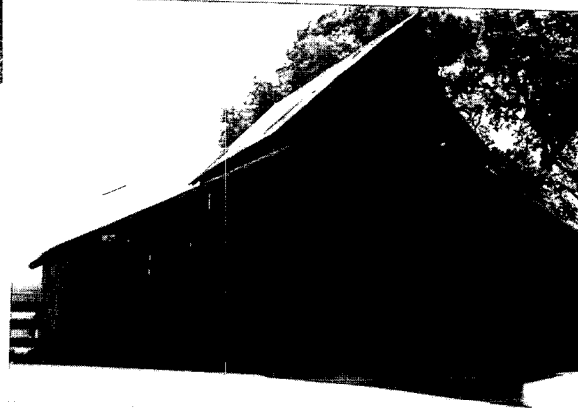


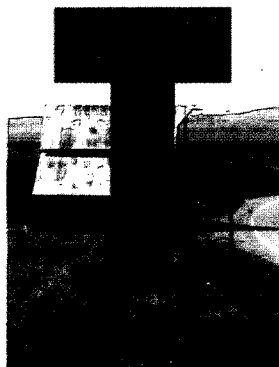
# The time of th

It has been called by many names, some of them quite grand. The Great Central Valley. The California Plain. The Serengeti of North America. The California Heartland. The Twin Valleys. The Other California. To those of us who grew up here, though, it's just the valley, a word residents sometimes will pronounce with a mock twang.



By Peter H. King

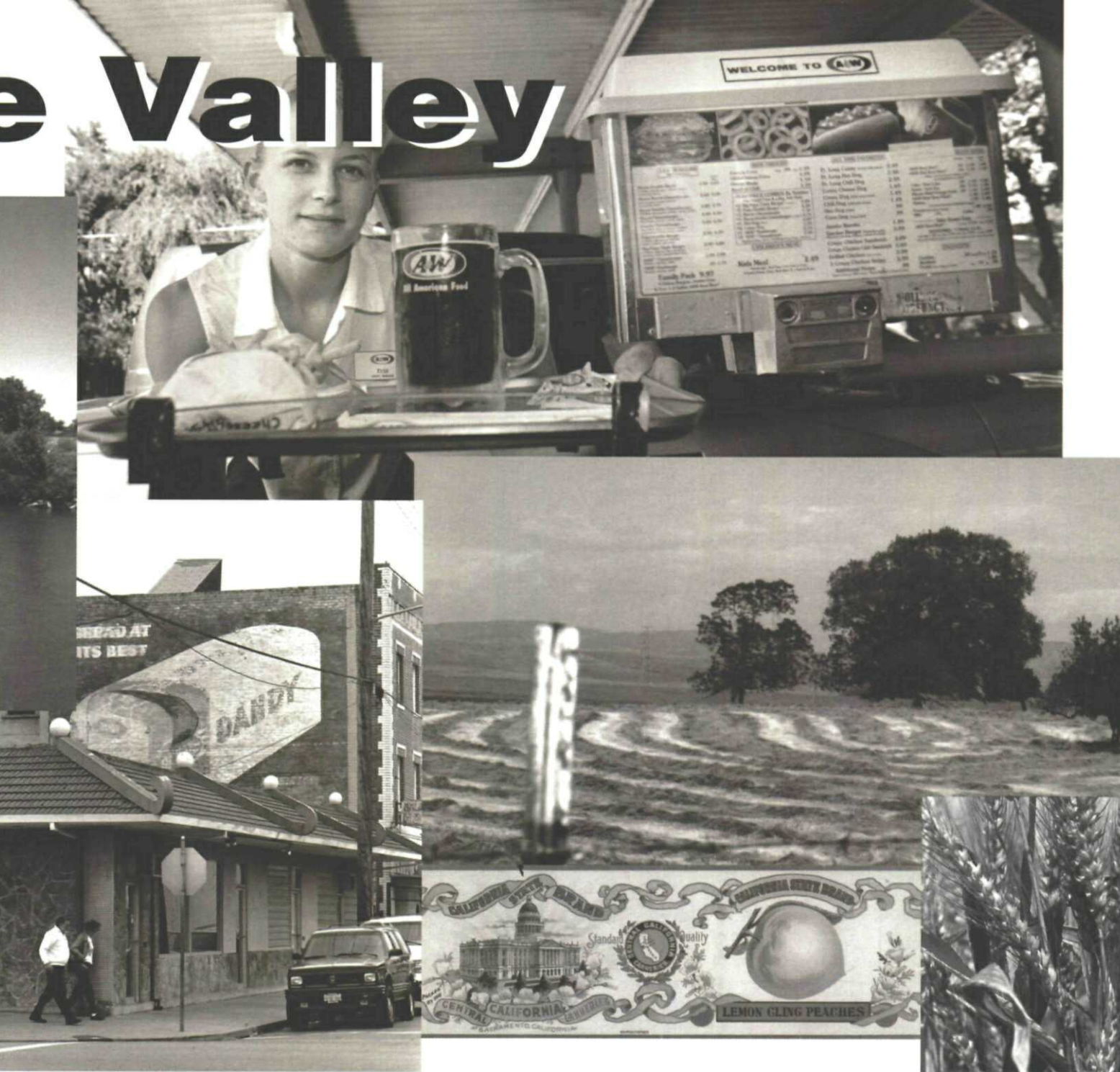
HIGHWAY 99, north of Madera.



ake a seat at one of the picnic tables outside the Mammoth Orange — last of the 1950s-era hamburger stands that were built and painted to resemble giant oranges, home of “Alaska-sized” burgers and “Fat John” hot dogs, and a valley icon if there ever was one — and watch the trucks blast by on Highway 99. The trucks tell a story about a place in transition.

There goes a big rig pulling grain trailers, followed by a cattle carrier, followed by a Foster Farms semi and now a hay truck — valley agriculture on the move, feeding the nation, making the desert bloom, and all that. And here comes a flatbed loaded with two-by-fours, and another with bags of concrete mix, and an entire convoy of Wal-Mart semis, rushing to fill the big box stores that seem to be

# e Valley



going up in the towns strung along this highway as fast as the new subdivisions they mean to serve.

Which is to say, quite fast.

The Valley is changing, but then it always has been. The towns along Highway 99 — technically, it's a freeway now, another change — can document the past as well as forecast the future. Anyone who wants to know what Fresno was like, say, a generation or two ago, need only drive 30 miles south and take the exit into Visalia. The future of Madera can be seen today in Merced, which before too long will grow to look a lot like Modesto.

Once, back in the time of the Gold Rush, the valley grew cattle. Then it was wheat. Then grapes and figs and

cotton and all the other crops that make it, still today, the most productive agricultural region in the world. Now, though, more and more it also grows housing tracts, often named to honor the farms and ranches they displace. The valley's population of five million is expected to triple in the next 40 years — that's a lot of two-by-fours, many Wal-Marts. Given these trends, the valley has begun to produce a new crop: Reports and studies and conferences and journalism, vast piles of paper, long sessions of worried talk, all aimed from various angles at the question of what all this growth will mean to this place. Here's one more for the pile.

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It has been called by many names, some of them quite grand. The Great Central Valley. The California Plain. The Serengeti of North America. The California Heartland. The Twin Valleys. The Other California. To those of us who grew up here, though, it's just the valley, a word residents sometimes will pronounce with a mock twang, the vowels flattened and stretched: *I'm from the vaaalleeey.*

The intent is comic self-deprecation, the valley's common defense against the snobberies, both imagined and real, of coastal Californians who live across the passes in the more fabled cities of the gilded land. This insecurity might seem a trifling point, a cultural quirk, but in fact it is an important element of the collective valley mindset. It explains many things.

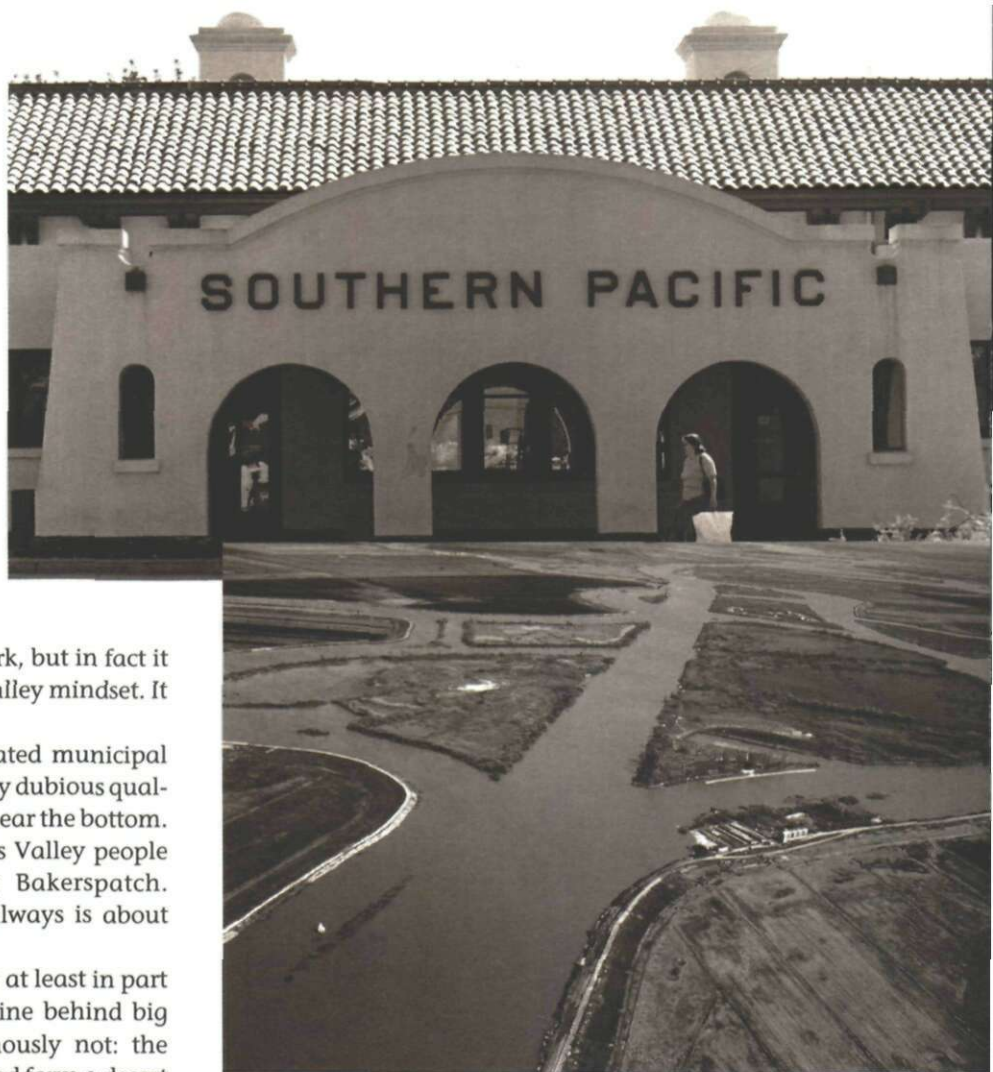
It explains, for example, the overheated municipal reaction whenever one of those scientifically dubious quality-of-life lists dares to rank a Valley town near the bottom. It explains as well some of the nicknames Valley people will hang on their own hometowns: Bakerspatch. Sacratomato. P-ville. Fresburg; humor always is about more than laughs.

More importantly, though, it explains at least in part the Valley's historic readiness to fall in line behind big dreamers, some successful, others infamously not: the agricultural pioneers who would irrigate and farm a desert or hook the world on raisins; the shopping mall developers who promise Nordstroms but deliver Targets; the field-of-dreams merchants who would scatter ballparks — yes, *minor league now, but you never know...* — from Bakersfield to Redding. Anyone with an idea for how to put the valley “on the map” always will be assured an attentive audience.

In truth, the Valley as a whole never has quite known what to make of itself. Many of its towns are too big to be called towns, but are not quite cities, either. They seem caught in a sort of gangling adolescence. Their newspapers dig up big-city scandals and cover urban crime, but they also feature the pound's “Dog-of-the-week.” Agriculture is everywhere — except within the ever-expanding suburbs, where it is nowhere.

As with almost every noteworthy facet of this part of the world, the late William Saroyan already has written about the Valley's struggle with its identity, and written about it with a clarity that still endures more than a half-century later. In a story published in 1934, Saroyan wrote this about his native Fresno:

*Two miles from the heart of our city a man could come to the desert and feel the loneliness of a desolate area, a place lost in the earth, far from the solace of human thought. Standing at the edge of our city, a man could feel that we had made this place of streets and dwellings in the stillness and loneliness of the desert, and that we had done a brave thing. We had come to this dry area that was without history, and we had paused in it and*



*built our houses and we were slowly creating the legend of our life. We were digging for water and we were leading streams through the dry land. We were planting and ploughing and standing in the midst of the garden we were making.*

*... We had buried no great men because we hadn't had time to produce any great men. We had been too busy trying to get water into the desert. The shadow of no great mind was over our city. But we had a playground called Cosmos Playground. We had public schools named after Emerson and Hawthorne and Lowell and Longfellow. Two great railways had their lines running through our city.... A man could feel our city was beautiful. Or a man could feel that our city was fake, that our lives were empty, and that we were the contemporaries of jack-rabbits. Or a man could have one viewpoint in the morning and another in the evening.*



An ancient seabed, the Valley actually consists of two valleys, one drained by the Sacramento River, the other by the San Joaquin. For that matter, the Tulare Lake Basin in the Valley's southern third also qualifies as a separate geographical entity. Such distinctions, however, have been rendered moot in the past century by the massive replumbing of the Valley's natural waterworks, along with the wholesale land-leveling done by agriculture's scrapers.





Increasingly, it has become what the satellite photographs and the utilitarian phrase "Central Valley" suggest: A singular region, a common place, a great trough of cultivated land and emerging townscapes running down the middle of California, 430

miles long and, at some points, 75 miles wide.

Which, of course, says nothing about what it is like to be from the Valley, to be of the Valley. Sometimes Californians who live beyond the bowl of the Valley, and who know it only as the numbing landscape of long, hot journeys to the Sierra or treacherous creeps through the winter fog, will find out that I was born and raised in Fresno. It's not exactly a secret.

In fact, I have discovered living in and around Los Angeles, and later San Francisco, that a certain cachet comes with being able to declare, affecting just the slightest twang, that one's roots are Valley roots. No matter how suburban your childhood, it instantly is assumed that you are a yeoman of the land, that you know how to milk a cow or fix a tractor. Your counsel is sought on all questions concerning trees or Merle Haggard.

Eventually, these Californians not from the Valley will get around to asking their main question. I have been asked it, not once, but many, many times:

*How can anyone stand living there?*

They mean, of course, the heat.

Or they mean the visual blight of streets like Fresno's Blackstone Avenue.

Or they mean the reputation as a haven for hicks, summed up nicely — no, make that not nicely at all — by

a travel guide entry that describes Fresno as a town where culture is commonly understood to be "what they take from your throat when you have strep."

My typical response is to mumble and fall back on humor. It's a great place to be *from*, I will say. Occasionally, though, I do rise to the bait and mount a defense that would make the chamber proud. I mention affordable housing prices and feeding the world and Saroyan and the Fresno poets. I recite from memory the names of Fresno State Bulldogs who have gone on to athletic glory in the pros. I talk about the ad-

vantages of central location. Yes, I come from a town that has promoted itself as being "so close to so much," a slogan which, to my ears, sounds an awful lot like "close, but no cigar," but this last observation I do not share with the inquisitive outsiders.

What I cannot tell them, because only Valley inhabitants would understand, is about the summer nights — about what it's like to emerge from the air-conditioned cocoons of the day and drink in the calming midnight air, to roam through the city on foot, or bicycle, or in a car, windows down, music up, deep into the night.

I cannot tell them about the faint hint of snow that can be sensed in spring breezes that blow down from the mountains, or the powerful, earthy fragrance of grapes baking on the ground into raisins. Or the taste of the cold water pumped from the well behind our house, or the Thompson grapes stolen — we kids preferred to think of it more as a rite of passage than theft — straight from the neighbor's vines across the street.

Valley things.

The Valley where I grew up still felt connected to agriculture. In the early years of parochial school, it seemed we always were being urged to pray for rain — to help the farmers. The exception was in the summer, when the grapes were drying on their trays in the vineyards. Then we were prodded to pray for it *not* to rain — again, to help the farmers.

"The Valley had no calendar," is how, in his novel, "California Time," Ernest J. Finney has described the agricultural imprint on the Valley. "Time in California wasn't measured out in months; it was by crops. Spring meant strawberries, then the apricots, cherries, peaches, and it was summer, hot as fire; tomatoes, squash, plums, Thompson seedless, figs. Fall, still blazing hot, was cotton, persimmons, pomegranates, walnuts, almonds. Winter was oranges, tangerines, and lemons. Then the dead time arrived, tule fog like a thick spread of moonwash hiding the sun, and you couldn't be sure you were awake or alive, everyone laying low, waiting for the first almond blossoms in February, when time started up again."

The Valley where I grew up was a place where kids roamed in packs for miles on their bicycles, where in the summertime they would lose their shoes for months, developing enormous, asphalt-blackened calluses on the bottoms of their feet. The Valley where I grew up had a certain topographical logic to it. It was still possible, on good days anyway, to stand in one spot and see both the Sierra and Coastal ranges. And seeing those mountains, it was impossible not to daydream about what life was like on the other side, and await the day of escape.

*Tulare dust in the farm boy's nose, sang Haggard, wonderin' where the freight train goes.*

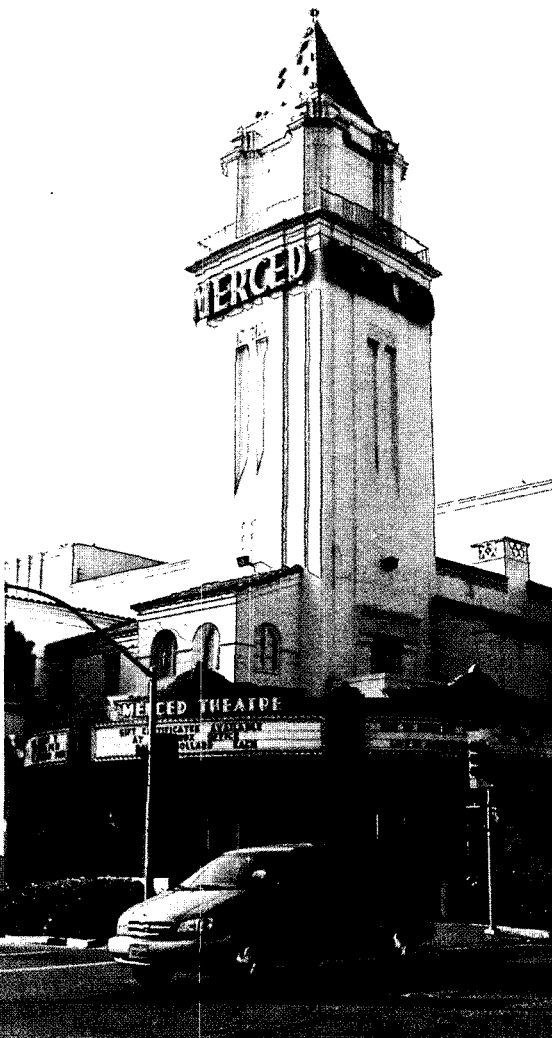
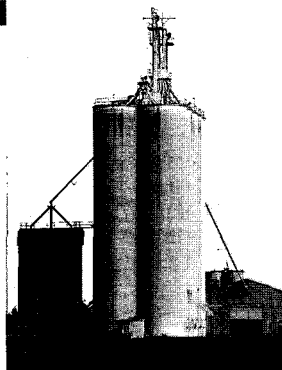
Much of the Valley where I grew up is gone, or at least going fast. Of course, this is what people almost always say about almost any place. "All that is constant about the California of my childhood," Joan Didion wrote about her native Sacramento, "is the rate at which it disappears." This was in a *Holiday* magazine piece first published in 1965. I wonder how much of the California of her childhood Didion could find today, nearly 35 years of change later.

Still, it cannot be denied: The north Fresno fig orchards where we congregated late summer nights as teenagers are now houses. A steady haze of dust and smog makes it difficult sometimes to make out from the valley floor even the Sierra foothills, and forget about the coast range. There are days when the local news seems an endless litany of crimes against children, and what parent would let their kids roam free in that world? And the more they grow, the less the bigger towns — "population centers," as they often are called in all the growth studies and reports — seem attached in any real way to the surrounding agriculture.

Contrast Finney's agrarian calendar, from a novel set in the 1920s, to the more recent observations of author Victor Davis Hanson, a Selma raisin grower and Fresno State professor of Greek: "They no longer care where or how they get their food, as long as it is firm, fresh, and cheap," he wrote in "Fields Without Dreams" of American town people in general and valley town people in particular. "They have no interest in preventing the urbanization of their farmland as long as parks, Little League fields, and an occasional bike lane are left amid the concrete, stucco, and asphalt. They have no need of someone who they are not, who reminds them of their past and not their future."

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However belatedly, a disclaimer must now be added: To talk of collective mindsets and such is a risky venture when addressing such a vast region and diverse popula-



tion. There is no one Valley viewpoint, no one Valley experience. Within the Valley all sorts of feuds and jealousies and conflicts simmer. Great agricultural wealth rubs shoulders with some of the worst poverty in the land — not exactly an economic coincidence, some would argue. Having filled out the Santa Clara Valley, high tech now has begun to lap over the Altamont Pass, bringing jobs to Sacramento and a real estate boom to places like Tracy, but elsewhere in the Valley depressed little farmtowns must sell their municipal souls to the prison boom in the hope of steadier employment and maybe even a McDonald's.

The Valley I know is only the Valley I know, and that leaves out a whole lot. For someone who grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, the Sacramento Valley can seem a foreign place. The mountains loom up closer, and the light has a different slant and cast to it. Even the dirt looks different. In a similar vein, I wonder about the Hmong refugees who huddle over their hoes, working postcard plots of strawberries on the fringes of many Valley towns. Their literature has not yet emerged, so for now their Valley must remain by and large a mystery to the rest of us. Thirty-five years from now, what vanished artifacts of their early Valley days will these people be lamenting? What is their Valley?

There are other things I wonder about as I sit at the Mammoth Orange and watch the trucks roar by, rippling

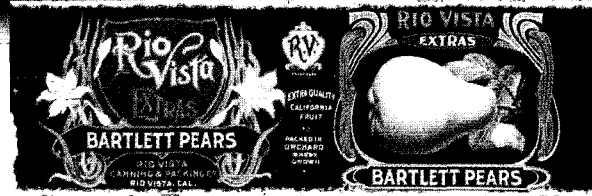




known as liberals. I am talking about real politics, ground-level politics. As the towns grow, will the townsfolk in turn grow more impatient with city councils that are willing to be led about by developers?

Will the agrarians, who generally have kept a wary distance from the city power-structures in the past, now pay for their rugged isolation? Is it possible that the 15 million Valley residents of

2040 might come to question the long-standing assumption that agriculture needs most of the water and the ability to



spray chemicals into the valley's shared air?

And yet, if agriculture does crumble — as some of the studies project it might — what would replace it? Does anybody really believe the next Silicon Valley or Hollywood will rise out of the vines of raisinland? Should maybe the valley's economic push be, not for less agriculture, but for more of it — enticing the big agricultural concerns, for just one example, to move their corporate headquarters out of places like L.A.'s Bunker Hill or the Bay Area's San Ramon and into the Valley? Advocates of economic diversity for the Valley refer, quite appropriately, to the persistent high unemployment and farmtown poverty. At the same time, the Valley weathered the last recession better than any other region of California. What is the message in that?

Beyond politics and economics, how will the Valley itself be altered? Will it be just a lot more of the same? Triple the drive time to shop at the Target that was supposed to be a Nordstrom. Triple the thickness of the haze that hides the mountains. Or could something grander rise up out of the dust? Could this become a place with the demographic clout to demand that place "on the map" which it coveted for so long, but also with the taste and smarts and leadership to avoid becoming just a poor man's Los Angeles — without the beach, or economic muscle.

In short, I wonder if it can be done right.

I wonder what the point of the place will be if it cannot.

*A man could feel our city was beautiful, Saroyan wrote. Or a man could feel that our city was fake, that our lives were empty, and that we were the contemporaries of jack-rabbits. Or a man could have one viewpoint in the morning and another in the evening.* 🏠

the oleanders in the center divide. I wonder if the Valley actually will grow as fast and furious as the state forecasts suggest. I have no reason to doubt the numbers, but is it possible the Valley might be hiding some punches? Could the August heat and winter fog sieges serve as a sort of moat of discomfort, driving down the numbers?

Could the mounting concern over Valley growth be a bit overblown? It's possible to drive west from this spot toward Los Banos on Highway 152 and for 40 miles see almost nothing but cattle pastures, orchards, alfalfa fields, farm ditches, a farmhouse and filling station or two — agriculture stretching out from horizon to horizon. It's a big place, the Valley, and most of it shows little promise of becoming, as the phrase of dread goes, "the next L.A." Of course, drive north and south on Highway 99, and the predictions don't seem far-fetched at all. It's possible to see towns in motion, traveling toward one another as fast as the house framers can hammer.

If the population growth does come, how will it change Valley politics? I am not speaking of Republicans and Democrats, or conservatives and the progressives formally

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# A sense of place, a clash of memory

by Sigrid  
Bathen



I knew it was changing, irrevocably so, one beautiful spring day about 10 years ago, when my then 12-year-old daughter and I were walking with my parents in Bidwell Park, that vast and stunning natural resource a few steps from the front door of the house where I was raised. We walked what my mother calls “the loop,” a trek that took us down a worn trail near the park’s entrance, under the roar of the ugly, 1960s-era elevated freeway, across an arched wooden footbridge over Chico Creek.

As we passed under a huge canopy of oaks shading the Saturday softball games, we encountered a wild-looking man yelling at a frightened, cowering young woman much smaller than himself. Probably out of his head on drugs, booze, or both – the methamphetamine labs said to be proliferating in rural enclaves of the Central Valley came to mind — he was threatening to cut off the young woman’s finger if she didn’t return the ring she was struggling to remove.

To my horror, my mother, who is five feet tall and was then nearly 70, walked up to this big crazed man, shook her finger at him, and told him he should be ashamed of himself and to leave the woman alone. I was thunderstruck when, meek as a kitten, he did precisely that. “Please Mom,” I later implored, “next time just call the police.”

Not long afterward, there was a serious assault on a jogger in the park. Then, shortly after Thanksgiving in 1990, a young man with cerebral palsy was found by an early-morning park worker lying in a pool of blood, beaten to death near “Annie’s Glen,” a verdant picnic grove named for the wife of the town’s founder, by thugs who stole his bicycle. More recently, two Butte Community College football players, both 19, were charged last year with beating to death a homeless man who was sleeping in the bushes of an apartment building near the bucolic campus of California State University, Chico. In what the prosecutor described as the worst beating he had ever seen, the burly athletes (one weighed nearly 300 pounds), beat the 5’7” victim with a 40-pound water jug and a metal tire rim.

The harsh contemporary details of these quintessentially “urban” crimes in the rural North Valley community where my parents moved from

Sacramento in 1947, when I was nearly 1, clash now with my memories as a child playing in Bidwell Park with a sense of total innocence and complete security, when my brother and sister and I worried only about catching poison oak and getting home before dark.

Our father, a businessman active in civic affairs, a city councilman and mayor, cautioned us that the park was sometimes a haven for “undesirables” of various sorts, that the small city police force really couldn’t afford to patrol it properly, and we should always go in groups. Years later, in a reflection of the changing times, my daughter and her cousins were allowed to go there only with adults in tow.

By the mid-1960s, I was attending Chico State and sharing a student apartment near the place where the homeless man would be killed some three decades later. Even then, we rarely locked the doors of our homes or our cars, and the only even marginally criminal act I recall from that time was when some neighborhood kids entered my parents’ home through an unlocked door and raided the liquor cabinet. My father didn’t discover the crime until he went

to the bar to pour himself a scotch and soda a couple of evenings later.

Crime is hardly the only measure of change in a place. Now when we visit our parents in their house in one of the new subdivisions that have sprouted like Legos south of town, I feel like I’ve been transported to some tile-and-stucco southern California suburb, anchored by big shopping malls on either end of town. The “downtown” where my father’s office supply store is located, though he sold it years ago, is a charming collection of boutiques and restaurants, but hardly the business center it once was.

The backyard of their house abuts a rocky gorge that becomes a small stream in the winter, and they can sit on the patio in good weather and gaze out over a field of wild grasses and giant oaks where cows graze. My 81-year-old father says this declining “open space” will probably outlast his lifetime – that’s his plan, at any rate — though the developers will get to it soon enough. 🏠



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