

Silent Harvest

The Disappearance of the Family Farm

Where I grew up in the suburbs of Southern California, there was only one farm that I can remember. The Murata farm was nestled behind the Cadillac dealership, within walking distance of Winchell's Donuts and hundreds of houses. The traffic noise from Florence Avenue was a reminder that this was not out in the country. This was the suburbs of the 60s. I never gave farming much thought back then. The lack of interest I showed for that farm, or any other, was inversely proportional to the consuming interest that I displayed in the Dodgers' place in the National League standings. Strangely, as I reach a half-century on this planet, my interest in farming and baseball has juxtaposed.

My waning interest in baseball has paralleled the huge guaranteed contracts, prima donna players, and owners with too much of everything. One might equate these changes within the game to changing times and attitudes. But for me the changes are like understanding a foreign language for which I have never displayed a discernible aptitude.

I went to school with the Murata's daughter, Ann. I always wondered why she worked at her family's produce stand after school, a time when most of us were more or less free to roam the neighborhood or play sandlot games. When my mom would come home with Murata strawberries or cucumbers, she would report that all of the Murata kids were working at the stand. Maybe there was a glint of insinuation in her statement, in hopes that our front lawn would get mowed without her incessant badgering. I guess I did wonder why Ann's life was so different from mine? After all, she, too, was just a kid. But those thoughts were fleeting. Strike one.



It is now two-thirds of a lifetime and half a head of disappearing hair later. I am settled in a small Central Valley community with a wife and yet another in a series of cats, and a considerable amount of time to contemplate the current state of my surroundings. And it is through this stick-your-head-out-of-the-window approach that I first became aware of changes to my neighborhood.

It started with the leveling of a prune orchard behind our house a good decade ago. It continued as I embarked

on a life's work to photograph California agricultural land and saw some unsettling occurrences upon the land and its guardians. Fueled further by statistical evidence and interviews, mixed with some unsoicited monolog from farmers, I began to see the picture of a great disappearance. These were not the subject of missing person reports, but rather, the content of rural census figures and land management studies. And it was the clinical impersonality of numbers on multi-paged documents that piqued my curiosity about this disappearance, that of the small family farm and farmer.

At times the disappearance of the family farms seems like a dirty little secret in California's Central Valley, the geographical boundary for this tale. Whereas stories about the difficulties in farming in the Midwest abound in newsprint, radio and filmed documentary, the promised land that is California bears little witness to such a decline of its own. But the evidence is irrefutable, if held up to a lightbox of scrutiny rather than a closet of ignorance and, worse yet, indifference. California's land is not an unlimited resources. And the competition to occupy and control this diverse landscape is creating winners and losers. One of those losers is the small family farm.

To lament such a loss is to attach some value to it. For most urban dwellers and not a few rural counterparts, there is no sense of loss. For those with no connection to agriculture, past or present, there is no grieving process. What passes for concern is nothing more than fleeting gesture. But for the California farmer, it is the loss of livelihood and as his grief moves beyond denial and anger, it is the loss of psyche.

Maybe if there were farmer trading cards and the barn had a cute nickname like "bullpen", the urbanite would have more to latch on to. Unfortunately, the disappearance of the family farms in the Central Valley will go largely undetected until it is too late. The sad reality is that, like the baseball game I knew as a kid, the family farm represents elements of community, continuity, and sense of place that I will one day lament. And if a model exists for what was good about the good ole'days it may just lie in the traditions of small communities represented by the old Holt tractors, metal milk cans, overalls and now crumbling barns.

The Murata farm is no longer there. It was sold shortly before I left my hometown of Norwalk more than thirty-five-years ago. Ann's parents retired comfortably from the sale of land, which effectively retired the farm. Not really much different from the folks who sold the prune orchard ten years ago just over the fence from my house in Yuba City, now replaced by one of hundreds of new houses within a stone's throw of our house.

In retrospect, most of the very changes that are taking place now in the Central Valley were played out long ago in the places I frequented as a child. These same places are now the scenes of traffic jams, middle fingers, and dirty diapers in the gutters. And the themes of decay that permeate words, sentences and paragraphs are nothing more than a recurrence of things I have already seen. Maybe I was always closer to agriculture than I realized. And now I just want it back.