trace their roots to the American South. Between 1884 and 1965, hundreds of thousands of Southern African Americans were actively recruited by California farmers to pick cotton and other crops. Most migrated to the cities of Stockton, Fresno, and Bakersfield while others established homes closer to the land.

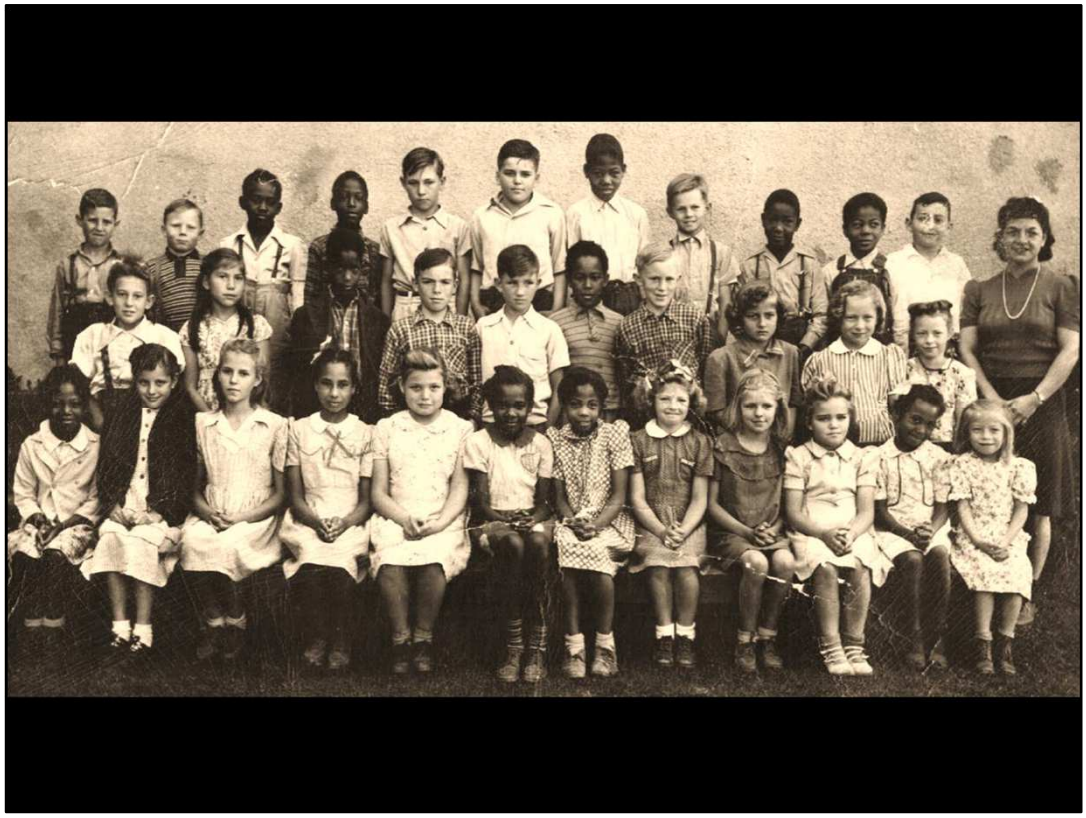
Yet their contributions are seldom part of public memory.

Somehow, the image of exploited, possibly illegal, immigrants has become common, and perhaps, more acceptable than the vision of fields filled with black men, women, and children toting hundred-pound cotton sacks with all the connotations and connections to slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow (which, although alive and well in the San Joaquin Valley for most of her history, has been allowed to fade from public consciousness).



This second part of the story of Fairmead begins with a Jewish land owner, Jacob Yakel, who not only sold land to African Americans, but, personally carried their mortgages at a time when legal, systemic racism prevented banks from lending to blacks. Probably the first such family to buy from Yakel were the Ameys who, by 1922 were well established in Fairmead. Enoch Amey founded one of town's earliest black churches: the Ethiopian Coptic Church of Fairmead.

Here you see several African American students, including members of the Amey family on the Madera High School Swim Team, in 1924.



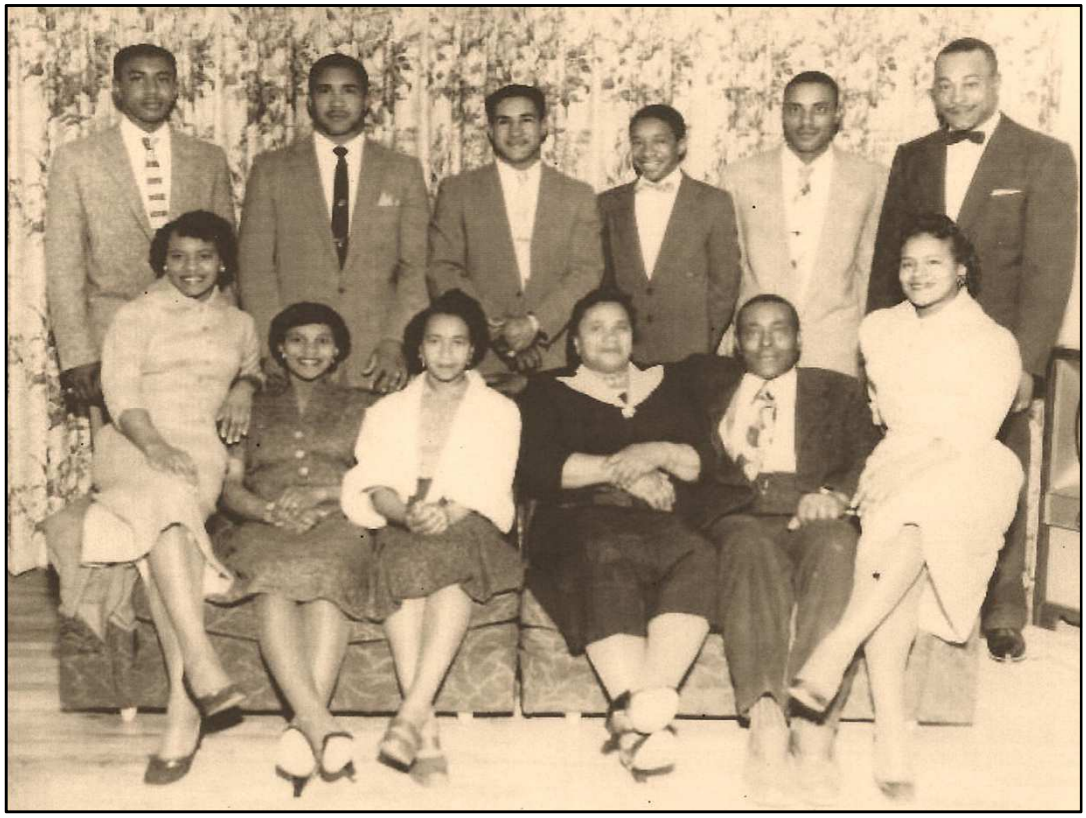
Other black families followed—their arrival accelerated by the Depression and the Dust Bowl – the so-called *Black Okies*.

Here you see African American children in the first grade at Fairmead Elementary School, in 1944.

During World War II, members of the Amey and Brown families found work in the shipyards of Oakland, Richmond, and Long Beach. There they met Southern blacks, recently arrived in California for solid, well-paying work in wartime industries.

After the war, when African Americans and

women were displaced in the factories by returning white servicemen, many who did not wish to return to the Jim Crow South remained in California. Some, seeking a future outside of urban centers, came to Fairmead, South Dos Palos, Lanare, and other Valley communities.



In the shipyards of Long Beach Morial Williams met a member of the Amey family. At the close of the war, Williams took his family to Fairmead, where, pooling their resources, they purchased land. Eventually, the Williams family owned the largest dairy in California – and the only one owned by African Americans.

Stories of the Williams, Brown, Amey, and other black families who made up the majority population of Fairmead well into the 1970s, are not available from archival sources. They had to be re-collected. The bulk of these stories are sourced from interviews conducted by myself and law students from UC Davis. Triangulating multiple interviews with what

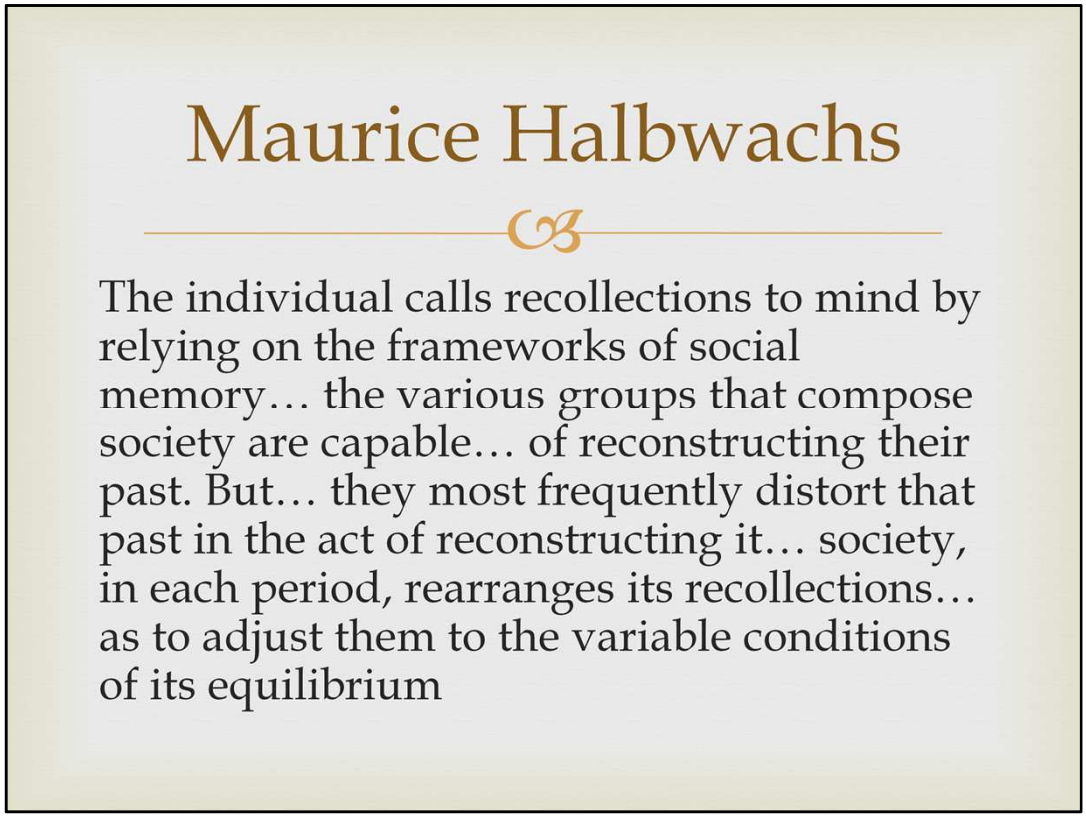
little archival information was available proved to be the only method to reconstruct this history—and consequently take personal recollection and convert it into public memory.

I can provide a personal example of the intersection of and occasional disconnect between public and private memory.

I was working in professional radio, in the early 1980s. At that time, my girlfriend's roommate—they were both Fresno State students—was a graduate of Chowchilla High School—with the surname Williams. It wasn't until well into my research that I realized that she was a member of that same Williams family that arrived in Fairmead at the end of World War II. Thirty years after meeting that young woman, I found myself interviewing her parents and their siblings (not remembering, until later, the connection). My own personal history – my own individual memory – included invisible ties to this community.

Public or cultural memory often replaces individual memory – official history displaces individual memory, and the past is shaped by what, in the present, is considered to be important to remember.

By the mid-sixties the mechanical cotton picker and chemical defoliant ended the need to pick cotton by hand. New Federal laws banned discrimination in housing, employment, lending, and other practices that had created the need for these rural settlements. By the 1970s and 80s, many of the established families were no longer working in the fields. In some cases they owned the fields. Access to jobs and higher education created opportunities beyond these rural enclaves, and these communities began the transition into largely Hispanic populations.



Maurice Halbwachs has suggested that, "The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory. In other words, the various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing their past. But, as we have seen, they most frequently distort that past in the act of reconstructing it… society, in each period, rearranges its recollections in such a way as to adjust them to the variable conditions of its equilibrium…"

It is on this point where I now wish to focus attention.

At the centenary celebration last summer, I was approached by several people who already had copies of *Fairmead: A Century of Change*. These copies were purchased through Amazon.com or other on-line booksellers. One woman explained that she was a teacher at Fairmead Elementary – the school where the event was taking place – and that they were using the book for a fifth grade local history project. Throughout the day, other teachers, followed by the principal, and finally the assistant superintendent came by to discuss the book, and by the end of the day, the school had ordered several hundred copies providing every individual fifth grader in the Chowchilla Elementary School District with their own copy.

Not long ago, Fairmead was just a collection of houses behind a hamburger stand right off the main highway. The community's history – if it had a history – was invisible. Those with personal ties knew only bits and pieces of its past. There were family histories, and some recollections and remembrances of businesses and landmarks that used to be there, but no real sense of *history*. When *Fairmead Community and Friends* first set out to commemorate the town's centenary – in part, to draw attention to the often overlooked plight of this unincorporated town – it was unclear where their efforts would lead.

I agreed to write the town "history," in part because I needed to do the research anyway. Re-collecting the archival material and putting together the recollections of former and current residents codified that material into a history with a physical form.

Hundreds of fifth graders – many from Chowchilla – now read the history of Fairmead as their own history. Part of that history focuses on exclusionary practices that kept African Americans from living and working in their home town.

How will all this play out, not only in the realm of

history, but in the arena of local politics? Those fifth graders who use this book will have have an historical association with Fairmead that did not exist, before: a public or social memory has been created. In another decade when these children begin voting on local measures for water, sewage, and other issues will Fairmead continue to be forgotten or will a shared history change the way in which these future young adults view the needs of the community whose past they once studied?

How does *having* a history change, not only social and individual memory and the perception and understanding of the past, but the present, and the future?