



The Principality of Mendocino County



Photo: V. Sharkey

A TRAVELER'S VIEW



PART 1

Blacksmithing STILL ALIVE

Mendocino County's Public Radio transmits the Near and Far, the Left and Right, Up and Down of what in a pretty red state seems a principality, an enclave, a refuge, the Principality of Mendocino.. The somewhat eccentric electronic emissions encircling the principality start before state route 128 hews up the valley from Boontling times to the champagne ways of some of these days.

But when I arrive late at night in the township, the village seat, the center of Gravity of Mendocino proper, the only apparent emissions are from the Mendocino Art Center studios. That, and of course Paterson's Pub and Dick's Bar, keeping it from small town, not even late night, shut down.

Besides a little light pollution and the rebound from a westerly surf one hears the sometime clang bang of hammers on blacksmith anvils in the open shed space of the foundry. A glow marks the spot from the forges rewelded by the current master smith and probably just a few minutes ago thought by some "as not suitable for the center's mission."

When before Mendo proper I approached the oldest wooden highway bridge in California – way above the Albion flat – I scurried across while it was still standing, leaving central Albion behind. All of which gave me flashback of the smudged black and white photos of early Coastal mill life which was a lot like Siberian industrial days – let the nostalgia go! The tourist packs will come anyway.

But Doug's Albion store looking it's 1950's way still like the photo of the wood paneled Chevy station wagon being pumped gas at an impossibly low price – way below two bits – by the granddad of someone 'farming' a little up the ridge in Albion Nation.

The back of Doug's building always will house the Volunteers' pumper truck as well as the too frequently needed jaws-of-life kinds of tools for coastal highway speeders. Throughout this Rhode Island – sized county, volunteer groups like these sustain the heart beat of the place the corporations cut and ran from. And the various volunteers are reinvigorated by newcomers determined to finally stay put, no matter how much moisture their laundry wicks in.

And then, after skirting the moonlight's shore bound sheen, and seen between the several fishing trawlers anchored in Little River Cove, the memory of single lunged packet boats moored precipitously to load timber for San Francisco's rebirth after the Great Quake in redwood clear enough to reveal your better self.

While in the pitch and heave off Portagee Beach near the mouth of Big River, loading board– feet on sliding decks in sudden lurching swells initiated from some remote underwater mountain range, that sometimes mangled hands and feet ready for the

Compassionate knife of Mendocino's Dr. Preston who again, on occasion, was to be covered in gore like his days just after the Great Quake. "Only better than

Civil War field hospitals in that we had something for the pain."

Or it might have been a timberman struck blind in the craftsman eye by a glint of steel off a band saw or his skeleton compacted after a topper's fall. But remembrance of the heft and feel of those days is not in selective remnants of the past we've chosen to forget: no picturesque buildings well maintained of the missing towns (Glen Bair, Dewey, Melbourne, Christine,) They had hotels and cafes and blacksmith shops, stables, saloons and narrow gauge rail yards. Now only foundation debris.

And then there were the countless port towns at every cove and eddy [Cuffey's Cove, Whitesboro, Big Gulch, Bridgeport, Nip and Tuck, Hardscratch, Kibesillah, Laguna, Pallas Bay.

These served that wild north coast ocean highway which brought the first automobiles here by ship when Mendo's many rivers and deep gully creeks finally had bridges to parallel the timbered logging train bridges which served the camps at every cove and landing.

No jetties survive to serve nostalgia's trade, Pt. Arena notwithstanding, (remember it really was not so picturesque). Hardly a board is left of any of this (recycled I guess): no buildings, no markers, no

plaques, no tourist vistas of boom to bust days. Merely on occasion, an overgrown cemetery, or stapled photos outside a few stores and tourist picture book memorabilia and then of course the tidied up exception of the entire historical review board approved Mendocino township



Oddly enough this trade in, and often enough exploitation of, nature's free trade still has hands- on descendants of the original trades. The forges dampened roar of opened doors in the midst of Mendo's high class touristville is music to what is still molten in the heart of this crazy, mismatched marriage of a place. A place where third generation and late bloomers and tardy arrivals are in a creative dynamic.

No death and potatoes of a world already mourned and past, and no succumbing to well oiled New-Age carpet baggers (well maybe a little) putting plastic over their sweat lodges. The Art Center for instance in its well used habitat – some would say rundown ways – is a living testimony, a poetic memory, maybe a creative reconstruction of this county's white man's frontier days, "What Indians? Find me a buck who will take down a fifteen foot across redwood giant!"

It may not seem important to boards of directors, but the funky old forges in the back sheds connect directly to the old ways, with tools of a bygone time often enough shaped and pounded ("only when hot enough") from the debris field of those days: giant cast couplings and joints from fourth generation backyards, or venturing afield. to Ukiah auto dismantlers. steel parts on the cheap with a high carbon content or auto springs suitable for the tests of ancient crafts current practitioners.

For as Ernie Pardini famously said "As long as one gypo remains (meaning in this case one independent non-corporate logger) we're all free."

Thank God for the ear blasting scream of the volunteers base station sirens!



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