*In Common Purpose: Urban Restoration and Regional Realignment in Twenty-First Century Salinas, California and the Central Coast Region*

*by Carol Lynn McKibben*

*In Common Purpose* shows how the city of Salinas became the epicenter of regional agricultural achievement with a global reach, and why that matters in understanding California and America, past and present. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and extending into the present day, the city of Salinas became one of the most critical centers of agriculture innovation in California and the nation, and as such, offers us a lens with which to understand California's (and the nation's) story in all of its wonderful complexity.

We know a great deal about urban/suburban and exurban spaces in this country. Much scholarship has been devoted to manufacturing cities and the high tech sites that command attention today. However, we tend to caricature (and ignore) places that are rural, particularly in agricultural zones outside of major municipalities. The myths that people living in rural communities are backward in their thinking; fearful of new populations and resistant to change are both misleading and overly simplified. This unfortunate view of rural Americans prevents us from fully understanding the deep complexities of whatever we define as the American character and hinders our efforts to create good policy and more equitable and sustainable communities as a result. However, forward thinking agriculturalists in the Central Coast region, with Salinas as urban center, offer both new ways of understanding the past and new ways of coping with the challenges of the present in what can seem like a paralyzing and polarizing disconnect in American life today. The Ag-Tech influence in Salinas may even give us new ways of living as diverse Americans in common purpose.

This book builds on terrific new scholarship in urban studies, environmental studies, and in California history that expands the scope of analysis from large municipalities like Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles to look regionally for new understandings of past and present demographic, political, social and economic change. Some of this new scholarship complicates our understanding of how and why towns and cities in regional context developed as they did, for good and for ill (Self, Tsu, Ivey, Vaught). Some of this important work is an indictment of past policies that gave us a new and stubborn inequality, segregation and re-segregation despite a progressive political climate that started in the post-war years; investment by government agencies in urban renewal projects in the 1970s; and, more recently, investment by tech giants (Schafran, Desmond). All of this new scholarship focuses on cities and towns but demands that we look regionally and holistically too, rather than limit our focus to one locale, one issue, or one racial or ethnic group.

*In Common Purpose* is an effort to do all of this, with a deeply rooted analysis into one of the most historically important urban centers on the Central Coast, Salinas, California, but with an eye on the critical context regionally, statewide and

nationally. This book weaves the wide variety of ethnic group histories into a comprehensive account of city-building that illustrates the challenges and successes they experienced as they came together (and sometimes came apart), in the common purpose of making a place that was economically strong, politically fair, and socially inclusive.

Salinas, with a population of 157,596 (out of a total county population of 437,907) is the most important urban center in Monterey County, a minority-majority Hispanic city, and the county seat for Monterey. It is situated at the head of the rich agricultural region known as the Salinas Valley, some 17 miles inland from Monterey Bay, 106 miles south of San Francisco and 325 miles north of Los Angeles in the Central Coast region that stretches north from Santa Cruz and south to Santa Barbara. This region encompasses both the wealthiest places in California and the nation (Carmel, Pebble Beach, Santa Barbara) and the poorest. The region is defined by and identified as a place of great agricultural production and wealth, and also by some of the fiercest labor battles in American history. It includes populations from every country in the world.

## Part I: Community At All Costs

### Chapter One: American Urban Footprint

This section debunks the myths about Salinas's founding as accidental, and makes the case that Salinas (like every other community in San Francisco's hinterland) was founded by clear-eyed city-builders from San Francisco, women and men, mostly (but not all) white Americans, who were an integral part of a regional plan to create an urban California in the aftermath of the nineteenth century War with Mexico. In record time and with shrewd political skill, they constructed a town that became both the county seat and the major Southern Pacific Railroad stop in the region.

Sources: The Monterey County Historical Society is the repository for numerous local newspapers (some short-lived) in hard copy and in entirety. Until now, the archive, a private corporation, has not allowed access to these newspapers because of their fragile condition. However, (after a year of intensive lobbying),they gave me access, which has allowed me to present a fuller story of the early, post-Mexican War era.

### Chapter Two: Regional Urban Center

This chapter shows how determined city builders in Salinas came together in common purpose to establish Salinas's place as the urban center not just for the county, but also for the entire Central Coast region, utilizing everything from cultural events to tax incentives for industrial development that was tied to agricultural expansion. Salinas's residents were a diverse mixture of ethnic and racial groups all essential actors in the endeavor. Although Chinese, Japanese,

Mexicans and Filipinos did not play leadership roles in government, they became important members of the middle classes of Salinas, bolstering the economy through business enterprise and contributing to the community through philanthropy and social activism.

Sources: In addition to the newspaper sources cited above, I also utilized manuscripts of Salinas City Council meetings and minutes from various clubs and organizations. David Vaught and Michael Magliari both reviewed and critiqued these chapters and I revised accordingly.

Chapter Three: Lettuce Metropolis

Salinas achieved national recognition for its booming economy in the midst of the greatest economic catastrophe in the nation's history: The Great Depression. The economy propelled a wave of migration to Salinas, both international and from all parts of the United States, creating both prosperity and pressure on local government and community organizations to cope with the sudden population increase. At the same time, Salinas became infamous as a result of widespread media attention in the wake of the 1936 strike by fruit and vegetable workers (many of them women) in the packing sheds and Filipino and Mexican laborers in the field.
However, this simplistic story ignores the presence of diverse ethnic groups represented on both sides of the strike, and the strenuous efforts of everyone to maintain the spirit of communalism so painstakingly built in the 1910s-1930s. Almost immediately after the strike ended, all groups in Salinas expressed a determination to restore community spirit. For Salinas, the strike was a blip and quickly overcome, not a game changer in labor relations nor did it affect the collective effort at community building.

Sources: In addition to the newspapers utilized in the first two chapters, I discovered another, *The Independent*, a self-described pro-union paper—a new source not available to scholars previously. More importantly, the Grower-Shippers Association allowed me to examine the Minutes of their meetings beginning in 1930. No one has had access to these before either, except in the small fragments given on demand to the LaFollette Congressional Committee.

Josh Sides, Vicki Ruiz, and Matt Garcia reviewed and critiqued this chapter and I revised accordingly.

Chapter Four: Unintended Consequences

The fall-out from the 1930s migration boom in Salinas became contentious in the 1940s as the unincorporated (but heavily populated) East Salinas (Alisal) impacted the entire community. By 1940, Alisal had rapidly developed into its own economically enterprising community, with multiple housing developments, independent school systems, and a lively social life. Fiercely independent Alisal

residents aimed to protect the area as an independent entity. By contrast, Salinas's residents felt threatened by haphazard population growth that created threats to public health and lack of zoning that threatened planned growth. Alisal and Salinas battled over desperately needed infrastructure and the question of annexation throughout the 1940s and into the 1960s.

The war years papered over class and ethnic conflicts as residents came together in common purpose to support the national emergency, willingly sacrificing their Japanese neighbors and friends in the process and reluctant to reintegrate them at the end of the war. Reintegrate the Japanese did, however, as they became critical new actors in the emerging multiracial and thriving middle class population of Salinas in the post-war era.

Throughout the post-war decades, city builders focused on improving the lives of workers through investment in homes, hospitals and schools, and in so doing, diverting workers' energy and attention from labor organizing. Everyone believed they had a shot at the American dream through land ownership and educational opportunity that would bring them into the ranks of the middle class.

Source: Oral histories contained in Steinbeck library from Japanese residents, former Dust Bowlers, and residents. Family papers newly available. Newspapers from Monterey County Historical Society, including a short-lived *East Salinas Pioneer* published in Alisal and previously unavailable.

I am in the finishing stages of writing this chapter and have not yet showed it to readers.

## Part II: Breakdown

### Chapter Five: Industrial Garden and Homemaker Environmentalism

In the post-war era, Salinas's leaders gleefully took advantage of federal investment in cities to expand roads and infrastructure and also encourage industrial investment, which happened at lightening speed. In the 1950s, multiple industries relocated their plants and headquarters to Salinas and enjoyed unprecedented tax advantages as a result. The city benefited from new populations of middle class managers and professionals that bolstered tax revenue and added class diversity and sophistication to the social life of the area.

At the same time, oil refineries, industrial air pollution and overtaxed water resources threatened to derail their dream of idealized suburban life. Women responded but not in sustained, organized ways and without coordination with city or regional planners. The American Association of University Women, the League of Women Voters, various book and craft clubs and smaller localized women's organizations engaged in letter writing campaigns and protests. They challenged

(successfully) the threat of an oil refinery (which moved to Benicia) and also protected both the coastline from development and the watersheds from industrial pollution. But after they won their battles they dropped out of the war. As middle class and largely white homemakers they felt no connection to mostly minority workers who lived in densely populated, environmentally degraded areas of the city and in labor camps. To be fair, there was no organized environmental justice movement to join with them at the time, and they were not organized or focused enough politically to sustain an environmental movement that might have been more broadly based with a more far-reaching impact. Once victory was achieved on the coastline and in getting rid of the oil refinery, they largely lost interest and focused on other issues.

Nonetheless, by the mid-1960s, Salinas had indeed achieved its nineteenth century dream of becoming a true urban center for a Central Coast region that stretched from Santa Cruz to Santa Barbara. It was not going to endure.

Sources: (New)Oral interviews with women and men engaged in environmental activism and city planning in this era; Board of Supervisors meeting minutes located in Monterey County Historical Society; records from LandWatch and LAFCO showing annexations in this era, Planning Department and Public Works Records, City Budgets.

## Chapter Six: A War Zone?

When Cesar Chavez launched his own version of the Civil rights movement with the grape boycotts and strikes beginning in 1965, Salinas became a national villain. Residents felt a deep mark of shame as Ethel Kennedy, Jesse Jackson and other luminaries joined Chavez in public prayer meetings and street protests as he famously performed hunger strikes from his Salinas jail cell. As a result, and seemingly all of a sudden, Salinas lost its standing as the primary urban center both in the county and throughout the Central Coast region. It could not have happened at a worse moment in time.

Thanks to the hard work of the homemaker-environmentalists, CEQUA and the EPA protected the coastline from affordable housing and hotel overdevelopment. Propositions 13 and 14 contributed as well, pushing out minorities, working and even middle classes in favor of housing to support only the wealthiest residents. Monterey, Carmel, Pacific Grove and Pebble Beach quickly displaced Salinas as a destination for wealthy tourists and business people. The now pristine beaches, mansions, and increasing number of golf courses with ocean views drew hundreds of thousands of new and wealthy residents and visitors to the area annually enriching local city coffers. Few ventured into Salinas, which was gaining an unsavory reputation as a poor, minority working class city.

To make matters even worse, federal and state disinvestment in cities left places like Salinas desperate to find a source of tax revenue to build and maintain infrastructure and housing, park and recreation centers, schools, and create events that might bind the diverse population into community and common purpose. Many long-standing Mexican American, Filipino, Japanese, Chinese and white middle class residents of Salinas, embittered by the vicious controversies of the farmworker movement began to leave the city altogether for new residence in the nearby unincorporated suburbs emerging along highway 68, the road to Monterey.

Source: Grower-Shippers Association Meeting Minutes and miscellaneous records located there showing their view of UFW and the evolution of a strategy of opposition; interviews with local attorneys who participated on both sides of the labor dispute; local newspaper accounts from Monterey County Historical Association; census data documenting migration patterns within the region that initiated the process of re-segregation of the entire area as the Mexican population began to be concentrated in Salinas; records of local nonprofits, (CHSPA and others) that grew disillusioned by the UFW and turned their collective attention to housing and upward mobility rather than participating in boycotts and strikes for higher wages in the fields.

Chapter Seven: Housing, Prisons, and New Populations

Salinas answered the challenge to its loss of predominance in the county and region by building new prisons and juvenile detention centers, expanding older prison facilities, and building shopping centers and malls on the outskirts of town. As in so many other metropolitan areas of California, it was exactly the wrong strategy, creating a leap-frog development model so prevalent in both Central Valley and Central Coast regions. This destroyed historic downtowns that historically served as critical communal centers. Salinas's hotels, once regional and statewide meeting centers deteriorated and collapsed. Main Street became a center for the poorest, the homeless, a ghost of its past.

In addition, mostly poorer, and working class Mexicans and Mexican Americans arrived in Salinas increasing its population by the thousands and effectively repopulating (and re-segregating) the Alisal, creating a visible critical mass. Many had been forced out of Monterey and the other newly invigorated and increasingly pricey towns on the coast; many came by way of the larger municipalities of San Jose, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. They came to Salinas for work in agriculture, industry, the prison system, government, and because of the relative proximity of the coast, and to support the ever-growing service industries connected to tourism or found employment in the increasingly growing prison system. Some arrived as family members or intimates of inmates, many of whom became swept up in the growing gang culture associated with the prison system.

Source: General Plans and Budgets located at City hall and Minutes of City Council Meetings that show strategic planning; newspaper accounts of the battles over

development and engagements with the county and the state located at Monterey County Historical Society; Chamber of Commerce records located at the Chamber of Commerce showing the pros and cons of development and local views of policy; interviews with former City Managers, Planners, and others actively involved in the development process.

Chapter Eight: Bankruptcy and a New Political Order

The convergence of forces--dramatic population increases of poorer, mostly Mexican residents and the subsequent loss of the ethnically diverse middle classes and elites, political drama, conflict and notoriety, poor planning decisions by local and county government agencies without regional or state planning, fiscally disastrous legislation, and an environmental movement that failed to appreciate links to marginalized groups—all led to an eminently predictable outcome: marginalization and bankruptcy, fragmentation and despair. The common purpose that defined Salinas for almost a century evaporated in the space of a few short years between 1965 and 1990.

At the same time, as in many cities and towns in California during this period facing similar, multiple challenges, a new leadership in the mayors office and city council emerged out of the dominating population of Mexican Americans in Alisal to take the reins of city government. Contentious and lacking critical tax revenue, mayors and city councils desperately tried to stave off the disastrous consequences of federal and state disinvestment and loss of a solid middle class tax base such as the closing of libraries and unfunded school systems, deteriorating infrastructure, loss and lack of parks and open space.

Source: Interviews with local officials directly involved in the battle for funding; records located at City Hall, Chamber of Commerce, and Monterey County Public Health Department showing demographic change and financial crisis.

Part III: Restoring Common Purpose in a Polarizing Age

Chapter Nine: Decline or Progress?

Common purpose appeared to make a comeback by the 1990s. Even as city coffers suffered from the outmigration of long-standing middles class families, the Salinas economy blossomed with the rapidly increasing globalization of agriculture that created vast new market opportunities and also brought technology into the fields and packing sheds, making it possible for workers to increase incomes, diversify, and settle down as aspiring new middle class homeowners and landowners, like every other group that preceded them. In turn, residents elected new leadership that drove policies on housing, city-space and health for the common good.

Nonprofits filled a gap in social services that government agencies no longer provided creating innovative housing, support for juvenile offenders and adult

former felons alike to prevent (and preempt) recidivism. Elites provided sustained financial support for educational opportunities through public and charter schools and the local community college. Main Street began a comeback, as residents came together to create a cutting edge cultural center named after one of the most famous (and locally vilified) Salinas natives, John Steinbeck. Cultural events flourished.

It wasn't enough. The Steinbeck Center failed to draw tourists in large enough numbers to sustain its existence Ownership was transferred first to the city and then to the local state university. The cultural events, many of them ethnic, did not galvanize communalism or even attract attention outside of the ethnic entity that organized them, much less serve as a regional or state draw that an event like the weeks long, Jose Rizal Filipino celebration did in the 1920s and 1930s. The growth of prisons led to an upsurge in gang activity, alarming and highly publicized increases in violence and crime that made Salinas's already damaged reputation seem unremitting and kept the city from reclaiming its former predominant position in the county and the Central Coast region.

Source: Steinbeck Center records; records from among the 1400 nonprofits in Monterey County that focused on environmental justice, housing, public health and public safety

Chapter Ten: Hope? Reinvestment and Renewal Through Ag-Tech

Ag-Tech should have done it. A stone's throw from Silicon Valley, Salinas learned some lessons from the tech giants that reshaped the region to the north. First and foremost, the multi-billion dollar industrial elite that formed the bulwark of Ag-Tech invested heavily in the community, in everything from creating globally sponsored events in Salinas and remaking a twenty-first century version of Main Street to supporting initiatives in the local community college and state university in creating innovative pathways for students to join the new revolution in technology as part of the booming agricultural economy that includes organic farming and cannibus.

However, Salinas was among the hardest hit in the Central Coast region by the 2008 foreclosure crisis, which revealed the deep fissures of inequality through this region as it has throughout California. High rates of evictions, revanched subdivisions county-wide and in Salinas proper, and obvious re-segregation created a new crisis even as the city of Salinas utilized the billion dollar Ag industry to rescue it from the economic marginalization that began with the labor battles of the 1960s. This last Chapter will evaluate the extent that this strategy is working to create equality, integration, and sustainability in contrast with more widely studied outcomes in the Central Valley Region to the north as Alex Schafran so ably showed in his work, *The Road to Re-Segregation: Northern California and the Failure of Politics* (2018).