

2. PETER SHIELDS' STATE FARM PASSION

Born in 1862 and raised on a modest farm just east of Sacramento, Peter J. Shields became an attorney and was elected a Sacramento superior court judge at age 38.

He never forsook his rural roots, however, and had an avid interest in improving agriculture and agricultural education. In 1899, he met a Penn State agriculture graduate and learned, to his surprise and delight, that there

were college programs and scientific research in agriculture at universities in other parts of the country.

This was a turning point in Shields' life. From 1899 to 1905, he dedicated himself to campaigning for a "State Farm" and "Farm School" in California, authoring bills in 1901 and 1903, and was eventually successful with his third attempt in 1905.

Biography
of Judge
Shields
by Ann
Scheuring
in her
official
history of
UC Davis,
*Abundant
Harvest*
(2001, p.
13).

PETER J. SHIELDS

(1862–1962)

Advocate and Friend of the University Farm

THE FRAIL, white-haired man whose portrait hangs at the entrance to the UC Davis main library, known officially as the Peter J. Shields Library, was born to Irish parents in 1862 on a modest farm near Hangtown Crossing on the American River about 14 miles east of Sacramento. Despite his frontier upbringing, he received a good education from the Christian Brothers in Sacramento and read law in Judge Amos P. Catlin's office. He was admitted to the bar at age 21 and practiced law briefly until illness caused him to drop out of the active work world for nearly ten years.



Judge Peter J. Shields was honored with a yearbook dedication in the 1915 Agricola.

In 1895, at age 33, Shields became a deputy state librarian in the law section of the California State Library, later he became a secretary in Governor

James Budd's office. In 1898 he was appointed secretary of the State Agricultural Society, where he became acquainted with many of the leading agriculturalists of the day. In 1900 he formed a brief law partnership with Hiram Johnson (later to be Governor and U.S. Senator) but was soon elected superior court judge for Sacramento, a position he held until October 1949.

Shields's boyhood experiences on a pioneer farm gave him a deep sympathy for the farmer's life and an appreciation for country living. Although his frail constitution seems to have precluded an active farming career, he became well known as an owner and breeder of Jersey cattle and was involved in several livestock associations. For years he exhibited his prizewinning stock at the State Fair. He also became an eloquent advocate for agricultural education. At the request of dairy and stockmen, he authored the preliminary 1901 and 1903 proposals for a State Dairy Farm School and ultimately penned the successful 1905 University Farm bill.

A counselor and mentor to youth and a staunch supporter of the University of California, Judge Shields and his wife, Carolee, were loyal friends of the University Farm. In 1972 the campus honored Shields by naming the main library in his memory. The Shields Oaks Grove and the Carolee Shields Memorial Garden in the Arboretum today also commemorate their generous bequests to the university.¹⁹

According to Shields, University of California Officials did not want a State Farm.

Ironically, Wickson would become a key figure in selecting the site, as you will see in columns 14 & 15.

(pp. 12-13, Shields, *Birth of an Institution*.)

The Regents of the University took no part in the new venture. They shared the views of one of their most distinguished members who objected to it, and who told me I should not be attempting to "put that on the University."

"You know," he said, "*that* is not education."

With the exception of Professor E. W. Major, I can think of no member of the faculty of the College of Agriculture of Berkeley of that time who favored it. Dr. E. J. Wickson, then Dean of the College, was mildly opposed to what I was trying to do. Dr. Wickson was an exceptionally admirable man and my close friend. I can only account for his opposition upon the grounds of age, and reluctance to disturb his comfortable adjustment to existing conditions. The Dean Emeritus, the distinguished scientist Dr. E. W. Hilgard, was aggressively opposed to my plan. In such circumstances, I turned more and more to public officials, to members of the Legislature, and to those connected with such activities.

Shields Reflects on the Politics of Passing a State Farm Bill.

Anti-UC sentiment helped the bill.

Shields' personal relations to political figures.

B You made a statement in your memoirs that interested me. It was that much of the support for your bills in 1903 and 1905 came from interests and persons who were unfriendly to the University, but who were friendly to your proposals. Could you give us more details on ...

S Well, in a word, yes. You had in Alameda County a Senator named Frank W. Leavitt. He was a printer, I think, and a swashbuckling fellow who didn't give a damn. He'd go into Governor Budd and say, "Jim, you've got a bill in there you're thinkin' a lot about. You're not a goin' to get it." He talked like that, you know.

He was not a rowdy, but just that kind of an informal fellow.

He was the leader of the Senate and all that. He didn't like Dr. Wheeler, I don't know why, and he thought that Wheeler didn't want this thing. "Therefore, just to spite Wheeler, he was going to be for this thing. Then, I knew him well. When it comes down

to now I got the bill through without the farmer as a mass, without the big press, without the faculty, without the Dean, without the Regents, it was on my personal friendship and my political experience. I had known so many men in public life and so many of them were friendly to me.

You see, Dr. Mead, he was a power in California. I knew him intimately. I knew a lot of the leading legislators and the men who were familiar around the Legislature and could do things there. It was through those men more than anything else. I don't think anybody else could have done it. That's not egotism, it's just a fact. It was just my personal acquaintance combined with what general sentiment.

Shields found that many farmers did not want a State Farm

So what can a "bespectacled" college professor know?

(page 12, Shields, *Birth of an Institution.*)

As I look back now upon that great struggle, its days and nights of effort, its years of anxiety, upon its fine men who labored with me, I also recall sources from which I got no help. Many farmers did what they could as individuals, but the farmers of that time could not see how their industry could be aided by a school such as was proposed in the Bill.

The miracles of modern agriculture had not happened then. Only a small percentage of the livestock of the State was purebred. Dairy cows were not being tested for production. Trapnesting of poultry, or other ways of breeding chickens for increased egg production, were not practiced. Tractors were not in use; farms were not mechanized. I need not further enumerate the differences which separate the methods of that day from this.

I do not intend here to speak slightly of the master farmers of that period. They had the accumulated experience of centuries, but a new world was opening—a world that would see power on the farm, high-priced labor, machines, specialized breeds of animals, the destruction of pests, new varieties of fruits ripening successively to provide orderly harvesting, water and its use, fertilization, new crops, new ways, new days.

Too many of the men who had succeeded under the old regime took the view of one of their number. When spoken to about plant breeding and about his field of potatoes, he said, "Hoe your potatoes!" That was all that was needed in his philosophy. Another, to whom the breeding of better types of animals was suggested, said rather contemptuously,

"Breed? Feed is breed!" It is easy to see how practical men who had made their way through the practice of half truths would not be quick to discard them for the theories of a bespectacled college professor who would seek to tell them how to cure "hollow horn" in their cattle, or why the yield of corn was steadily decreasing over the years.

Shields Writes of His Work in the 1925 UCD Rodeo

In 1899 I was Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture. In getting ready for the State Fair for September of that year, because I knew that he had been there previously I appointed Wm. H. Saylor, then a young man, as Superintendent of the Dairy Department of the Fair. In working with him and in receiving his reports, he told me of things about butter, its quality and manufacture, that I had never heard of. I did not think that there was as much to be known about what I thought to be so simple a thing as butter.

In astonishment I asked him where he had learned all those things, and he told me that he had done so at the Agricultural College of the State of Pennsylvania from which he had graduated. I instantly wanted to know whether or not the young men and women of California were getting such practical and theoretical instruction. I consulted old reports of the University and inquired wherever I could as to the character of our College of Agriculture. I found that it was poorly equipped, that it had a small attendance, and that while this State was in so many ways the agricultural wonder of the world, that our agricultural college was wholly without prestige. As I recall it now, but one person had graduated from the college that year, and that that was a woman, and that only two young men had graduated the year before. I found too, that the college had not kept pace with the growth of the University nor had it kept up with the great agricultural colleges of such states as Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. The college had no farm and its courses were theoretical and not greatly different from other colleges in which scientific instruction was given. I began to talk and write about this in a rather blind and groping way.

I prepared the bill, creating it with great care before the session assembled. In this work I was given valuable assistance by Prof. E. W. Major of the University who was technically acquainted with the organization of other institutions of agricultural instruction. In drawing our bill we took the Minnesota School of Agriculture as a model so far as it fitted our conditions. In providing for the Commission to purchase the Farm and to select the site for the school, we hesitated and changed our plans many times. We wanted to be sure that the Commission named would not purchase a piece of hill land near Berkeley, but would choose a representative place in one of our great interior valleys. When the bill was completed and ready for presentation, the Yolo County people who had been active in the matter scanned it very closely and insisted that I amend it by adding to the section describing what kind of a farm should be purchased, a provision relating to a water right. I added this qualification by means of a rider which I pinned on to the original draft of the bill. A copy of this rider just as I prepared it with these men standing about, is shown in the photograph.

in its soil, location, climate and general environment be typical and representative of the best general agricultural conditions in Cali
 crops provided that no site or tract shall be chosen, which is not susceptible of irrigation, and for the irrigation of which some means are not already provided, or for which a water right is not purchased or procured at the time the land is selected, also purchase any such water or other rights, or acquire the same by the exercise of the right of eminent domain.

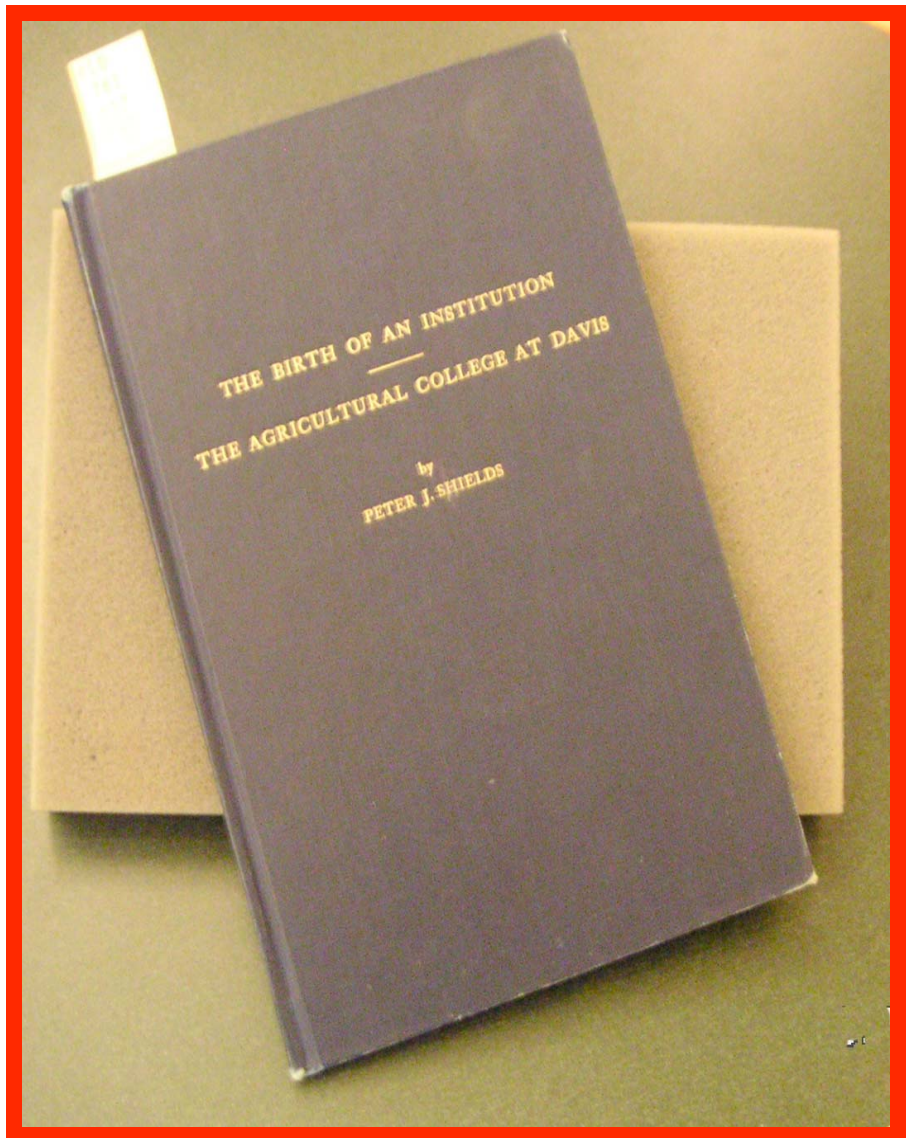


Their object clearly was to make the bill fit Yolo County and to add to the chances of Yolo County to secure the Farm. As this did not in any way impair the great purpose of the bill, and as I was more than willing to see the Farm and School located in that rich and centrally located County, I was willing to accept the amendment. I think that that amendment served the purpose planned by the Yolo people and was the cause of the final choice of Davis as the site of the School.

This famous last-minute slip of paper is reproduced in the next column

In a 1933
Memoir,
(photograph
-ed below),
Shields
reported he
promoted
establish-
ment of a
Farm
School, but
had no
hand in the
selection of
a specific
site.

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Today, as I look over that site, I regret to say that I cannot claim a share in its selection. My interest was in the College and the School to be established, and in the farm to be chosen. I had such confidence in the body of men who were to make the choice — men whom I had carefully selected — that I thought it best to refrain from interfering with the good selection I was sure they would make. I think I can confidently say that no college in the United States has a farm like that of our own institution at Davis.



Peter Shields,
third
from
the left,
circa
1910

Photograph in
the Peter Shields
Collection, UC
Davis
Department of
Special
Collections.

The precise year
and location of
this photograph
are unknown, but
Shields' intense
interest in and
frequent visits to
the State Farm
suggests that
this is an early
Picnic Day scene
close to Putah
Creek.

