The Valley Oak: OurHeritage Tree

by Charles Kennard

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Entering the Ross Valley in 1849, the physician "came upon a tract of park-like land, shaded by ancient trees with a sparkling stream running through it." The enchanted Dr. Taliaferro paid his compliments to the owner of Rancho Cañada de Herrera land grant, Domingo Sais, and acquired forty acres of land from him – including the future site of the Marin Town and Country Club in Fairfax.

Many nineteenth-century visitors to the Bay Area commented on the landscape of picturesque oaks and grassland, as beautifully arranged as any landscape architect could devise. These oaks were principally the deciduous valley oak (*roble* to Spanish speakers, and *Quercus lobata* to botanists), growing in the deep alluvial soil of the valley floor. The surrounding grassland had long been kept clear of brush by the Indian practice of regularly setting fires to facilitate acorn and seed gathering and hunting, in their seasons. Latterly, herds of the longhorn cattle introduced by the Spanish stripped the grass from the landscape. A traveler in the South Bay in 1841 noted that "no plant of any consequence was seen – every particle of vegetation (but trees) being browsed down by the numerous herds of cattle everywhere to be found in California."

With the spread of agriculture in the Ross Valley, and the voracious appetite of San Francisco and local brick kilns for cordwood, most of the landmark valley oaks too were felled in the 1850s and 1860s. An early photograph of the Ross Valley shows hayfields crossed by a bare rut, San Anselmo Creek. Writing in the 1920s, James H. Wilkins lamented the clear-cutting of hardwoods and redwoods during the 1850s: "the devastation wrought through the Ross Valley and along the foothills and canyons down to Corte Madera was nothing short of sacrilege."

Today's picture is very different, due to the passion of the owners of Marin's new house-lots for planting trees for posterity: cypresses, elms, cedars, black locusts, eucalyptuses, pines, planes and many

Valley oaks can live to 150 years in San Anselmo

others, souvenirs of other places and other climes. The San Francisco Theological Seminary, built atop a hill in San Anselmo in the early 1890s, was one of the first developments to include ornamental plantings, and that in time counted many trees and shrubs from the Holy Land in their number. Gradually, moved by wind, water and animal, native riparian trees have re-established themselves along our creeks: willows, alders, box elders, ashes, maples and bays.

The stately valley oaks – and the evergreen live oaks too – can again be found scattered through much of the Ross Valley, most of them probably sprung from acorns tucked into moist soil by jays. Under ideal conditions, they can live for several hundred years, but in our semi-urbanized setting, the ring counts read 100 to 150 years when they are no longer safe. The majority of them are close to the edges of the valley or in the side drainages, away from the former hay- and wheat-fields that were cleared of trees, and away from the salt-marshes.

Valley oak groves, with their long spreading arms and twisting secondary branches, add grandeur to several neighborhoods in our watershed. In Fairfax, Porteous Lane is outstanding; Yolanda Drive and the vicinity of the Robson-Harrington House in San Anselmo have fine trees; Ross School is shaded by large oaks; others are found scattered though Kent Woodlands and Larkspur; and a large one stands in the Bon Air Shopping Center parking lot. Valley oaks also thrive here and there along the creeks. The Oregon oak, with shinier leaves, is at home on the lower slopes of the hills, and hybridizes with the valley oak, so probably some of the large deciduous oaks are intermediate species.

Oaks are the true heritage trees of the Ross Valley, evocative of this area's historic and prehistoric past, and add great beauty – and value – to neighborhoods where they grow. Being deciduous, they let light through in the darker winter months, and in summer, their high, spreading crowns provide an open shade. Their effect is similar to that of the non-native elms planted so ubiquitously in Ross, but unlike elms, oaks are a bonanza for wildlife unequalled by any other California species. Jays, woodpeckers, band-tailed pigeons, flickers, nuthatches, titmice, thrushes, deer, squirrels and raccoons feed on the acorns, and many more creatures feed on insects that feed on oaks, and shelter in their branches. Sudden oak death is devastating our evergreen oaks and their worlds of wildlife, but the valley oak has not proved susceptible.

As the large oaks reach the ends of their lives, we must ensure that they are replaced by another generation. They grow surprisingly fast – although slowly compared to pines – starting from an acorn, they reach twenty feet or more in fifteen years, and leafy enough to provide shade for a parked car. Valley and live oaks at different stages of growth can be seen at a restoration project co-managed by Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed in front of Drake High School in San Anselmo. Young oaks need protection from deer and benefit from watering for two or three years. Gradual side-branch pruning speeds their growth skyward.

To plant an oak and watch it grow larger from year to year as its roots multiply and reach ever deeper, day and night, is tremendously satisfying. There will come a time when it becomes a roost for birds, forms shiny green oak galls, and then is strong enough to stand in. When the planter is gone, it will still be expanding its fluttering canopy, producing thousands of acorns, and being enjoyed as a neighborhood landmark.

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