

Fairfax Creek: Conversation with Lou Vaccaro

by Ann Thomas

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A half-century ago the opening day of trout season in Fairfax was marked by a school holiday to allow students to go fishing, recalls longtime resident and angling enthusiast Lou Vaccaro. A summer visitor since 1933 and a permanent resident of the town since the mid '40s, Lou remembers Fairfax Creek running through town bounded by open meadows and fruit orchards and bountiful with crawfish, suckers, chubbies, steelhead and sticklebacks – and all kinds of wildlife and birds, especially bluebirds and swallows. He particularly remembers frogs and their nighttime calling.

He notes that he has not seen a fingerling (small trout) in Fairfax Creek in 30 years, but believes that public education and cleanup efforts in recent years are having a positive impact and that the trout are slowly returning.

An advocate for healthy streams, Lou criticized land use practices which over several decades have resulted in the deterioration of San Anselmo and Fairfax creeks for fish spawning and habitat. “I hate to see all the oil and junk coming down the creek,” he said, surmising also that the creek’s health problems were exacerbated in years following World War II when ranches upstream began washing out barns with chemical solutions which would run into the creek. In later years, he believes, building along the creek has resulted in silt runoff from construction sites covering the natural gravel streambed and creating an environment which suffocates fish eggs. As construction has slowed, Lou is hopeful that the creek’s natural gravel bottom will rejuvenate itself. Winter rains allowed to run freely in the creek over time will flush out the fine sediment, he believes. (The natural streambed is largely gravel, which provides aerated conditions critical for successful spawning. Runoff carrying silt, sand, clay and organic materials from soil creates a more compacted covering of the streambed, which smothers the fish eggs.)

Lou and his wife Jean have lived since 1954 on Olema Road, next to the home where his family summered in the '30s. That house is now occupied by son Chris, one of three children who grew up in Fairfax and learned fishing on the banks of the Ross Valley creeks. In the early days Lou’s family traveled from San Francisco to Fairfax via ferry to Sausalito and train to Fairfax. After the Golden Gate Bridge was built his father bought a car that his sons drove for him. During the summer Lou, his mother and two brothers, stayed in Fairfax, while his father commuted to work at Sea Island Sugar Company weekdays in the city. Lou attended Glen Park Grammar School and Balboa High in San Francisco but moved to Marin after World War II.

Fairfax Creek runs along the perimeter of his property – across from property which, in his childhood, was owned by the Simi family who operated a fruit stand on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. Apples, grapes, peaches and walnuts he remembers being raised and sold there. On the property now occupied by the county library there was Buon Gusto Villa, a well-known restaurant in its time.

The creek remains about four feet deep in a pool below his home, even in late summer, and trout swim there, largely undisturbed and unseen. However, they are easily enticed to the surface when Lou tosses several pellets of tropical fish food into the creek. The ready proximity of the trout next to his home is a reassurance to Lou that the trout are on the verge of returning to the creek in greater numbers.

Lou is active in ensuring that the creek’s four fish ladders serve their purpose and remain unobstructed. He is concerned that some people continue to contaminate creek waters by disposing of substances such as car oil and unused house paint, in gutters and drains. “It all winds up in the creek,” he said, giving the county credit for educational efforts to inform residents about the importance of proper disposal of household and garden chemicals and other debris.

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Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed

P.O. Box 415, Larkspur, California 94977 phone: (415) 457-6045 fax: (415) 457-6362

info@friendsofcortemaderacreek.org