



The rise and fall of a mighty oak stand, El Sobrante CA, July 2023

By Chris Conrad

A squirrel hid a cluster of acorns in a spot by San Pablo Creek, perhaps around the same time that the American soldiers were slaughtering native people at Wounded Knee.

Five oak trees began to grow just as the Spanish American War erupted and Teddy Roosevelt made his name. His Republicans were the party of civil rights, the environment and anti-trust laws to rein-in big business.

These oaks stood here as WWI raged across Europe, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Joyce Kilmer wrote his poem, 'Trees.' They saw the rise of the automobile, airplane, talkie-movies and the telephone. They survived the Spanish Flu and saw women get the right to vote, the Roaring 20s, and watched as Alcohol Prohibition both began and ended.

They grew and flourished as the stock market crashed, the Great Depression sent Okies to California and FDR launched the New Deal.

They stood vigil during the rise of Fascism, the Nazi Reich and saw cannabis hemp banned in the USA as a racist ploy to expand the fossil fuel industries and Big Pharma.

They saw single party state-communism take power in Russia and China, but also the adoption of

the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and also the GI bill, building homes and sending Americans to college.

They grew tall as Mikki and I were born, the Korean War was fought and the Freeway system spread its net across the nation; tract houses on the hillside, made of ticky-tack, Joe McCarthy and broadcast TV took hold. Eisenhower warned us about the military industrial complex and pointed us to war in Vietnam.

They waved in the breeze as Kennedy was elected, the Age of Camelot, space and moon aspirations and “ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” They were silent witness to the Sixties’ assassinations, the Beatles, the civil rights and peace movement, hippies, LSD and the generation gap. They breathed a sigh of relief for the first Earth Day, back-to-the-Earth communes, the no nukes movement. They lived through post-industrialism and the service economy, the invention of computers and the Internet. They produced oxygen to keep us going during the Reagan rollback, and were here on the days when Mikki and I met, when we fell in love and when we launched the hemp movement and began our campaign for cannabis legalization.

Dirt was piled high around their trunks and crown roots when the Regency House was built on the hillside above, to savor its shade and enjoy the magic of giant oaks dancing in the wind. El Sobrante was a sprawling, semi-rural township. It was 1991, the same year that Mikki and I married. We moved to Europe and relocated to El Cerrito and helped pass Prop 215 in our decades-long quest to legalize marijuana and change the world. After our 2010 initiative loss at the ballot box with Prop 19



and the passage of Mikki's mother, we needed a change and a respite and we found it here, nestled among the deep shade of these oaks and the Bay Trees.

First Colorado and Washington voters and then Californians legalized marijuana. We thought the trees would flourish and endure long after we had gone but, early on, people told us our beloved trees were in trouble. Initially, everyone said the riparian zone was being choked by the ivy, so we cleared it. Then, Nita's ancient bay laurels next door came crashing to the ground, smiting our oaks but they held. Then an arborist told us the dirt was smothering their roots, so we gently moved it aside. They said we had to prune them so we did. They said sudden oak death was looming and suggested we cut them down, but we drew the line there. Instead, we nourished their roots with ashes of Monty Jacobs and my mother and, year after year, compost tea. The leaves returned. New branches began to grow out.



The Covid pandemic swept the planet. One day, a crack appeared at the base between two of the oaks. For the first time, we sensed their mortality and had to have one oak severely pruned and cabled to keep it from falling, but the magic persisted and the greenery returned. More compost tea, robust greenery and the sense of relief that, somehow, we had prevailed against all the odds until the severe drought ended with 12 consecutive atmospheric rivers that flooded the creek for months on end, toppling trees including our willow. When the storms ended, we thought we were safe. But this summer, we caught Covid and our tallest oak crashed back to the ground, from which it had grown.

Our best hope to save the surviving trees was to prune them back so far that they were forever altered. Even now, we can't be sure how long any of them will last, but it is once again our hope that they will outlive us all, living another 100 years, with their stately trunks but vastly reduced shadows and sustainable canopies.

Today, we stand beside our still-standing trees and their fallen comrade. Homes to nests for 1,000s of

birds and squirrels. Shading the creek, its fish, flora and fauna. They have weathered floods, droughts, freezes and earthquakes.

So, yes, it is our hope that they will continue to endure and even flourish for decades to come, certainly diminished but not vanquished. We honor these trees and their legacy.



We honor nature for letting us experience the time we shared with them and ask that their lives go on and on. We are humbled and reminded that, as the trees have grown from the earth and shall return to it, so have and shall we, and that nature is greater than any of us.

All things must pass but we will continue to work to keep this stand of mighty oaks going for as long as we can. We ask only that they pass a bit more slowly and that the next generation of living things shall not only cope with the changing times but manage to surpass ours. Thus is the legacy of the oaks remembered.