

The Live Oaks of Byron

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2 July 1995, revised 29 August 2018

Nestled in the hills of Livermore, suckled by the rich earth that gave birth to it, Byron currently straddles two different worlds. Not that one might suspect this truth by just visiting this small, seemingly lazy town, for in Byron time itself seems to have come to a near halt. Time stands as still as the live oaks that surround the town. But change cannot be escaped, it overtakes newborn babies, old men and live oaks. Sometime in the near future it will catch up even with Byron.

Byron came from the rich earth that surrounds it. At first it bore the flesh of its mother. Hardy people from faraway homesteaded here not for its natural beauty, but for the wealth that could be extracted from the soil. They did not think of their life in Byron as colorful. They were not inclined to think of things such as the state of their own lives, but if they did, they would consider their lives in Byron only as practical. Their cattle were not a prop to lend authenticity to their country life; the cattle were life itself. If the cattle went hungry, so did Byron. In a good year rain would emboldened the earth to burst forth in rich feed grasses and brilliant forsythias. A golden California sun breathed life into the rolling hills as an ally of the rain and friend to all that was green. Later the same sun, using the same light, sucked the very life out of the hills and left wilted, brown, dried-up skeletal remains of the lush green sea that thrived there just a week or two before. Only small islands of live oaks withstood the summer sun's light and retained enough life to make it through until the next spring. These passing natural wonders were picturesque to city dwellers, but to the original settlers the wonder of these cycles of life was only in the wholesome milk, meat and meager store credit that these parched hills served up. The founders of Byron were authentic people, the salt of the earth.

If there is one thing that authentic attracts nowadays, it is its opposite. From the Livermore government labs, the port of Stockton, the oil refineries of Pittsburgh, and the office buildings of nearby Walnut Creek, modern man has sought out Byron and its live oaks in an attempt to give authenticity to his own modern compartmentalized life. The old-timers of Byron had, without being aware of it, an authenticity (and the sense of limitless time) that the newcomers lacked. The search by these newcomers for the old life of the original homesteaders mystified the old-timers who knew the travail of living in those harsh pioneering days. They knew that all that still remained of those days was the live oaks. In a good-natured way that offended no one, the

old-timers shared their amusement at the dogged naivete of the moderns who sought out their town.

The moderns understood the old-timers' chuckles were at their expense. They knew that what was salt for the old-timers was sugar of the vine to them. Yet an intellectual understanding of their own depravity and an awareness of how ridiculous they might appear to those who had what they longed for could not satiate their hunger. Like a downed live oak longing for its roots, belonging and individuality, once lost, are not so easy to regain.

As has happened before in human history, the very presence of those hunting for something often chases away that for which they are hunting. While the old-timers were a hardy bunch, they were finite in number. The sea of self-alienated moderns was infinite. Over the years the ratio of old-timers to moderns changed. As the moderns came to dominate the town of Byron, the very essence of Byron itself slowly changed. Oddly, the newcomers noticed the changes more than the old-timers and their mourning for the passing of the old Byron was heard often. For centuries Byron has stood, impervious to floods and drought, to Indians and desperadoes, to whiskey, earthquakes and old-time religion, yet it has proven vulnerable to those who love it too much, in too great of numbers, and for the wrong reasons.

As the reign of the live oaks teeters on the unconscious needs of those who seek them, as the weight of modernity weighs upon Byron, my story begins.