

Las Animas Rancho: Henry Miller and Miller and Lux purchased over 12,000 acres of land of the Las Animas Rancho. This rancho was originally granted by the Spanish Viceroy of Mexico to Mariano Castro in about 1806. The original grant contained 26,000 acres more or less. When Mexico seceded from Spain in 1823, Castro reapplied to reconfirm his grant with the new Mexican Government. He received confirmation, but died in 1828. The land was then re-granted to his heirs in 1835. Shortly thereafter the heirs began to sell their holdings, eventually about 16,000 acres of it going to a wealthy ranchero by the name of Jose Maria Sanchez.

When California became part of the United States in 1850, the U.S. government set up a land commission to establish land ownership of these old ranchos. In the case of the Las Animas Rancho there were many problems of clear title, primarily due to the fact that Castro and Sanchez, both patriarchs of large families, had died intestate and the land was held in common among the heirs. Although the land title had been confirmed to all these heirs almost all of the land had been sold to Americans including Henry Miller, “the Cattle King,” by the time of the confirmation. So while the entire grant was confirmed to the original or secondary owners, title to the land divisions thereafter were confused. At that time the entire town of Gilroy was within the boundaries of the original Las Animas land grant. As title was uncertain Henry Miller started a “friendly” lawsuit to clear up title to all the lands. The Henry Miller et al versus Massey Thomas et al suit or the Las Animas Partition suit as it was commonly called was begun in 1879. Two hundred and sixty parcels of land were confirmed in title at the conclusion of the suit in 1887. Most landowners were confirmed in their property title. However, legal fees and costs associated with the preparation of the lawsuit did force some landowners to sell their land to pay off these debts. On the whole most were satisfied with the results, grateful that the long ordeal was over and they had guaranteed title to their land.

Garlic: Bountiful harvests inspired Gennaro Filice, his father, Michael, and partner John Perrelli to build a local cannery that became Gilroy’s largest industry for years, processing over 50 varieties of fruits and vegetables annually. Kiyoshi “Jimmy” Hirasaki, arrived from Japan in 1914 and also learned the seed business as a young man. He later purchased land east of town, raised a variety of vegetables and was among the first growers to commit huge tracts of land to the cultivation of garlic.

Pieters-Wheeler Seed Company: A further agricultural boon came once enterprising growers determined that the area’s climate was near-perfect for seed cultivation and hybridization. Lin Wheeler came west in 1910, soon forming the Pieters-Wheeler Seed Company whose operations were moved to Gilroy in 1913. It began as a flower-seed producer but shifted to vegetable-seed production during WWI. In 1962, Goldsmith Seeds was founded east of town by philanthropic, flower-breeding pioneers, Glenn and Jane Goldsmith. With expansion, operations relocated to Hecker Pass, west of the city, and later, facilities were established in Guatemala and Kenya. The company became one of the world’s largest breeders of hybrid flower seeds, its innovative varieties garnering many awards.