

A sense of place, a clash of memory

by Sigrid
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I knew it was changing, irrevocably so, one beautiful spring day about 10 years ago, when my then 12-year-old daughter and I were walking with my parents in Bidwell Park, that vast and stunning natural resource a few steps from the front door of the house where I was raised. We walked what my mother calls “the loop,” a trek that took us down a worn trail near the park’s entrance, under the roar of the ugly, 1960s-era elevated freeway, across an arched wooden footbridge over Chico Creek.

As we passed under a huge canopy of oaks shading the Saturday softball games, we encountered a wild-looking man yelling at a frightened, cowering young woman much smaller than himself. Probably out of his head on drugs, booze, or both — the methamphetamine labs said to be proliferating in rural enclaves of the Central Valley came to mind — he was threatening to cut off the young woman’s finger if she didn’t return the ring she was struggling to remove.

To my horror, my mother, who is five feet tall and was then nearly 70, walked up to this big crazed man, shook her finger at him, and told him he should be ashamed of himself and to leave the woman alone. I was thunderstruck when, meek as a kitten, he did precisely that. “Please Mom,” I later implored, “next time just call the police.”

Not long afterward, there was a serious assault on a jogger in the park. Then, shortly after Thanksgiving in 1990, a young man with cerebral palsy was found by an early-morning park worker lying in a pool of blood, beaten to death near “Annie’s Glen,” a verdant picnic grove named for the wife of the town’s founder, by thugs who stole his bicycle. More recently, two Butte Community College football players, both 19, were charged last year with beating to death a homeless man who was sleeping in the bushes of an apartment building near the bucolic campus of California State University, Chico. In what the prosecutor described as the worst beating he had ever seen, the burly athletes (one weighed nearly 300 pounds), beat the 5’7” victim with a 40-pound water jug and a metal tire rim.

The harsh contemporary details of these quintessentially “urban” crimes in the rural North Valley community where my parents moved from

Sacramento in 1947, when I was nearly 1, clash now with my memories as a child playing in Bidwell Park with a sense of total innocence and complete security, when my brother and sister and I worried only about catching poison oak and getting home before dark.

Our father, a businessman active in civic affairs, a city councilman and mayor, cautioned us that the park was sometimes a haven for “undesirables” of various sorts, that the small city police force really couldn’t afford to patrol it properly, and we should always go in groups. Years later, in a reflection of the changing times, my daughter and her cousins were allowed to go there only with adults in tow.

By the mid-1960s, I was attending Chico State and sharing a student apartment near the place where the homeless man would be killed some three decades later. Even then, we rarely locked the doors of our homes or our cars, and the only even marginally criminal act I recall from that time was when some neighborhood kids entered my parents’ home through an unlocked door and raided the liquor cabinet. My father didn’t discover the crime until he went

to the bar to pour himself a scotch and soda a couple of evenings later.

Crime is hardly the only measure of change in a place. Now when we visit our parents in their house in one of the new subdivisions that have sprouted like Legos south of town, I feel like I’ve been transported to some tile-and-stucco southern California suburb, anchored by big shopping malls on either end of town. The “downtown” where my father’s office supply store is located, though he sold it years ago, is a charming collection of boutiques and restaurants, but hardly the business center it once was.

The backyard of their house abuts a rocky gorge that becomes a small stream in the winter, and they can sit on the patio in good weather and gaze out over a field of wild grasses and giant oaks where cows graze. My 81-year-old father says this declining “open space” will probably outlast his lifetime — that’s his plan, at any rate — though the developers will get to it soon enough. 🏠



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