

# Cal Ag Roots to develop animated atlas of California farming history

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NICHOLAS CHAN / AGGIE

## NEH grant to support work of UC Davis alumna

The National Endowment for the Humanities recently [awarded](#) a \$30,000 grant to a project that is aiming to develop an [animated atlas](#) of California's farming history.

The project is led by Ildi Carlisle-Cummins, who earned her master's degree at UC Davis in 2013 and is the director of [Cal Ag Roots](#), a program through the [California Institute of Rural Studies](#). The project's advisory team includes three UC Davis professors (Glenda Drew, Michael Ziser and David de la Peña), cartographer Molly Roy, and several independent scholars, including Nina Ichikawa of the Berkeley Food Institute.

The team is currently collaborating to make early decisions about the direction and goals for

the project, asking what exactly the final product will look like and how it will be used.

“This is a discovery grant, meaning we’re asking ourselves those questions, I’m coordinating with a humanities team and a digital team,” Carlisle-Cummins said. “We’re all thinking about who it’s going to be for and what type of platform it will be on. And we’re still deciding if we want this to be something that will be finished and done for good or something that will continually be updated.”

She added that she hopes the atlas will be of a calibre that makes it a useful and accurate resource for scholars and curious citizens alike.

One of the purposes of the project is to provide a new way to bring to life some of the stories that Cal Ag Roots has already compiled and produced in podcasts. These podcasts can be found on Cal Ag Roots’ [Story Hub](#). Topics that have been covered so far include the history of tomato farming in California, the Bracero Program, land rights and ownership and Japanese farmers. Cal Ag Roots aims to continue developing stories to add to the animated atlas, but isn’t currently planning to have user-generated content. However, Carlisle-Cummins said that she and her team might be open to it in the future since it is a good way to get users even more engaged with the tool and with the history itself while bringing more stories and perspectives into light.

Developing a digital resource for sharing these stories is in line with previous Cal Ag Roots projects that go beyond what a history textbook can do and intimately connect people with the land and the locations that have such historical significance for food production in California. The podcasts were initially part of an event called [Docks to Delta](#), in which people took a train trip through agricultural lands between the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento while listening to the podcasts.

Roy explained how this project compares to similar work that she has done and why she believes this project and others like it are valuable.

“I hope to provide insights about how the team can most effectively present their spatial stories in a visual way that an audience can connect to,” Roy said. “Other collaborative mapping projects I’ve worked on like this are the Food and Water Atlases with Guerrilla Cartography, and making maps with indigenous leaders through the group MappingBack.

This one is different though, because it's focused specifically on historical stories, and also alternative paths of history, which I find fascinating."

Roy expanded on the importance of actively using maps and why maps are so valuable in communicating stories about the history of agriculture.

"I think historical agricultural mapping is valuable because there's not as much reflection on wins and losses within the food movement over time as much as there could be," Roy said.

"Because agriculture is so spatial in nature, those histories can be mapped very easily. Maps serve as an appropriate medium to tell agricultural histories."

Carlisle-Cummins hopes that this will be an interactive tool that will allow users to actively search for information and to become connected with the geography and changing landscape of the state.

"Maps are such a big part of our everyday life now since we have them on our phones and we think people are a lot more map savvy, but are they?" Carlisle-Cummins said. "We know that the atlas will be closely attached to the stories, and we want to allow space for people to put two and two together, to understand how [...] California has changed based on what people were doing."

Carlisle-Cummins said that her team is using the story about Japanese-American farmers as a sample during the design and development phase of the project so they can test different potential interfaces and ways of communicating specific details from the stories.

"By end of year we'll have a design plan and know how the animations will work," Carlisle-Cummins said.

As the team has discussed and planned the project, there's been debate over whether they want to present strictly historical information or to present counterfactual scenarios as a way to demonstrate the significance of certain events.

"The idea is to show change over time, for example, to watch how Japanese fruit and vegetable farms grew significantly, and then were impacted by internment," Carlisle-Cummins said.

"Had we not interned Japanese-Americans during World War II, what could California have looked like?"

While there is still some uncertainty over details of the project and how it will come together, people involved believe that this is a unique project with the potential to continue growing and evolving.

“It’s an exciting project but [we’re] at a quite early stage,” said David de la Peña, an assistant professor in landscape architecture and sustainable environmental design at UC Davis and a project advisor. “With success it will lead to more funding and the full blown atlas project after this year.”

Carlisle-Cummins said that there will be many technological challenges associated with a project like this, especially because of the speed at which technologies change, which makes it important to design this tool in a way that will not make it necessary to regularly update fundamental aspects of how it works.

“We’re at the beginning, but thinking about how to keep a living website like this fresh, keeping up on what the best platform to use would be,” Carlisle-Cummins said. “[We want to] stay current without having to reinvent the thing on a new platform.”

Advisory team member and UC Davis English professor Mike Ziser spoke about some of his goals for the project and some of the important decisions that will soon be made.

“I’d like it to be on a platform that allows for a very immersive experience, but that can shrink the audience,” Ziser said. “We have to balance the desire to involve as many people as possible while still making for an immersive experience.”

Having a user-friendly tool with a high concentration of information and rarely heard stories about food production in California’s past could help to build greater understanding of the problems that face the state’s agriculture today and in the future.

“There are so many stories left untold in our incredibly productive farming state which impairs our ability to understand and respond to present conditions,” Ichikawa said. “I hope the atlas will be useful, enjoyable and sparks interest across disciplines and across California.”

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