

An Inside View of Corte Madera Creek Watershed

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I spent my childhood inside the watershed of Corte Madera Creek. But I never knew it by that name. It was Fairfax Creek and San Anselmo Creek and Ross Creek. I knew the tributaries by the names of nearby places: the creek by Sorich Dairy; the creeks feeding into Phoenix Lake; Katherine Branson Creek; Redhill Creek; the creeks by Deer Park Villa. They were mostly small, shaded and quiet in summer. During winter storms, they could become dangerous.

But Corte Madera Creek was a wide-open, exotic place where the tides happened. Houses down there were built on posts or on fill. Somehow, the houses were real but the land wasn't. I knew the other creeks flowed to the bay, but for me, Corte Madera Creek was a long ways away.

When I was very young, Toad Hollow was an important place just below the Sorich Dairy and about a quarter mile upstream from my house on Los Angeles Blvd. Through my adult eyes, I see it as a scour pool below an overhanging culvert, banks broken down by cattle, right out in the open, where a little kid could get into big trouble.

Through my childhood eyes, it was all that plus fun. In spring, there seemed to be an endless supply of toads and strings of toad eggs. I swear, you could close your eyes and catch a toad.

One time, when I was wearing new shoes, a big toad lured me in deep. To make matters worse, I was real late getting home. I hid my wet shoes under my bed. I put the toad in the toe of one shoe and put the other shoe on top so the toad would stay wet and cold. But he got out and found my mom in the hall, halfway to the kitchen. When she tried to catch him, he led her back to my shoes. After that, I hardly ever wore shoes when I was trying to catch toads.

Below Toad Hollow, the little creek passed under some blackberry bushes and then entered a thicket of willows. Actually, the blackberries completely covered the carcass of an old Ford pick-up. During summer, a trickle of water ran under the engine block and through the right front wheel. Kids would reach the berries above the truck by walking out on wooden planks suspended in the berry bushes. I used to sneak through the willows and climb into the cab of the old truck, sit with my hands on the steering wheel and listen to the kids above me. When the kids would leave, I could hear the bees. Later I read a poem called *Blackberry Motorist*, by Richard Brautigan, that suggests he had the same experience.

When I got a little older, I would hike over to Deer Park Villa to go fishing. I used to catch and release native trout all the way to the Hub in San Anselmo. The creek got a little bigger just above the Marin Town and Country Club, where Deer Park and Fairfax tributaries met and where Sleepy Hollow Creek came in. Just above there, at the downstream side of Drake High, the creek flowed over a concrete skirt and into a dark pool. That's where I caught a 19-inch steelhead, using a wet fly. I'm not sure how I knew it was a steelhead, or why I knew enough to let it go. But I did. I never took out a bigger fish than that. I called it the "Drake High Steely".

About the time I turned ten, my brother and sisters were on their own, my dad's folks were gone and my mom was looking for someplace smaller and better suited to her. So we moved to Ross. This was a big move of about five miles and one whole world away from our home in San Anselmo. The creek was about the only thing the two places had in common. I moved away from friends who only wore Levis and smelled like the dairy creek, to friends who wore pressed trousers or white tennis shorts and never smelled at all. But the move put Mount Tam in my back yard and after a while a number of us began to spend most of our time biking and hiking around the mountain.

We had plenty of good times in Ross. I especially liked ballroom dance class at the Lagunitas Club. One afternoon, after fox-trotting around in a coat and tie, I went across the street to the bridge on Glenwood Avenue and saw three or four Coho salmon resting below the bridge in a shallow pool. Their backs were out of the water. A Siamese house cat was watching them from a tree stump on the creek bank. Ross was a wonderful assembly of expensive appetites.

Our place in Ross was not the best. We lived on the floodplain, between Redwood Drive and Poplar Avenue. When we moved in, my dad said that some day the creek would move us out of the way. We were only badly flooded once. I remember ripping up the wall-to-wall carpets to save the oak floors and anchoring the car to the carport. I saw a Volkswagen bug float down Poplar with no one inside. After the water receded, my father and I discovered that a box of his art had been left on the garage floor. We had to throw away his field sketches of Mount Lassen erupting and some drawings he made as the lone ranger on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. My folks never blamed the creek, or the government, and they weren't too hard on themselves. I remember my dad turning to me, with a handful of ruined drawings and asking "When it floods like this, I wonder if any steelhead move upstream." That's a question I'd still like to answer.

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