

## REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF PLACE WRITING

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During the 1990s we taught, both singly and together, a place-writing class at Humboldt State University (HSU) that focused either on California's North Coast or on the Trinity Corridor that connects Redding with Arcata and Eureka (Figure 1). Several of our students published revised versions of their papers in the *Humboldt Historian*; scores more participated in the production of *Traveling the Trinity Highway* (2000).<sup>1</sup> That 250-page guidebook is a portrait, in pictures and prose, of a trinity of Trinities—the river, the mountains, and the 140-mile road that ties together a dozen small towns divided among three counties (Shasta, Trinity, and Humboldt). Our decade-long collaboration has convinced us that fieldwork and archival research are equally essential to the perusal and portrayal of place.

This conclusion will leave veteran place writers unsurprised, but many geography departments, including HSU's, teach the two kinds of methodologies as separate courses, as if they had no common bond. We do not mean to question the validity of such a division, but, based on our experience in preparing a guide to the Trinity National Scenic Byway, we would strongly recommend a place-writing class as a practical medium for integrating the two approaches. The primary purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the utility of combining them. At the same time, we draw from a rich fund of Trinity field reflections to illustrate the kinds of methods used to highlight the places portrayed in the book.

In trying to make topographers, or place biographers, out of budding topophiles, we wanted students not only to probe a specific locale but also learn how to identify and interpret the quintessential qualities of any small area. We sought, in other words, to develop place perusal as a skill integral to the art of place portrayal. From the outset we encouraged class members, not all of whom were geography majors, to employ the methods of other disciplines; we also emphasized geography's role as a synthesizer of multiple approaches to fathoming the myriad facets of place.

Students developed a close relationship with their chosen place in a variety of ways. We had them visit the site, walk its streets and trails, probe its plant life and watch its wildlife, locate and interview knowledgeable locals, discover pertinent documents and artifacts, and, in general, try to absorb the site's genius loci and thereby bond with it. We devised no set formula for familiarizing students with a given place, but we did discuss strategies with them and organized at least one ex-

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ploratory field trip. We also had the class sample the place-writing methods and styles of such prominent American authors as Page and Wallace Stegner.

Eventually we blended the elements of our approach most effectively in a one-day excursion to the Table Bluff area, which embraces a set of historic sites some 20 miles south of the HSU campus. To prepare participants for the trip, we gave them a handout on ways to study place and a packet of maps, photographs, and news clippings of the region. A university bus took us to the locations of two abandoned towns, the remnants of an old port and a defunct railroad, and an aging cemetery. We also stopped at a century-old cider works in Fortuna, a family dairy on the Eel River Bottom at milking time, and a cheese factory in Loleta.

After a lunch stop in Loleta we set the students loose on a "Place Chase." We divided them into teams of two or three and asked them to solve ten riddles (rhymed by Jerry), each describing a feature of the community. For instance, "From what corner bay can you look toward the whey?" and "330 looks mighty handsome gilding which building's transom?" We monitored the progress of the chase and offered hints to help solve the more difficult riddles. After correcting the teams' collective answers, we awarded Jerry's guidebooks to the group with the highest score (Rohde and Rohde 1992, 1994, 1996). Later in the day the dairy treated each of us to a dish of the local Humboldt Creamery's premium ice cream—which rivals any produced by Ben & Jerry's!

The overriding lesson students learned from the chase was that the story of any place is indeed a riddle, a mystery awaiting solution. Such riddles belie passivity, challenging would-be place detectives to involvement—walking, touching, looking, puzzling, talking, and at last, if all goes well, understanding. All places, even the so-called nondescript ones, are living entities, communities of buildings and beings, plants and perspectives, that can only be apprehended by becoming, for a time, part of them. The written accounts resulting from this experience echo what has resonated with the perceivers, who then present them to the public. When presented clearly, with appropriate visuals and vignettes added to the text, place can become poetry.

We shall illustrate many of the methods used to illuminate the Trinity Highway by roughly following the guidebook's east–west sequence and by quoting freely from it. In our "Bird's-Eye View of a Serpentine Highway" we spotlight the road's history, the region's indigenous inhabitants, its varicolored vegetation, wondrous river, and geologic knots and mining nodes. Except for the section on fishing the Trinity, which tapped the expertise of a student angler, we relied heavily on jaunts into the pages of aging newspapers, scholarly journals, and old correspondence that brought to life long-silent voices. The ethnographic work of C. Hart Merriam and John P. Harrington yielded intriguing accounts of the tiny Indian tribes that inhabited the middle reaches of the Trinity River. The little-known Tlohomtahois' last surviving member, Saxey Kidd, provided Merriam with a few dozen words of his native tongue, all he could recall after not having spoken it for fifty years.

In the chapter covering the Trinity Highway section of Shasta County, we found an excuse to create a Place Chase for our readers. Old Shasta, the first county seat,

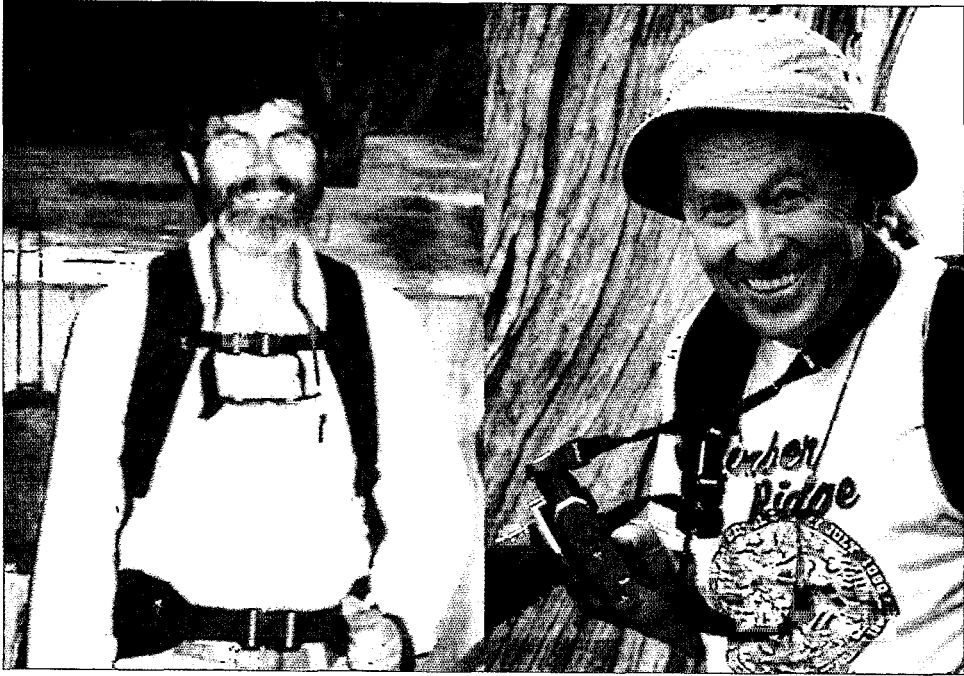


FIG. 1—On the left, a reconnoitering Jerry Rohde is skillfully positioned between the skillets at an old rancher's cabin in the Trinity Mountains of California; on the right, Ben Bennion is framed by an incense cedar tree near Trinity Summit on the Tish Tang Trail. (Photographs by Gisela Rohde, August 1998 [left], August 1999 [right])

became a state historic park in 1950 after decades of decline related to the rise of Redding. Because both the park and the Shasta Historical Society had already produced detailed guides to the area, we saw no reason to prepare yet another one for "Sweet Shasta Town," which so enraptured Joaquin Miller, the young gold seeker who gained later fame, if no greater a fortune, as a poet. Instead, we decided to test park visitors by asking them, for example, "Which of the historic buildings looks most out of place, as if it doesn't belong in Old Shasta?" Or "Which site was most likely operated in 1870 by a German named Simon Maltzer?"

To give readers a sense of what Shasta was like in its prime (1850s–1860s), we compared the data recorded in the 1870 census with the town's first plat map, an 1870 compilation by Colonel Magee. Workers in the diverse occupations that supported mining outnumbered individuals listed as miners. The surveyor's map excluded the "colored" population, even the few Chinese who owned property, just as the whites barred nonwhites from Fourth of July celebrations.

Small towns such as Old Shasta and French Gulch proved much easier to represent than the much larger gateway cities located at either end of the Trinity Highway. Eureka and Arcata, at the western end, have at least retained well-defined centers in the form of an Old Town and a plaza, respectively. But Redding, with 80,000

residents spread far in every direction, has lost the central focus it once had. A century ago, as a town founded by the California & Oregon Railroad, the city centered itself squarely on the depot between North, East, South, and West Streets. Our guidebook included an 1890 map of Redding that shows California and Oregon Streets flanking Center Street (and the depot) and a series of roads named and ordered, from south to north, after six California counties: Sacramento, Placer, Yuba, Butte, Tehama, and Shasta.

Our “Primer for Reading Redding” explains the town’s capitalizing on its situation at the head of the Central Valley to overcome its negative site, eventually transforming itself from “Poverty Flat” into a gateway city. With the advent of the automobile, it turned away from the depot and adopted distant Mount Shasta as an icon. Redding’s logo, boldly displayed both inside and outside the new City Hall, incorporates “imperial” Mount Shasta plus Shasta Lake and Shasta Dam. The primer also answers the question, “What’s in a Place Name?” by pairing two toponyms often confused because they are pronounced identically (as in *red*): Redding, named after the railroad company’s general land agent, and Reading, which honors the pioneer who triggered the 1848 Trinity gold rush.

In central but remote Trinity County we ran head-on into the difficulty of sifting fact from fancy. A perceptive student sensed that little Weaverville, the county’s still-unincorporated seat, had a surprising density of history buffs, one of whom carried an “I collect facts” business card. Her facts, however, did not always agree with those collected by other local historians. One of the student’s sources advised him that “History here is not an exercise in collecting facts. Legends, fanciful tales, and less-than-factual memories embellish much of the oral and written history of this region.” In tilling the Trinity’s “tailings” of fact and fancy, we faced the challenge of checking both oral and written histories against documents found in the courthouse and the county historical society’s splendid History Center.

Of the numberless interviews we conducted, a morning-long trip through the little-known but historically important Indian Creek area with Harold Rodgers proved particularly informative. A near-octogenarian member of the region’s once substantial Portuguese community, Harold detailed the significance of numerous sites, some of which bore remnants of earlier activities and others of which contained clues evident only in his mind. He was likely the sole remaining Indian Creeker who could point out the location of the rock-and-corrugated-metal dwelling of “Injun-Chinaman,” who suffered the torments of local youngsters only to reward each of them at Christmas with a brightly wrapped gift. Harold passed away not long after the excursion, but, thanks to the information he provided, some of the region’s story survives in our book as a “Backcountry Byway” section.

Since the 1960s the Trinity County Historical Society has created a remarkable museum complex. It also published a guide to *Trinity County Historic Sites* (Jones and others 1981), *Flowers and Trees of the Trinity Alps* (Jones 2000), and a “Walking Tour of Historic Weaverville” that would exhaust anyone who set out in just one day to see the 116 places listed. Apart from the Chinese Joss House and a few other

sites, most buildings have little architectural distinction, partly because, as a forty-niner pointed out, "The fact is nobody is poor here and nobody very rich. . . . When a man 'makes a raise' as we call getting from ten to forty thousand dollars . . . , he takes it and leaves" (White 1930, 208–209). Almost all of the residents, therefore, built their homes and businesses along simple and similar lines. For our "Weaving across Weaverville" tour, we thus chose sites based mostly on colorful anecdotes related to those who owned or occupied the buildings.

For an earlier section of the "Basins Wedged between Mountains" chapter, we featured the "fast feats" of William S. Lowden, Trinity County's best-known road builder and surveyor, who first gained fame as an express rider. The Weaverville tour includes his home and office, built in the 1890s in a modest vernacular style that characterized much of the town he platted by metes and bounds in 1876. We inserted an old photograph of his place so that readers could see how much or little the Mill Street site had changed since his time.

A century ago the La Grange Mine, located a few miles west of Highway 299's Oregon Mountain Summit, ranked as the world's largest hydraulic mining operation. Travelers today see little more than a water-powered nozzle and a rock plaque in rusty decay by the roadside. How, we wondered, could we convert the weathered monument into an essay that might capture the magnitude of *la grande* La Grange? We feared having to settle for a summary of the geographical extent and historical import of the mine, but serendipity—every writer's indispensable ally—enabled us to enhance our account with *From the Known to the Unknown: Memoirs of Baroness de La Grange* (2000). In January 1998 the baroness's grandson donated the memoirs to the Trinity County Historical Society, along with an album of faded photographs of the La Grange Ditch, which brought water 29 miles from the Trinity Alps to Oregon Gulch.

The three nozzles, or "monitors," at the La Grange Mine, the baroness observed in 1894, "sit like big cannons that haven't been loaded yet, aimed at the bedrock." They "are outdoing each other, and the mountain is crumbling and collapsing into a stream of liquid mud that is channeled into the long corridor of the sluice." She rightly feared that "a little settlement at the bottom of Oregon Gulch runs the risk of being buried when we run our operation full-scale" (2000, 54, 94, 80).

Less than a decade later a leading California botanist named Alice Eastwood complained about her party's midsummer climb over Oregon Mountain, which "was hot and dusty beyond any place we had passed" since leaving Redding. They found relief only after reaching "the fresh green trees and shrubs" of Canyon Creek in the nearby Trinity Alps. En route to the lakes at the head of the canyon, they "passed a lonely cabin in which some old miner lived." To Eastwood, such miners "seemed like the driftwood of humanity left behind on the great tide that swept over the country in the days of '49. They were chatty and liked to talk of olden times" (1902, 44–45).

If only Jerry and his wife, Gisela, could have interviewed such "driftwood" for our Trinity book! Fortunately, they did find Eastwood's account of her plant-finding

trip and used it to enliven their own description of mining and botanic sites scattered along the road and trail of ore-rich Canyon Creek. They were pleased to find her list of more than 100 “rare and lovely flowers” that “ranged through this beautiful cañon” remarkably current (Bennion and Rohde 2000, 126). Jerry even sighted such elusive specimens as the “step flower” *Lewisia cotyledon* and the naked broomrape when Gisela sent him climbing up to a rocky bank above the road.

Where Canyon Creek joins the Trinity, a mining town named Junction City arose to replace, in effect, the nearby Oregon Gulch village buried by debris washed down from the La Grange Mine. With a Compagnie Française mine operating on the other side of the Trinity, Junction City became “the liveliest town in the county” by 1895. The lunar landscape left by the Compagnie Française monitors has been transformed during the past decade by a new kind of enterprise. One student spent several days there at the Rigdzin Ling Buddhist conference and meditation center and then combined the information gleaned from observations and interviews with her reading of the history of the Compagnie Française to contrast the present “mind-scape” with the past “minescape” (Bennion and Rohde 2000, 116–120).

The same student who provided “A New Angle on Fishing the Trinity” also produced a paper about “Raging Times on the Trinity Rapids.” Fishing and rafting the river became his passions at an early age, and his HSU-employed parents allowed him to pursue those passions. Somehow they also nurtured his flair for writing. Alex Fulton’s lead sentence (and entire essay) needed little editing on our part: “As our sky-blue river raft floated across the placid green water, I sensed a calm before a storm” (p. 145).

The thirteen maps drafted for *Traveling the Trinity Highway* by students in KOSMOS, HSU’s new computer cartography laboratory, serve to orient readers to each of six regional chapters and to guide them on tours of seven towns. We include historic maps in the book and urge students to use them and other “geographics” as a focus for their writing. Through perusing maps dating from the 1860s, 1890s, 1920s, and 1950s we managed to reconstruct the series of trails, stagecoach roads, and highways built to traverse the Trinity corridor. Scanning old newspapers, we learned of the U.S. Forest Service’s pivotal role in road building. One official averred in 1913 that “Nothing would create favor for the United States Forest Service as much as this project”—forging a road through the Trinity Gorge (Bennion and Rohde 2000, 174). It took a full decade to complete the final stretch of Highway 299, which connected the Trinity’s North and South forks. Even then, travel time by automobile from Redding to Arcata approximated twelve hours, as opposed to three or four today.

We also compared past charts of the corridor with contemporary versions to help fix the locations of vanished or obscured activity, to learn alternative place-names, and to make sense of topographical references in historical records. “Negro Joe Ridge,” a grassy, oak-fringed hillside in the Redwood Creek watershed, was finally determined to relate not to anyone named Joe but to an ex-slave named Leroy Watkins, who was attacked in the vicinity by two relatives of his Indian wife. De-

spite suffering a chest wound, Leroy dispatched the ambushing duo and promptly "divorced" Mrs. Watkins.

A 1902 pictorial map of Eureka seemed a fitting focus for the final section of our last chapter, "Up and Down to Old Town." As the map makes clear, the city hosted an array of bustling bayside businesses. Research in the library further revealed that Eureka must have had a lively nightlife, with some sixty-five saloons, an even larger number of "gambling dens," and thirty-two "houses of shame." "Whiskey Specials" transported hundreds of "freshly scrubbed, bear-greased" loggers from surrounding lumber camps every Saturday night. Today's much tamer Victorian Old Town draws a large but quieter nighttime crowd only once a month when it stages "Arts Alive!"

Numerous lunchtime strolls through Old Town Eureka led to the eventual selection of a score of sites for the walking tour that concludes the book. Interesting architecture and artifacts claimed our attention, along with less visible locations that held a more hidden significance. Even after months of preparation, this section underwent a last-hour change when we found archival confirmation that the old Oberon Saloon, its name still proclaimed on the tiled entrance, was indeed the scene of an epic fistfight between the author Jack London and the brother of a local mill owner.

As place detectives, our Trinity team took special pleasure in finding something new about old sites and in describing and explaining them in fresh terms. No place proved more difficult in both respects than the gargantuan, green-hued Carson Mansion at the eastern end of Eureka's "Two Street," which any walking tour of Old Town must include. We described its eclectic style as "Vainglorious Victorian" and pointed out the irony that the mill owner who made his fortune cutting redwoods built his cathedral of "Gothic gloom and Baroque exuberance" out of woods gathered from around the world.

Any success we had in portraying familiar places with fresh perspectives resulted from combining neglected records with careful fieldwork and from presenting our findings in readable and visually appealing fashion. Putting Trinity Highway places in their geographical and historical context has given our students and us the opportunity to apply most of our skills in writing a book for a broad audience of travelers, residents, and scholars.

#### NOTE

1. Funded in large part by a U.S. Forest Service grant administered by Trinity County, *Traveling the Trinity Highway* (2000) can be ordered from Jerry Rohde at MountainHome Books, 4305 Ridgecrest Drive, Eureka, California 95503; e-mail [jrohde@reninet.com].

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