

Mostly about People

By Wally Traling



Tom Sawyer Country

We've got Tom Sawyer country near our place and didn't even know it.

It's sort of a miniature Mississippi called Laurel creek and it flows through that vast mysterious tumbled mesa called Neary's lagoon.

The 10-year-old chases his dreams and waters his imagination down there. Now that the evenings are lighter, safari after safari leaves our house after school. A line of neighborhood towheads disappear into the jungled marsh and always return with reports that replace breathing in the telling.

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Neary's lagoon is probably the last of the original great open spaces in Santa Cruz. Nature maintains it. The lagoon stretches behind the Southern Pacific depot near the beach and is corralled by Bay and California streets.

It should have been a city park by now, with waterways and a large lake, but, of course, officialdom never caught that vision.

One evening last week the 10-year-old included his pater in his safari—quite an honor, y'know.

I fixed my face with rabid anticipation and we crossed California street, walked around back of the new First Methodist church, skidded down a steep embankment and were suddenly swallowed by Livingstonian jungles.

We marched humped-back through tunnels of vine and shrub, duckwalking through recently hacked passages. Our cadence was a running commentary by the 10-year-old, warning of pitfalls ahead.

"Come on, you can make it, dad!" was flung back over his shoulder every 20 paces (I was NOT scared. Wild blackberry vines kept clutching my neck).

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Finally we arrived at the creek,

and let me say here that 10 minutes before it happened, riding a raft was the last thing in the world I ever expected to do again.

By golly, I haven't ridden a raft since—well, never mind.

It was a beauty—three heavy beams laid parallel, a tree limb or two across and a scattering of Heinz Variety boards on top. The 10-year-old was head raftsman and I polled and the second I pushed away from the bank, I knew I was liking it.

Laurel creek is not just an ordinary stream. This is the stream mentioned in Father Crespi's log with the passing of the Portola party through here in 1769.

On October 17, the explorers camped by a river which they named San Lorenzo and the next morning Father Crespie wrote, in part:

"About 8 o'clock in the morning we started taking our way along the coast which runs to the west-northwest toward the sea. Five hundred steps after we started we crossed a good arroyo of running water which descends from some high hills. It was named Santa Cruz."

Most local historians agree that this creek is the present day Laurel creek which runs from Escalona, generally down Laurel street, across Mission and into Neary's lagoon.

Perhaps we were adventuring on the very spot that Portola sloshed across. At any rate, the creek is now walled by thousands upon thousands of tall yellow iris. Behind them stretch tullies and willow trees.

The place is a bird sanctuary. Polling silently through this we saw flocks of quail, pheasant, blackbirds, ducks and swallows. The noises of the city were deadened by the dense growth.

It is a very beautiful place and we never fell into the historic water once, let alone twice.

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