

Tuleyome Tales

Finding our sense of place in Yolo County

By John Mott-Smith

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The Central Valley where we live is a part of the route for bird migration that is the Pacific Flyway, but there is another kind of migration taking place, a human migration. Though there are still many “old timers” in the area, many of us weren’t born here; we came from someplace else. We came because of the university, or the state government, to get away from the congestion of the Bay Area, because housing is more affordable, or for all of these reasons and many others. In my case, I came to Davis from Santa Cruz in 1979, leaving the mountains, ocean and forests that defined my sense of place. Before then, my views of Yolo County were through a car window as I traveled from the Bay Area to the Sierra Nevada. I remember feeling a bit bereft of natural beauty, of a loss of my sense of place, when I came here to live, and of winning a letter writing exchange with a friend in Australia over who could best complete the sentence, “Where I live is so flat that ...”

Time changed that. I now feel a deep sense of rootedness, of place, and I have found that many of those who came and stayed here have had a similar experience, and share a profound feeling of attachment to the region. This is more than just settling down here; marrying, working, raising a family --- what we typically think of as “putting down roots.” It is also a connection to the region, to the land itself. Where does this sense of place come from?

Our sense of place comes in large part from our connection to agriculture. It comes from seeing the patterns of crops on the land. It comes from watching the crops grow and change with the seasons; the corn that gets taller in the field; the tomatoes that ripen in the sun; the rice in flooded fields; the hay stacked in piles; the egrets gathering in the fields of mown alfalfa; the safflower changing in color from green to yellow to burnt orange; and fields of sunflowers tracking the path of the sun as it moves across the summer sky each day. We live in the midst of farms, farmers, and the food they grow. We live surrounded by an astounding abundance of fresh fruit, vegetables, nuts, grains, oils, meats, grapes for wine --- virtually everything required for the dinner table. You can’t miss it, especially if you are behind a slow-moving tractor on a country road, or turning off your engine while waiting for a train to pass.

It also comes from our towns. We are still small. Our towns don’t run into each other. Generally, there is one downtown, one high school, one soccer league, one library, one senior center, and one community center. Our elected officials know many of us by name. You can run into people you know while shopping at the market, and you know that friends have a protective eye out for your kids. There is a sense of community,

safety, and neighborliness here that is different from what you find when living in a big city or urban area.

It comes from our Mediterranean climate, and from the relief that the delta breeze provides at the end of a hot summer day. It comes from the seemingly endless gray of the tule fog in the winter, and from the north wind that heralds a change in weather. It comes from the rushing flood in the by-pass when the Sacramento River overtops the Fremont Weir, and the general sense of watchful and nervous anticipation as water levels rise in Cache Creek and the Sacramento River. It comes from the change in color of the land and hills around us --- the wet green of winter and spring and the dry, golden brown of summer and fall.

It comes from our compass point visual landmarks. The Berryessa Gap to the West, and Mt. Diablo to the South are iconic images, visible to everyone from everywhere. And, on a day with good visibility, you can see the snow-capped Sierra Nevada to the East and the Sutter Buttes to the North. It comes from the infrastructure of flood control and irrigation --- the Monticello Dam (and the “Glory Hole”), the weirs, the canals, the by-pass, and the causeway that both connects us to Sacramento and also seems to keep urban development at arms length.

And there is nature here, lots of it. You can see river otters in the by-pass. There are the spectacular flocks of migrating waterfowl --- ducks and geese and swans. Less obvious but equally spectacular is the migration of numerous other bird species --- such as warblers and shore birds --- through our area in the spring and fall. There are huge, noisy flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds. There are the valley oaks, those huge trees, standing alone, seemingly anti-social, not wanting to be crowded by other trees. There are the riparian corridors dense with vines and full of cotton from the Cottonwoods. And there are the hills, the Blue Ridge connecting Putah Creek to Cache Creek, and making up a third of the county we think of as flat. And, thanks to the hard work of many people, there are several areas set aside for us to enjoy as open space or natural habitat, including the Yolo Basin, Stebbins-Cold Canyon, portions of Putah Creek, the Cache Creek Wild and Scenic area, and other areas that have been protected and are accessible to the public.

One measure of the extent to which the “sense of place” has taken hold in our hearts is observable in our culture. Many local artists draw, carve, paint, sculpt, write about, or otherwise depict images of cows, fields, low hills in the distance, Valley Oaks, and sunflowers --- all images of our area. These works of art are compelling in part because so many people have a deep sense of place that is evoked and reinforced by these images. People are drawn to these artworks to decorate their homes, and we send them as gifts to friends who live elsewhere, sharing the beauty and pride in our place.

These are just some of the things that contribute to our sense of home, our pride of place, here in Yolo County. There are many others that inform our appreciation. When we stop to think about them, and list them, we are reminded that there are no guarantees that many of these characteristics will continue in the future. We have only to drive to the Bay Area to observe development and its effects creeping our way on the I-80 corridor, or to

look across the river at the massive developments in Natomas and Elk Grove to see that agriculture, open space, and natural habitat for wildlife --- the underlying pillars of what we cherish most about our region --- are under great pressure. These values will not preserve themselves. If we want the future to include those things we value now, it takes active citizens, organized into constituencies that can advocate for strong policies at the state, county, and city levels, for the protection and preservation of those things that define our attachment to where we live --- our “deep home place.”

John Mott-Smith is a member of the Board of Directors of Tuleyome, a local non-profit working to protect both our wild heritage and our agricultural heritage for future generations. Past Tuleyome Tales articles are available in the library section of their website.

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