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**From Turkey Ranch to Wealthy Retreat:
The Making of Lovall Valley, California**

The land remembers those who have passed before, and silently records their deeds. There are scars and improvements that long outlive their instigators, that still remain decades and centuries beyond even the bones of the mortals buried there, returning to become part of the soil. There is a valley in the Mayacamas Mountains, in Napa County, California, where one can read the story of many who have shaped it, including three generations of my family. Lovall Valley is a place I know intimately, where from earliest childhood I have spent countless hours hiking and exploring, and where I was married last summer. And yet, in examining the land closely with a critical eye, I discovered a new interpretation for familiar landmarks, and began to weave together a history that is both societal and personal.

Lovall Valley is nestled in the hills between the towns of Sonoma and Napa, in the heart of the northern California wine country. The valley proper is little more than a mile long and less than half that wide, but the definition of Lovall Valley as a space in my mind includes hills covered in grasslands and oak

savannas stretching several miles to the south and west. In the summer the hills are golden, the oaks and chaparral are a dusty blue-green, and the lack of water hangs in the air. But from November to April, rain soaks the ground, the grass is thick and lush, and dozens of small intermittent streams course all over and through the mountain, sometimes wandering over the road in search of the quickest path to lower ground.

A close look at the land here, the buildings and roads, streams and fences, tells the story of the economy and ecology of the site as well as the fragmentation of a family. In my memory from childhood, Lovall Valley was a place where one would see red-tailed hawks, orange-bellied newts, oak trees veiled in lichen, some decaying agricultural buildings, and not much else. These days there are nearly twenty homes built there, all but a few within the last ten years and all of radically different styles, on parcels that have been divided and subdivided from my grandparent's original ranch of six hundred acres. By tracing human impacts on this site, and looking at both historical changes through time and the human motivations responsible for shaping this land, one can understand how today's seemingly incongruous landscape juxtaposing grassy hillsides, old barns, and new "mini-mansions" came to be.

Searching for the Past: Interpreting a “Natural” Landscape

Lovall Valley’s landscape of grasslands and oak savannas that looks so “natural” today in fact belies long-standing and intensive human impacts. In pre-European California, one-fourth of the state was covered by interior grassland largely composed of bunchgrasses and colorful spring-blooming herbs adapted to the Mediterranean climate.¹ The Native American practice of burning encouraged regeneration of native species and kept the grasslands productive to feed the grazers hunted for meat and materials.² This native grassland was rapidly transformed by European practices such as keeping livestock year-round in fenced pastures (thus disrupting the natural grazing regime of deer and tule elk), fire suppression, plowing grassland for food production, and the introduction of European seeds. In short order, annual grasslands of introduced European species, such as wild oat (*Avena barbada*) and ripgut (*Bromus diandrus*), replaced the native perennial bunchgrass community.³ The interior live oaks that dot the rolling hills are native, although they are now threatened by a new, rapidly spreading, and poorly understood disease, “sudden oak death,” that first appeared in Marin County in 1995.⁴ For now, thankfully, the oaks of Lovall Valley are still healthy.

A small intermittent stream flows through the bottom of the valley, collecting the winter rains and running south towards the wetlands that drain to San Pablo Bay, the northern half of the drowned river valley of San Francisco Bay. The

creek doesn't have enough water to be useful for irrigation or other human purposes, and as a tributary to the wetland habitat of the endangered California freshwater shrimp, it would be illegal to decrease the water flow downstream.⁵ So the stream is an example of a natural feature in Lovall Valley relatively untouched by human influences, other than a few U.S. Fish and Wildlife-approved culverts. This tiny stream bears the name "Huichica Creek," an Indian name given to the area in common use since at least 1851.⁶ The meaning of this word remains a mystery, but a 1980 USGS topographical map still labels the area "Huichica."⁷

Tantalizing clues of farming and grazing in the late 1800's and early 1900's dot the hills, though I have no corroborating support for this conclusion other than the land's evidence. Large piles of stones, now covered in green moss and crusty lichen, lay next to several of the flattest areas of Lovall Valley, suggesting plowing for agriculture took place here. Some of these stones were used to construct a long, low fence on top of Arrowhead Mountain, the peak that forms the western edge of Lovall Valley and slopes down into the Sonoma Valley below. Hauling tons of stone to the top of a 1,000-foot mountain and placing them carefully enough to last at least a century was certainly labor-intensive, and so must have served some purpose; my father speculates that Chinese laborers built these walls as a barrier for grazing cattle in the 1870's or 1880's.⁸

The Turkey Years

My family entered into this already altered landscape in 1957, and from then on I have a somewhat less speculative knowledge of human land use in Lovall Valley. My paternal grandparents, George and Eleen “Johnnie” Nicholas, acquired this land in that year from a dairy rancher, Mr. Lawler. The only traces of this dairying past today are Mr. Lawler’s small gray house in the northeast corner of the valley, and a wooden dairy barn with a galvanized tin roof inside the southern end of the loop. Before the recent advent of dense and suspicious neighbors, the barn was a favorite hangout for local teenagers, who have graffitied its sides with messages proclaiming love, defiance, and sports victories.

My grandparents purchased this land to provide more space for their turkey-breeding operation, which was overflowing its buildings down in the flatland below; they initially christened it “Nicholas Oak Hills Research Farm,” later to become a part of Nicholas Turkey Breeding Farms, Inc. (NTBF). On the advice of a professor at the University of California at Davis, my grandfather had been experimenting with turkey breeding as a way to make money following the Great Depression. Bank of America took a chance on the young couple and gave them a loan on an abandoned farm in Sonoma, which they had cleaned up and used to begin the breeding program that would yield many new strains of turkeys. Eventually, my grandfather’s broad-breasted white turkey, with its clear

pinfeathers that required no plucking, would go on to become the world's main meat turkey.

The turkey-breeding venture would actively shape the landscape of Lovall Valley for several decades, and some of its leftovers are still in place today. By 1961, my father had helped to build eight long, narrow white buildings at the north end of the valley, with seven more added by 1971.⁹ These brooder houses were used to raise turkeys from hatchlings to about eight weeks of age. After several months in larger houses or on the range, about three-fourths of the hens and ten percent of the toms were selected for breeding. These birds were then transferred to the breeder pens, located at the south end of the loop about a mile away.

In 1961, an aerial photograph shows seven of these breeder pens, but ten years later they had largely been removed. This change reflected the introduction of *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, a disease brought to Lovall Valley by a neighbor's chicken in the early 1960's. At that point, the breeder pens in the south end of the valley held 29 strains of turkeys, which my father calls "the most that ever have or ever will be in one place." Most of these strains were wiped out; the rest were moved by 1961 to a new location in Bennett Valley, about thirty miles west in central Sonoma County. After the flocks were disinfected, some were returned to Lovall Valley, but there were many fewer strains than before, and far fewer than

the 50,000 birds living here at the peak around 1960. The downsized turkey operation made room for a sheep barn in the south, which lasted from 1979 to 1993; George built it as a part of his money-losing attempts to branch off into the sheep business. Today none of the larger breeder pens and just a few small, ramshackle wooden pens remain in the south end of the valley, and homes and vineyards have replaced all of the brooder houses.

Transitions and Conflicts

The dynamics of the turkey operation in Lovall Valley changed with my grandparent's sale of Nicholas Turkey Breeding Farms, Inc. in 1979 to Arbor Acres, an international conglomerate. My father and other family members had wanted the business to stay in the family; he and my uncle had submitted an equal bid for purchase that my grandfather rejected, so the sale was a contentious decision. Family lore holds that George, always in competition with local wine patriarch August Sebastiani, wanted to say that he had sold the company he started with nothing for millions of dollars to John D. Rockefeller's great-grandson, a company executive. As part of the sale of the company, Arbor Acres leased the continued use of Lovall Valley for turkey raising.

My grandfather passed away in 1984, and my grandmother died in 1990. After the shock and grief of their deaths, my family was left with the messy task of dividing up and paying taxes on their estate. My father had inherited a huge

solid oak business table from NTBF that we used in our dining room. I remember long and sometimes tense meetings held there between my parents and my two aunts, the children of George and Johnnie. The end result was a division of Lovall Valley into more than 40 parcels split between the three kids. From there, the 1990's saw the majority of these parcels sold to pay estate taxes and to profit from the lucrative market for scenic housing land and prime vineyard soil. Within the loop and Lovall Valley proper, 24 parcels totaling nearly 240 acres were sold to buyers including a retired Spanish professor, a dentist, a lawyer, a retired Turkish engineer, the owner of a San Francisco electric company, and a cast of entrepreneurs. Thus began the deep roar of the bulldozer and the heavy machinery, building and planting and reshaping earth, that characterizes the valley today as it undergoes what surely must be its most intensive land-use change to date.

"A Hideaway for the Rich and Reclusive"

The development of roads in Lovall Valley traces the valley's increasing use. An 1851 map shows only three roads (Upper, Middle, and Lower Napa Roads) crossing the hills¹⁰; two appear to correspond to paved routes connecting the towns of Sonoma and Napa today, and the third is unfamiliar to me. The only paved road today leading from the valley down to town below enters at from the Sonoma end of the valley, from the north. To connect the entire valley floor with this access point, a road was built in a loop along the perimeter of the valley.

Decadal aerial photographs¹¹ show an increasing number of shorter access roads built off of the main loop as driveways for all the houses that are there now; from above they look like tributaries feeding a river. The sides of the valley slope steeply in some places, and some of these driveways either appear to shoot straight up the hill or snake back and forth across an entire hillside. Napa County has strict rules regarding erosion control; some of these roads were built hastily before the rules were put in place, to assure future access to homebuilding sites. In 1960, there was one house inside the loop; by 1970, there were two; the most recent photos show the many new roads that have been built criss-crossing the loop to serve the new houses and vineyards.

An article in the local *Napa Valley Register* has called Lovall Valley a “hideaway for the rich and reclusive” seeking to escape the pressures and rampant development of the Bay Area. The article quotes Coldwell Banker real estate agent Jim Brown describing Lovall Valley as “a recently-discovered diamond in the rough;” he goes on to note that development “seems to be working just fine” with no apparent design review. “It’s really an interesting study, to see that the houses are being built without heavy government intervention and they’re doing just fine.”¹² To my eyes, the juxtaposition of a Mediterranean villa with a concrete-sided castle and a split-level ranch house with a three-car garage is not very harmonious, but it does demonstrate the fragmented nature of the residents of Lovall Valley today. They are there to enjoy the idyllic countryside, but the

irony is that by their presence they are changing the nature of the “natural” land they so value.

The dynamics of the valley now are an interesting reflection of the trends in Sonoma and Napa below. Even in my memory, which only reliably accounts for less than the last twenty years, these towns were sleepy and agricultural; a group of paunchy old-time farmers in overalls were a fixture at the local greasy-spoon café. Today these towns are trendy, and their rural charm has been commodified into a serious asset, as the lucky people who cashed in on the giddy economy of the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond in the 1990’s flood the area as tourists and residents. The small, locally-owned cattle ranches once common in Sonoma have all but disappeared, swallowed by extensive new housing developments and “industrial vineyards.” The tension between the old and new economies and residents is high. A recent *New York Times* article characterized the environmental battles over vineyard development as “green, antiurban [residents] who have come to Napa to live” on one side, and “green, antiurban [residents] who have come to Napa to farm” on the other.¹³ In this phrase I find some echoes of the conflicts between members of my family. From a similar starting point, as a part of a family-owned agricultural business, the generations have taken different views of the best use of Lovall Valley and acted independently with their properties, yielding the fragmented pieces and varying uses of the land today.

Reflections on Place

In interpreting the environmental history of Lovall Valley, I have re-examined many of my beliefs about connections to a place. I was surprised to find that this familiar place, a spot on the earth to which I feel that I belong, held a number of clues to a past I had not imagined and a history I had taken for granted. In addition, I found that the current shape of the land could be used as a document to understand some of my family dynamics. The shape of the land today reflects choices made since before I was born, a physical expression of personalities and values. My interpretation of the land suggests its own intriguing set of questions, about the full complexity of motivations of relatives whom I barely knew, to which I might never really understand the answers.

I am not above the story of Lovall Valley, I am a part of it. My obvious dislike of the intensive development and the many new houses there is balanced by my recognition that it could not have stayed a turkey ranch forever, and that perhaps that use of the land is no better than those before or since. The year after I was born, the turkey-breeding company with my last name no longer even belonged to anyone in my family. For their own reasons, my father and his siblings got out of the business entirely in subsequent years. My two aunts have sold all of their properties in the heart of the former turkey ranch, while my parents have held on to some favorite parcels that will stay in our family. I never really had

the option to preserve Lovall Valley as it was thirty years ago, and I'm not sure I would have wanted to. So I am left with a better understanding of the course of human impact on this one small valley, my deeply ambiguous feelings about their consequences, and the knowledge that I will leave my own mark on the land here. I am aware that my actions will be subject to future judgment by my own descendants, and I will try to live up to what they deserve.

Notes:

¹ Anderson, M. Kat, Michael G. Barbour, and Valerie Whitworth. "A World of Balance and Plenty: Land, Plants, Animals, and Humans in Pre-European California," *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush*, ed. Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Richard C. Orsi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 12-47.

² See Shepard Krech's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999) for a discussion of the role of Native Americans in shaping the landscape they inhabited. For a description of the native peoples of the Sonoma and Napa area, see *The People of the Pueblo: The Story of Sonoma* (Sonoma: Index Tribune Publishing, 1937) by Celeste G. Murphy.

³ Anderson, Barbour, and Whitworth, 1998.

⁴ Kinsella, John. "What To Do When the Oaks Start Dying," *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, February 9, 2002. Page B7.

⁵ United States Fish and Wildlife Service. *California Freshwater Shrimp (Syncaris pacifica Holmes) Recovery Plan*, (Portland: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1998).

⁶ Leese, Jacob P. and Thomas D. Larkin. "Map of a survey and subdivision of the Rancho of Huichica." (Napa: Napa County Recorder's Office, 1851).

⁷ United States Department of the Interior Geological Survey. *7.5 Minute Series Topographic Map- Sonoma Quadrangle, California*, (Denver: USGS, 1980).

⁸ Special thanks to my father, Robert J. Nicholas, for his time in sharing his extensive personal knowledge of the history of Lovall Valley with me. Most of the family history described here comes from him.

⁹ Sonoma County Assessor's Office. Aerial photographs of the Lovall Valley region, taken 12 May 1961; 21 April 1971; 3 May 1980; and 23 June 1990.

¹⁰ Lesse and Larkin 1851.

¹¹ Sonoma County Assessor's Office. Aerial photographs. (see note 8).

¹² Beck, John. "You Can't Get There from Here: Lovall Valley," *The Valleys of Napa County: A special publication of the Napa Valley Register*. Saturday, May 23, 1998. p. 18-25.

¹³ Kahn, Joseph. "Lawsuits in Eden: Fury Over Napa Vineyards," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2002.