

From Colusa

I was born in Arbuckle, but during my childhood years of the 1940's, I was raised in Colusa, a rural community of barely 2,800 residents. The town is seated hard by the levees of the Sacramento River, 60 miles north of Sacramento. Starting at Bridge Street, the city streets run north, first to tenth, and from the river, they run west – Main, Market, Jay, Oak, Clay, Parkhill, Webster, and Fremont. That's it, the urban square mile of my childhood world.

The birth of Colusa dates to 1850, the same year that California was incorporated as a state. Rice growing was introduced in 1912, and my uncle used to tell me that the U.S. produced more rice than China. This might have been something of a patriotic exaggeration, I don't know, but Colusa itself did grow enough rice by the 1940's to be ranked the number-one rice-producing county in the nation. It still is. On average, Colusa produces more than 10 million sacks of rice a year, a half-million tons or more, with an annual cash value of approximately \$200 million. Rice is deemed such a valuable commodity by the federal government that in 2002, it paid \$55 million in federal subsidies to 900 Colusa County rice growers, including some of my relatives.

If you can imagine two highways intersecting at mid-point, each one 20 miles long, one running east and west, the other north and south, flooded on both sides for five months of the year, you have the same view of the county that I had during my childhood. During the rice growing season, the ten-mile drive from Colusa to Williams, the intersection in my highway example, seemed to me like driving through a vast lake on a narrow elevated strip of asphalt. The terrain was flat, and without highlights to provide any dimension, it seemed eerie to me, like a water wasteland.

The production of rice requires water, huge amounts of water, enough water to cover several hundred square miles of rice fields. For five months of the year, irrigators like Pop, my grandfather, flooded the rice fields. They regulated and controlled the water by means of a series of seemingly endless contoured small levees, called rice checks. Each check contained an irrigation box that permitted the irrigator to move the water and raise or lower it as the

growing cycle required. Standing water in the rice fields meant extra long days for the irrigators. From daylight to dark, they walked the levees with their long-handled shovels lying atop their shoulders, repairing levee breaks, regulating the water, and generally fussing over the rapidly growing crop.

My mother's family grew rice west of Williams, and my aforementioned Pop was a rice irrigator for a large ranch, but even though my childhood roots were in the rice fields, I knew that whatever the future held for Colusa, it did not include me.

My future was shaped by the convent school, my mother's devout practice of Catholicism, and my father, who often expressed his wish that I should get an education and do better in life than he. I admired my father greatly and marveled at all the things he could repair and fix and figure out, but apparently he did not attach much educational value to it. He hoped I would do better. I said I would.

In the 1940's, the devout practice of Catholicism in the rice town of Colusa meant attending mass on Sundays and taking communion if you had not broken the no water, no food since midnight rule, making a good confession every Saturday, serving the early weekday mass for the parish priest, praying the rosary daily, not eating meat on Fridays, attending the convent school, observing the practice of Lent, including the weekly stations of the cross, and not entering a Protestant church, even for a social event. In fact, social relationships with non-Catholics were discouraged for fear they might lead to marriage with a non-Catholic, which was a cause of concern and very much frowned upon. Catholics were Catholics, and everyone else was something else, but each group was to be kept separate and apart.

Does this sound too simplistic and without nuance? I'm sure it does, but 60 years ago, in the rice community of Colusa, it seemed natural and commonplace, at least to me, the son of devout French Canadian Catholic ancestors.

I have no clear recollection that I was anxious to leave Colusa, only that I was destined to do so. I did well in the convent school and I wanted to attend a Catholic high school, but the closest one was located in Sacramento. My father wanted me to get an education, and for some reason, the small high

school in Colusa was not what he meant. My mother was pleased because I could continue my Catholic education. All of the stars seemed aligned for the inevitable, so with great expectation and little fanfare, they drove me to the Catholic boarding school one day early in September 1948.

That day was the last of Colusa for me. I came home a weekend or two a month, but I longed to return to school at the first opportunity, and then in August 1949, I entered Catholic religious monastic life. My break with my childhood, and with Colusa, was complete and irrevocable. I never looked back.

I lived my childhood to the fullest, I was close to my uncles on the ranch, I lived with my grandparents for a time, I was an avid reader, I enjoyed going to school, and I felt my parents wanted the best for me. Everyone needs to come from someplace, and Colusa, the number-one rice-producing county in the United States, is a good someplace from which to come, but no return would be possible.

Now, writing as an old man, I am hesitant to ask myself if I fulfilled my father's wishes and whether I did more with my life than he did. I remind myself that to him who is given much, much more is expected in return. I was given much.