CHAPTER 3

LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION

INTRODUCTION

Through the years, decades, and millennia, the appearance of the Lake Sonoma Area inevitably changed. Initially, the usual pace was almost imperceptible, related to the seasons, and thus cyclical in nature. On rare occasions, earthquakes may have suddenly altered topographic features, creating new springs or damming watercourses. Fire, a more frequent agent of change, produced more widespread, though less permanent, modifications to the environment. These fires were caused not only by natural forces, such as lightning, but were also the result of both the purposeful and accidental behavior of human beings.

The preceding chapter described this environment at succeeding intervals as it appeared to various observers. Except, perhaps, for environmental reconstructions based on quantitative data, these descriptions were biased by the values and interests of the observers. A simple example of this phenomenon would be the different characteristics sought, and therefore noted, by farmers, ranchers, and lumbermen: redwood forests posed barriers to farmers and ranchers, but promised wealth to loggers. Thus, our phased reconstruction of the environment was limited by the interests of those persons who chose to commit their observations to paper. This chapter explores people’s thoughts and feelings about the project-area environment and how these affected their behavior in realms such as settlement pattern, use of natural resources, and land management (1).

Environment is an inherent property of every living thing, it is that which surrounds and sustains; we are always environed, always enveloped by an outer world. Landscape is less inclusive, more detached, not so directly a part of our organic being. Landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds. . . Environment sustains us as creatures; landscape displays us as cultures (3).

Landscapes are a product of human activity, an accumulation of evidence of human lifeways, both past and present. Some cultural geographers study the landscape as history. The proponents of this discipline profess that landscapes are like artifacts which, in contrast to written sources, cannot lie. According to one advocate, the “landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form” (4). Every landscape is an expression of cultural values, social behavior, and individual initiative enacted over the years upon a particular place. The landscape, in itself, is not a complete record of human history, for the actions of later groups and individuals may obliterate the visible remains of earlier occupations. Natural forces also alter biographic aspects of the landscape. Thus landscape, like environment, is dynamic, ever changing in its visual display.

Place Names

The creation of a web of place names upon a mental map of the natural environment is one way human beings create order and an understandable world. Place names are one aspect of the landscape which may survive their christeners and even the remains themselves. Place names can provide evidence of landscape creators and their activities, their values, their fears, and their pleasures; changing place names reflect changing land use, land ownership, and beliefs about the natural environment. Thus the names Hardscrabble Camp and Grouse Camp, found on an early map of Sonoma County, are apparently all that remain of two possible mining camps and early stopping places for those traveling
between the Russian River Valley and the coast. Hardscrabble, a name commonly given to Gold Rush mining camps, implies a difficult struggle to scratch something valuable out of the earth. Grouse Camp sounds more inviting, suggestive of abundant game and good hunting. On the other hand, as grouse also means to complain, this may have been an unpleasant locale, giving residents and visitors cause to grumble.

In order that directions and other information may be communicated within and between groups, descriptive names are often given to topographic features. Even when the features themselves have not changed, the names assigned to them by successive groups have. For example, the Southern Pomo called Skagggs Hot Springs Kahowani, or “where hot water is”; what is currently designated Buzzard Rock—formerly possessed of the more elegant title, Eagle Rock—was called Kabepetri, or “at big rock.”

Directional and size modifiers sometimes serve to distinguish geographic locations. Thus the native inhabitants of Dry Creek Valley called their creek Mihilakawna, or “water to the west,” while the Russian River was Ashokawna, “water to the east.” Some local Southern Pomo groups called the Russian River Bidape, or “big river.” In a similar vein, the map filed in 1843 with the land-grant petition of José German Peña encompassed portions of two watercourses, the Russian River and Dry Creek, designated Rio Grande and Rio, respectively. The meaning of other place names, such as a Southern Pomo term for Toothpick Rock, are culture-bound and cannot be accurately translated (5).

The subsistence economy of traditional Pomoan groups was based on a seasonal round: people harvested plant and animal resources where and when these became available within a specified geographic region. Many of their place names reflect this subsistence base, referring to the locations of important seasonal resources, for example, Amalako, “rabbit field,” Makahmo, “salmon-hole,” and Osokowi, “at clover-field.” Clover must have been abundant in the area, since the word showed up again in the name of Cloverdale, dale being an Old English term for a low-lying area or valley.

When Euroamerican settlers imposed a new economic strategy—farming and ranching—upon the land base, place names changed accordingly. Streams now were given such names as Cherry Creek, Wild Cattle Creek, Wine Creek, and Strawberry Creek. Hunting, which has remained important in the area until the present, is reflected in place names like Buck Mountain. The geographic location of specific activities may also be graced with place names, for example Chatahmowi “at fish-weir-hole,” Koloko, “hopper-field,” and Schoolhouse Creek.

The names of two of the Pomoan groups that formerly resided within the Lake Sonoma Area were derived from important place names within their territory: Mihilakawna-Chamay, or “west-water people” and Makahmo-Chamay, or “salmon-hole people” (6). In contrast, the sedentary Euroamerican settlers often gave their family names to land forms and watercourses located within their holdings. The study area provides many examples of this practice, which can sometimes aid in the identification of early settlers, including Board Bridge, McClashen Rock, Pritchett Peaks, Dutcher Creek, and Thompson Ridge. Occasionally, more recent inhabitants replaced the names of earlier residents with their own, as with the supplantation of Beatty Creek by Yorty Creek. The spelling of these family names was often altered over time; Pritchett was sometimes shortened to Prichett, Board to Bord, and Yordi quickly became Yorty. During the historic period, some Southern Pomo place names also indicated the presence of Euroamerican settlers: for instance, Olovicha, or “adobe house,” and names which translated to “where Powell is,” “Curly’s Creek,” and “black-men’s place.”

The Kashaya, or Southwestern Pomo, also used portions of the Warm Springs drainage for village sites and for camping, gathering, and ceremonial activities. Kashaya tribal scholars remember the uses of and names for many of these places during prehistoric and early historic times. One historic and prehistoric living site (CA-Son-544/H), called Serene Flat by Euroamerican settlers, had two names in Kashaya. The site’s prehistoric name has been forgotten, but in historic times it was called Peska mitiwali, or “place where the bricks lay.” In addition, the father of the most recent owner referred to this field as Chimney Flat, since whenever he plowed there, he turned up a great deal of brick (7).

In the old days, every hill and gully had a name which the locals knew, along with the time it took to get from one place to another. These names were seldom understood by outsiders. The Baldwin family created or fostered a number of names for places within their 8000-acre ranch. Some of these were
Pomoan place names in the Lake Sonoma Area
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descriptive—Rock Gate Field, for example; some indicated function, such as Beef Pasture and Horse Pasture; and some may have focused on local or family lore, such as Bellyache Hill, Darkest Guallala, and Bear Pen Canyon.

Place names also indicate where fear is centered and what real dangers haunt a group. Chuchukaton, or “on gray-hair-water,” designated a spring whose water, it was believed, would turn the drinker’s hair gray. Another taboo spot was Kamhsoman, “splashing-water,” a deep hole within the Russian River. These names indicate two not uncommon fears. For the Kashaya, Eagle Rock was a frightening place called Donokoko, or “Taboo Mountain.” Euroamerican anxieties were more generalized and less centered on specific locales. Bear Ridge, Coyote Ridge, and Hawk Ridge all define larger geographic areas inhabited by livestock predators. Although bears were quickly exterminated and coyotes nearly eliminated by area settlers, the latter once again are seen as a threat to the livelihood of present-day ranchers. According to some cultural geographers, modern man’s power to alter the environment has generated a new genre of landscape fears, fears that are not centered in a specific place but generalized to a dread of a “breakdown of the cosmic order and the unleashing of violent natural forces”: flood, drought, unseasonable weather (8). Such fears played a part in the decision to construct the Warm Springs Dam.

Occasionally, place names reflect ideals. Icaria Creek is the best local example of an ideological place name. Icaria was the name of an ideal republic described in a work written by a French Communist in 1840, later given to several 19th-century communistic settlements in the United States. The Icaria-Speranza settlement, based on these principles, operated just south of Cloverdale from 1881 to 1887 (9).

Landscape as Focus for Ritual and Folklore

Folklore and ritual beliefs and practices are often perpetuated when they are attached to specific locations. Murdered Man’s House, visited by Baldwin and his children after the turn of the century, is just such a place. Here, near Toothpick Rock, a stone foundation and a fallen stone chimney marked the spot where once lived a man supposedly robbed and murdered during the 1880s. Details of this crime are few; in fact, the lore was probably based on a quarrel that ended in a bloody fight, but not in death. According to this tale, Sylvester Scott and a neighbor, McClemmy, were feuding over a fenceline. McClemmy threatened to shoot Scott, who decided to go up to McClemmy’s claim and settle the matter for good. When Scott arrived, he found McClemmy lying in a pool of blood, the aftermath of a crooked poker game with another neighbor. At the time, and with good reason, Scott feared that he would be charged with murder; luckily, however, his neighbor recovered and told the story (10).

Big Foot Canyon, to the north of the study area, is another place name connected with local lore. To many, the name “Big Foot” conjures up a legendary man-beast, also known as yeti or the abominable snowman, rumored to inhabit certain backwoods areas of the globe, including northern California. In this case, however, the name does not relate to the sighting of any large, hairy, manlike creature, but to the activities of an all-too-mortal stagecoach robber. According to locals, Lodie Brown was graced with unusually small feet, a sorry circumstance for an outlaw not wishing to be identified and tracked. To confuse any pursuers, Lodie wore extra large boots and became known as “Big Foot” Lodie Brown. Around 1870 Big Foot Lodie and his gang held up in a cave in a rugged portion of the George J. Matthews Ranch. The gang killed Matthews’ cattle for food and robbed the Cloverdale-to-Fort Bragg stage until they were finally captured and tried for murder in the summer of 1871. Their hideout area is still known as Big Foot Canyon.

Only fragments survive of the rich and complex belief system that once formed an essential part of local Native American life. One fragment of what may have been the creation story of the Makahmo, or Cloverdale, Pomo describes a great deluge and world flood, culminating in a speech by Coyote from the top of the three highest mountains in the area: St. Helena, Konocti, and a mountain north of Ukiah. The Makahmo recognized two creators: one a master planner, the other an active creator, Coyote. Before he began human creation, Coyote peopled the world with human-like beings, or “animal people,” whom he endowed with certain human characteristics, most notably speech. These “animal people” were the forerunners of human beings; they encountered many of the same problems and experiences, and possessed the same goals. A rich oral tradition, recounting the adventures of these “first people,” was passed on from generation to generation and provided the Makahmo with models of solutions to problems and the consequences of certain activities. Members of
Euroamerican place names in the Lake Sonoma Area (map by Adrian Praetzellis)
this group, young and old, were reminded of these stories and the morals they contained by just looking at the landscape (11).

Within a belief structure emphasizing the prevention and cure of illness and the acquisition of power or luck, the Southern Pomo considered certain sites to be sacred. These places were believed to be imbued with power, both malevolent and benevolent. As all sacred sites could possess negative powers, they had to be approached with caution and used with respect to avoid evil consequences. Sacred places were often the source of certain powerful plants, rocks, and songs, all of which could be used for protection from other supernatural forces and for good luck in activities such as hunting and gambling. Some sites, however, possessed only malevolent forces and were avoided whenever possible. Among these were lakes and bodies of water believed to be inhabited by supernatural beings in the form of snakes. These serpents were particularly dangerous to menstruating women and to anyone traveling with them; the serpents’ appearance caused serious illness, and possibly death, to viewers.

A pond on the north side of the Cordova Place, a ranch where many Dry Creek Pomo lived around 1900, is said to have been such a place. Children were cautioned never to go near the pond:

It was the place Mary Warn went six or seven months after she had a baby. Mary Warn was feeling very low because of her father’s recent death. Mary Warn saw something at the pond that scared her . . . this is thought to have been something which came out of the water—‘big snake or something . . . like that.’ She soon became ill and died shortly thereafter (12).

A dangerous place for Kashaya traveling along Skags Springs Road was the Twin Rocks, located a mile or so from the confluence of Warm Springs and Rancheria creeks. It is believed that the two rocks, located on opposite sides of the road, are male and female twin spirits. The female spirit is a long feathered serpent; the male spirit is said to be a “large buck,” who lives on the rock adjacent to an old camp site (CA-Son-553). The serpent is said to stretch across the road between the rocks. Both spirits are very dangerous to young girls and menstruating women, who may become very sick, or even die, if they do not take appropriate precautions. When traveling in this area, Kashaya followed strict rules. Susceptible women avoided the place if possible; if not, they covered their faces and were carried in the old times, when people traveled on foot. Special songs were sung and offerings made when passing by the Twin Rocks. One Kashaya elder recalled that she had doubted the spirit as a young girl. She peeked out from under her blanket and saw the buck. If it had not been for the songs that Annie Jarvis, a powerful doctor, had been singing for her, she would have died. After that, the woman never doubted the spirit again. Five Kashaya place names refer to the Twin Rocks (13).

Petroglyphs, rocks whose surfaces have been pecked and occasionally ground to form designs, are an example of sacred places created and perpetuated by former inhabitants of the Lake Sonoma Area. Numerous petroglyphs, varying in size and design, are found along the area’s creeks. Use of these petroglyph rocks appears to date from as early as 3000 B.C. to the 19th century A.D. Archaeologists now generally agree that hunting and gathering peoples produced this form of rock art primarily in a ritual “quest for supernatural power” (14). Ethnographic accounts describe a more specific use of petroglyphs as “fertility rocks” or “baby rocks.” In one account, a woman would decorate her body with dust ground out of a baby rock and ask for a child as part of a prescribed ritual. Petroglyphs remain sacred to some contemporary Indian people as a source of spiritual power to make a person sick or well, and as bestowers of songs of power and luck. Some of these petroglyph rocks were moved out of the area to be flooded by Lake Sonoma, for their protection and to provide inspiration to both Indian and non-Indian visitors to the project.

Cultural Landscape

Certain landscapes can be thought of as material manifestations of cultural values. These landscapes display the results of people shaping their environment according to culturally directed plans. An important aspect of studying the cultural landscape involves rediscovering the plans that created the visible form—namely, patterns of natural resource use, technological development, land modification, and settlement.

Euroamerican settlers brought with them familiar patterns of building construction, farmstead layout, and community design. These they adapted to local topographic and climatic conditions—in this case, a
rugged, mountainous region with steep-walled canyons and only small areas of flat, arable bottomland, characterized by a fairly mild, Mediterranean climate.

The first building constructed in Dry Creek Valley, the Peña adobe, is still standing just southeast of the Lake Sonoma Area. The earliest structures within the project area were evidently constructed of wood and not the adobe of the Spanish-Mexican tradition. The James Pritchett family home, built in 1862, may have been the first permanent structure in the area. It was described by archaeologists as a “northern adaptation of the Lowland South double-pen plan” house, with the addition of a central chimney. The double-pen house type was once common as plantation quarters along the Mississippi and Red rivers; it is part of the “Pen Tradition” brought by emigrants from the British Isles and modified first to accommodate log construction, and later to use in wood-frame buildings (15). This, like other “folk” houses, was almost certainly designed and built without the benefit of formal plans, but according to the artisan’s idea of what a house should look like. Although the study of vernacular architecture, or folk housing, has been pursued in the South and East for a few decades, these often plain and simple structures have only recently attracted attention in California (16).

Other folk buildings certainly were built within the Lake Sonoma Area; some examples were photographed there in 1976. There are currently, however, no recorded folk dwellings on the Corps’ property. During the 1940s at Skaggs Springs, and probably elsewhere, abandoned buildings were scavenged for lumber, especially structural members. Some structures were sold by their owners and moved to new locations just previous to the Corps’ acquisition; other structures were demolished by the Corps to deter the establishment of a new generation of “squatters” within the area; and some were burned as part of fire-fighting training.

Barns, outbuildings, stock pens and corrals, and other agricultural structures were once common parts of the local landscape. While some of these features remain, many have been lost to time, the elements, and human agents of change and destruction. Sheep fencing is one historic landscape element that still remains throughout the area. This traditional split/rough wood and wire fence type, well suited to its purpose, suggests an element of a folk or regional culture. Slightly to the north, in Mendocino County, this fence type gives way to the “snake fence,” a type once found extensively throughout the rural South. The stone-lined “cellar” walls dug into north-facing slopes in the southern portion of the study area may represent another element of regional culture. These
sites were investigated by historical archaeologists, who considered them to be “a local product of self-sufficiency in labor, materials and food storage needs” (17).

Most permanent 19th- and 20th-century residents planted orchards, vegetable and flower gardens, and other exotic species near their homes. Many of these still flower and bear fruit in testimony to the individuals and families who nurtured them. Thus, scattered agricultural features, domestic trees and other plants, crude sheep fencing, and farm roads covered much of the Lake Sonoma Area’s land, creating a cohesive landscape and a sense of the elements of the local culture (18).

Emotional responses to a landscape’s aesthetic qualities can be studied at an individual and/or cultural level. The cultural landscape has symbolic meaning within the context of the particular society which creates it. As people use the earth, they inevitably change it. Whether this occurs subtly or dramatically, creating an aesthetically pleasing effect or an eyesore, the modifications alter humans’ perceptions of the environment. As human activities alter an area, the landscape may acquire new symbolic meanings, interpreted by members of society in varying forms and degrees of culturally defined messages. Features may also have historical associations to particular individuals, events, or processes. The power of any cultural landscape is therefore dependent as much on an individual’s background as on the remains themselves. Yi-Fu Tuan, a cultural geographer, has coined the phrase “topophilia” to describe this mixture of sentiment and place (19).

“Every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes” (20), and those that arose in western North America were seen to represent staunch individualism and the frontier. The project area contained many elements of the “classic” American landscape. During the 19th century, the image of the brave, hardworking pioneer family was a dominant emblem of national character and aspirations, while the farm symbolized the good life and epitomized “pure America.” By the end of that century, this image of national virtue was exemplified by rugged landscapes, in which a small corner was tamed for human use. As growing urbanization and industrial development highlighted the contrast between civilization and nature, more and more people were inspired by the spiritual power of the wilderness (21).

Writers influenced by this perspective often got quite carried away in their descriptions of scenic beauty. Wilderness, according to Tuan, stood for the sublime and called man to contemplation; in its solitude one drifted into higher thoughts away from the temptations of Mammon; it has come to be associated with the frontier and pioneer past, and so with qualities that were thought to be characteristically American; and it was an environment that prompted toughness and virility (22).

In keeping with this sentiment, the wonders of Skaggs Springs inspired S.P. Mead, a midwestern newspaper correspondent and guest in the summer of 1871, to muse as follows:

For whose eyes have all these beauties been spread where age after age human footsteps never came? There is an untold pleasure in seeking out those places where God only is to study the beauty and realize his goodness. The immensity of the view, its charming variety, its lovely lights and shades, all in connection with the soft blue sky, all first brought a feeling of joy, then sadness, as I seemed to lose my identity in pleasure all too great for my grasp. . . . Such a scene, once looked upon, is a feast for the memory ever after. The pure air, clear sky, angel whisperings among the leaves, suggest to the mind a ‘love of earth and a great deal of credit to Heaven’ (23).

Four decades later, in 1911, a young high school student from San Francisco expressed a similar sentiment toward the Dry Creek uplands—straightforwardly and without the literary contrivances: “I just can’t wait for summer to come. I think I am still uncivilized because that wild life up there appeals to me in a very strange manner” (24). On another occasion, she wrote that:

My composition work always seems to be connected with the ranch in someway or the other. The other day we had to write a sketch of a field or grave. I wrote a description of your alfalfa field and came out ahead of the whole class. I described it at night and the scenery was quite wonderful when I finished. Nothing ever came so natural to me before for
I could just picture the whole thing as fast as my pen could write (25).

Wilderness as a landscape symbol was revitalized and widely defended in the 1970s by groups in opposition to construction of the Warm Springs Dam. One group in particular, the Friends of Sonoma Hot Springs, also called the Warm Springs Guardians, sought to save Kahowani, or Skaggs Springs, from inundation. In addition to their specific environmental concerns, they cited the healing powers of the springs’ waters and the spiritual quality of the environs as reasons for Kahowani’s preservation.

Supporters presented their values as sharply contrasting with the “temptations of Mammon,” or, in contemporary jargon, the “Great American Pork Barrel”—that is, those persons reaping profit from the dam.

To the Guardians, the hot springs functioned as what geographers have called a ceremonial landscape, communicating both the awe inspiring qualities of nature and the destructive capacity of man. To make a political point, the Guardians held “healing” ceremonies, during which they planted oak trees to replace, at least symbolically, trees destroyed by the Corps of Engineers. The Friends of Sonoma Hot Springs expressed considerable empathy with the Pomoan Indian groups who had used the springs in the past. Believing that the springs had a guardian spirit and that the Pomo were the traditional keepers of the site and protectors of the spirit, the Guardians wished to join with the Pomo in their traditional role. The extent, however, to which Kahowani continued to function as a sacred place to local Indian groups is unclear. One young Pomoan Indian passing by the springs reportedly disagreed with the new guardians regarding the springs’ value: “You can’t save this place, it’s gone. They’ve already destroyed it” (26).
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Ironically, nature, though not exactly wilderness, was a landscape symbol also used by Warm Springs Dam supporters. This group rallied around the cry of “Save Lake Sonoma,” images of a sailboat gracefully traversing Lake Sonoma, and a photo of a small boy fishing from a boat—this, at a time when Lake Sonoma existed only on paper and in the minds of supporters and government planners. For both pro- and anti-dam factions, the manipulation of symbols helped to build common allegiance to a simplified set of values embodied in the landscape.

ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION

Environmental perception studies concentrate on the relationship between what people believe to be the characteristics of the natural environment and how they use the land. Successive groups extracted or cultivated particular resources within the Lake Sonoma Area. All of these resources had been inherent within the environment from prehistoric times. Each group, however, made an assessment of the available resources, and chose for selective development those that were best suited to their needs and technology. When geographers study environmental perception, they are concerned with “the complex relationships between perceptions, values, verbalized attitudes, and behavior” (27). With positive and negative consequences, environmental perception influences behavior.

Environmental perception is shaped for a group by cultural and economic factors and augmented by experience at the individual level. Biases in environmental perception can be seen most clearly by comparing the attitudes of persons of different cultural and occupational backgrounds in reference to a new and unknown geographic milieu.

Examples from California

Despite California’s early reputation as the nearest thing to the Garden of Eden and the most favorable press ever focused on a frontier region, some new arrivals believed the state to be a desert, unsuited to agricultural pursuits. The early, overwhelmingly enthusiastic descriptions of California as a land of promise were often inaccurate and based on very little data, while appraisals of the state’s agricultural potential by actual settlers and government officials were quite mixed. Writing of the Sacramento Valley, Kenneth Thompson quotes a number of conflicting early reports on the area’s agricultural resources; these evaluations often reflected the cultural biases and expectations held by the observer. Observers heralding from the humid regions of the eastern United States and northern Europe were troubled by the heat, lack of summer rainfall, and dearth of trees. In the 1840s, these people commonly believed that where trees would not grow, the land was sterile and would not support crops. Settlers from the Midwest, in contrast, painted a much more sanguine picture of the Sacramento Valley’s rich agricultural potential. In fact, some became California boosters, preaching to easterners of the valley’s boundless fertility and unparalleled productiveness. These boosters envisioned the technological innovations and large-scale irrigation and reclamation projects that have since helped create the Sacramento Valley’s rich agricultural domain (28).

The rate and nature of settlement within the project area were influenced by both the general allure of California and by specific perceptions of the potential uses and value of land in the area. Judging from the 1833 report of Baron von Wrangell, the Russians settled at nearby Fort Ross were favorably disposed towards lands in the general vicinity of the study area. In that year, an expedition of 21 men on horseback traveled up the Russian River to Mark West Creek and then northward, probably passing through the Dry Creek Valley. They extolled the area’s “immense meadows,” “most luxuriant grass,” and “most fertile humus soil.” Although they journeyed in September, perhaps the driest and least attractive time of year, the area continued to live up to their expectations:

Nightfall took us unawares in one of those splendid oak groves which here and there shaded the plain. The horses almost disappeared in the high, fragrant grass which covered the meadows. The camp fire blazed up amidst the dark foliage of oaks a century old. Deep silence settled upon this land so richly endowed by nature (29).

It was the abundant grassland which, within a decade, stimulated the establishment of Mexican land grants in the area.

The economy of Mexican California was based primarily on large, free-ranging herds of cattle; their hides formed the area’s wealth, means of barter, and, to some degree, its currency. On vast stretches of land, these ranchers limited their cultivation to a few acres of barley, melons, and vegetables. George
Sonoma County pioneer Nicholas Carriger
(from Munro-Fraser’s History of Sonoma County)

Gibbs, a member of Colonel McKee’s 1851 government expedition which was charged with initiating treaties with the Native American population of northwestern California, kept a journal of his observations, including specific references to ranchos in the Russian River Valley. He felt the agricultural potential of much of the area was being neglected due to the ignorance and sloth of its Spanish proprietors and their Indian laborers. He belittled the Spaniard, who,

grasping such vast possessions, was too indolent to nurture the agricultural wealth of the land, and had too little enterprise even to find the mineral wealth that glittered at its feet (30).

This attitude, characteristic of the period, was unfair in its evaluation of the Mexican economy and of the technological and socioeconomic constraints working upon operators within that system.

Prior to the discovery of gold in 1848 and the almost worldwide stampede of fortune seekers to California, American settlers trickled into California, attracted by the vision of land that was abundant, fertile, and free. Nicholas Carriger, eventually a successful rancher and vineyardist near the city of Sonoma, had just settled in Missouri, built a house, and cleared many an acre, when in April 1846, the rumor of the fertility of California, brought on the wings of fame, made me feel displeased with my farm; and without consulting with any person; I sold it to a broker for the paltry sum of five hundred dollars, less than the amount I had invested in lumber for my house (31).
Within the week Carriger set out for California, accompanied by many family members, including his wife and children, parents, and in-laws.

In contrast to the Carriger family, who emigrated as a group in quest of farmland, the Forty-Niners came in partnerships of young men, intent on quickly amassing fortunes and triumphantly returning to their loved ones at home. Even local agriculturists temporarily abandoned farm and family for the quick riches supposedly waiting in the creeks and rivers of the Sierra Nevada. Few argonauts, however, managed to find and keep the gold they sought. Some entrepreneurs realized that a more secure fortune might be gained through supplying the miners with fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit. Other would-be miners, attracted by California’s pleasant climate and fertile soil, abandoned dreams of quick fortune, brought out their families, and sought a place for themselves within the rural, farming community. Numerous Lake Sonoma Area settlers began their California careers in the “Gold Country,” including Tennessee Bishop, William Board, Svente and Henrietta Hallengren, Sylvester Scott, George J. Matthews, and James and Elizabeth Pritchett.

Although the number and influence of California agriculturists grew during the 1850s and 1860s, the state and the world still perceived California’s wealth to be in its minerals and not in its agricultural products. Charles Nordhoff, a California booster, noted that in 1872 California was “still, to a great extent, a country in which mining is, as they say, ‘played out,’ while agriculture has not taken its place” (32).

Misconceptions regarding California’s free land generated much confusion and suffering. Although differing in their ideas of land use, Anglo and California (Mexican Californians) perceptions of the most favorable land characteristics coincided. Thus potential farmers often found the land they desired to be part of a Mexican land grant and, therefore, closed to settlement. Settlers, frustrated in their efforts to obtain the “good life,” squatted upon this private property. Meanwhile, large areas of public land, open for settlement, remained uninhabited due to their presumed or actual inferior quality. It was not until the late 1860s that population pressure, caused by the general exodus from mining regions and an influx of families displaced by the Civil War, prompted large-scale settlement on public land, including land in the Lake Sonoma Area. At the same time, the spread of successful cultivation without irrigation, and of extensive irrigation projects, upgraded the value of some land previously deemed to be unsuited to farming.

The Agricultural Bonanza

Economic incentives may cause abrupt changes in how the resources of a particular area are viewed. Agoston Haraszthy, for example, an important influence in the development of dry-farming techniques, helped revise the prevailing negative environmental perception of large areas of California. In his widely circulated 1858 treatise on grapegrowing and winemaking, Haraszthy provided the novice with sufficient detail to start his own vineyard and with a cost analysis to stimulate his economic interest. To make his point, Haraszthy presented a detailed breakdown of his expenditure in planting and bringing up to bearing a 100-acre vineyard. He then projected his profit on this acreage. The hefty profit margin suggested by Haraszthy was a strong incentive to those seeking a comfortable place in the rural economy. Many persons followed Haraszthy’s advice, if not his successful example. This development often took place in the foothills, on cheap land that had been ignored by previous settlers (33).

Numerous other books touting the advantages of California were circulated in the 19th century. Published in 1873, Charles Nordhoff’s California: For Health, Pleasure, and Residence: A Book for Travellers and Settlers was perhaps the most influential. Although Nordhoff was particularly impressed by southern California, he presented a picture of the state that was fairly balanced. He sought to lure the prosperous easterners away from their complacent superiority and love of home, by reassuring them that Californians were a no less refined and cultured group than they themselves:

Very few suspect that the Californians have the best of us, and that, so far from living in a kind of rude exile, they enjoy, in fact, the finest climate, the most fertile soil, the loveliest skies, the mildest winter, the most healthful region, in the whole United States. California has long passed with us in the East as a good-enough sort of country for over- adventurous young men; it is, in fact, the best part of the American continent, either for health or for profitable and pleasant living in any industrious pursuit (34).
Although Nordhoff, like all California boosters, gave examples of rags-to-riches success stories, careful reading singles out the industrious farmer, possessed of some capital and of the desire for a permanent home, as the target of his guide. Nordhoff believed that speculation was the curse of agriculture in California: the desire for quick profit prompted adventurers who were not farmers to gamble on a wet season, good market, or other, often unpredictable, variable. Such speculative ventures often failed, serving to discredit California agriculture.

Immigrants lacking capital were usually forced to borrow. Interest rates were high in California: the common annual rate in the early 1870s was ten to twelve percent. In newly settled areas, however, the standard rate was even higher: two percent per month. Thus the farmer with enough capital to get started had a considerable advantage over less affluent settlers who were forced to borrow. Perceived profit margin is an integral part of environmental perception, for it is the difference between expenditure and return that determines whether a particular area is deemed suitable for a particular land use. For example, when the price of grapes is high, the extra investment necessary to bring a marginal grapegrowing parcel into production will be rewarded; but when grapes are cheap, only those parcels requiring little expenditure will net a profit. Farmers or ranchers, producing for a market economy, had to keep abreast of both price and general economic fluctuations if they were to be successful. A period of lag between changes in market conditions, and changes in operators’ environmental perception and behavior, could have disastrous environmental and economic repercussions. For example, in 1872 Nordhoff wrote that a “well managed” band of sheep would return 48 percent per annum. This high profit margin would be reduced by half if the operator had secured a loan at 24 percent, by an additional amount if his methods, land, and animals were not up to par, and even further should climatic and/or economic factors prove unfavorable in a given year. Some authors of “how-to” manuals ignored these complexities and created an unsound image of a bountiful environment. Settlers’ faith in the California Dream also contributed to this overblown sense of optimism.

One of these overly optimistic tomes, written by “General James S. Brisbin, U.S.A.” in 1881 and entitled The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains: Being a Description of Cattle-growing, Sheep-
farming, Horse-riding, and Dairying in the West, beckoned to everyone dissatisfied with the decaying East to come to the western states.

Where myriads of people find homes and wealth; where the poor professional young man, flying from the over-crowded East and the tyranny of a moneyed aristocracy, finds honor and wealth; where the young politician, unoppressed by rings and combinations, relying upon his own abilities, may rise to position and fame; where there are lands for landless, money for the moneyless, briefs for lawyers, patients for doctors, and above all, labor and its reward for every poor man who is willing to work (35).

According to the “General,” it did not matter where the emigrant settled, for almost anywhere in the “Mighty West” he would find himself better off than he had been in the East. Ranching, and in particular sheep ranching, was believed to be a lucrative endeavor, requiring little capital investment or previous experience, yet achieving very high profit margins. According to Brisbin, “any large family can become rich by following the herds.” At a time when day laborers earned $12 a week and an acre of grazing land cost from $1.50 to $5, all a settler needed was a grubstake of $500 to $1000 and the labor of all family members (36).

Mistaken Environmental Perception

During the 1860s and 1870s, the demands of agriculture put fertile valley land into crop production and forced ranchers to locate in areas not generally suitable for cultivation. Pastoralism shifted to the woodland ranges of the foothills and then to the plateau and mountainous portions of California, where it settled and became stable. By 1880 California’s rangelands were fully stocked. This trend can be seen in the North Coast Ranges, where the quantity of livestock created pressure to use all available rangeland (37).

The rangeland may, in fact, have been overstocked. The Sonoma County sheep population peaked in about 1880 and then declined, possibly due to progressively deteriorating rangelands caused by overgrazing. Here, the influence of the pioneer ranchers’ perception of local grassland led to destructive grazing practices. Although the ranges of California were not evaluated as different from eastern grazing land, they were in fact significantly so, having lighter coverage than rangelands with summer rainfall. Eastern stocking methods proved to be detrimental to California ranges, which required lighter and more carefully controlled rates of grazing. L.T. Burcham, an expert on California rangelands, described the problem as follows:

Disturbances of the plant cover, by grazing or other activities, favored vigorous responses of native annual plants of inferior quality—and of introduced grasses and forbs—to a much greater extent than on eastern ranges. Rangelands with these characteristics may deteriorate rapidly under improper grazing practices and are very difficult to restore (38).

Rather than assigning blame, Burcham absolved the pioneer ranchers from reckless disregard of environmental consequences:

The high rates of stocking and related management practices which apparently were common throughout the entire early period of range livestock grazing in California seem to have been almost wholly honest mistakes of judgment on the part of stockmen (39).

Early stockmen judged the condition of the range by the condition of their livestock; this is now recognized as an unreliable index. The signs that

The cover of Brisbin’s Beef Bonanza
pointed to progressive deterioration of the range went largely unnoticed by ranchers because they did not know their meaning until too late. Burcham noted that one California rancher found that his ranges had changed several times during the 27 years he had lived there, with new species arriving, becoming dominant, and then being replaced by others. “These changes were not interpreted correctly as reflecting grazing use; they were believed to be merely another peculiar phenomenon of this strange new country” (40).

Many of the early ranchers in the Dry Creek uplands came from the British Isles, where green hills are equated with good grazing land. This was not always the case locally. Hills that looked green and rich from far away were not always as fine as they appeared. This situation is indicated by a passage written in 1887 by a native of Ireland concerning a Scotsman who owned land in the Dry Creek uplands. She wrote that William “hud” (Hood) was disgusted with the “fine counterey”; he had lost a great many cattle and complained that people were starving on hills that looked green from far away (41).

The combination of the closing of the range and its deterioration sparked two new developments: the initiation of more appropriate land-management techniques and the entrance of speculators into rural real estate.

**Differences in Perception: Ranchers and Farmers**

Differences between the raising of livestock and the raising of crops are among the factors that may lead to cultural differences in environmental perception, values, and behavior. Many of these differences have been widely recognized, as in the musical “Oklahoma.” Writing of a rural area in Saskatchewan, Canada, John W. Bennett described the differing “cultural styles” of ranchers and farmers and the relationship of these styles to their respective modes of economic production. The rancher, with his extensive land-use pattern, and the farmer, with his intensive land use, each exhibited different styles, values, and perceptions of the environment. While the rancher felt himself, regardless of his practices, to be a part of “unspoiled” nature, the farmer saw nature as something to compete with and to tame. The rancher had a concept of “the wild,” while the farmer thought of nature as “wilderness.” Both groups, however, ultimately took a utilitarian approach toward nature; natural resources were eyed with a view to their most efficient and economically productive use. It was the requirements of the different uses to which farmers and ranchers submitted their land that shaped, in part, their attitudes toward nature. According to Bennett,
the “great open spaces” provide an important symbol to ranchers:

To the rancher, natural resources were part of the unspoiled natural wilderness in which man and his domestic animals lived, using the resources sparingly and tolerating wild species so long as they do not hinder economic pursuits (42).

Grazing lands—the “great open spaces”—are, of course, the rancher’s primary asset. Thus, ranchers viewed the efforts of farmers to transform these open areas with both disdain and apprehension. Successful cultivation, on the other hand, had certain requirements: farmers must disturb wild species and the soil to plant their crops, and they must eliminate destructive insects and other pests. The basic difference between the two modes was, to quote Bennett, that “the rancher’s ideas were based on his minimal disturbance of nature, the farmer’s on a more extensive manipulation of resources” (43).

Only limited evidence is available supporting the existence of this cultural dichotomy between ranchers and farmers in the Lake Sonoma Area during the 19th century. To our knowledge, direct expressions of the values of pioneer settlers have not survived in written form, and their ideals must be reconstructed from their behavior as recorded in documentary sources and upon the cultural landscape. Oral history provides an additional source in the study area. According to one old timer, “the mountain people never did bother the hawks or other wild species.” He used the term “mountain people” to emphasize the special and superior cultural distinctiveness of the old sheep ranchers: “they lived off the land, killing deer for meat, but never abusing the game.” Many present-day landowners around Lake Sonoma espouse an attitude toward nature and land parallel ing that of Bennett’s ranchers. They value the isolation and privacy provided by the surrounding rugged, open spaces, the physical and psychological benefits of closeness to nature, and a conservationist attitude toward the land (44).

Hunting for pleasure is another area in which Bennett’s ranchers and farmers differed, and one for which an equivalent pattern may be reconstructed locally. Farmers, according to Bennett, did their best to eradicate wild species that they regarded as pests, but most did not go hunting. Ranchers, on the other hand, tolerated wild animals as long as they did not perpetuate economic losses beyond a certain limit, but they enjoyed hunting as a common pastime. During the 19th century, several famous hunters owned ranches in the project area, and visitors came from as far away as Europe to hunt with these men. Hunting clubs, run by area ranchers, brought many visitors to the area and supplied capital for property development. The persistence of hunting clubs and the importance of the sport remain a factor to the present and, in instances of trespass and poaching, have become a problem. Although unique in many respects, landowner Orville Baldwin may have shared the local ranchers’ attitude toward nature in general and wild animals in particular. In response to his father’s chiding for allowing the deer to get the best of his sheep feed, Baldwin replied, “The deer were here first” (45).

**LAND MANAGEMENT**

**Beliefs, Goals, and Management**

While beliefs are among the forces influencing the way people manage natural resources, the resource base and use strategies of a group may also influence their religious practices. Ceremonies were one way that Pomoans codified information about their environment and perpetuated instructions for its management.

Goals, whether these be short or long range, have a powerful effect on land-management practices. The result of the single-purpose pursuit of hydraulic miners is a good example of the effect of short-range goals. These men sought quick fortune in the gold-rich Sierra Nevada, a region in which they anticipated no further connection and saw no other value. In their hurry, the miners changed the face of the landscape, buried productive farmland, and washed both valuable topsoil and a fortune in gold dust into the San Francisco Bay. In contrast, the pursuit of long-range goals often involves the extraction of more than one resource from an area. Many former mining regions are now part of National Forests, where professional land-management planners attempt to maintain recreational and landscape values while harvesting and replenishing the timber and grazing resources to supply both present and future needs.

The influence of perception on land management is discussed above in relation to the destruction of California rangelands. Perception, like goals and beliefs, changes through time. Experience, cycles of economic and environmental change, and, in more
recent times, technical information and government regulations, all impinging upon the land-management decisions of individuals and groups.

There was a close relationship between Mihilakawna beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural and the cycles of nature. The Mihilakawna annually held at least five First Fruits ceremonies, each heralding the beginning of a particular harvest season, while honoring and giving thanks for the plant. Thus in spring, ceremonial rites were held first in honor of the appearance of clover and somewhat later for the “Indian potato” (the succulent bulb of plants of the lily family). A First Fruits celebration was held in summer for wild tobacco, in fall for the new crop of acorns, and in early winter for buckeye nuts. Strict prohibitions against collecting the honored plant were in effect prior to the observance. In this way, religious beliefs and practices functioned to assure the plants’ further productivity. The largest First Fruits ceremonies were held in spring, when offerings were made to insure an ample food supply throughout the entire year. Residents of other villages were invited to participate in these observances. After the acorn harvest in the fall, the Mihilakawna held a festival; here, ceremonially prepared acorn mush was offered in thanksgiving, followed by a dance and a ritual feast (46).

Ceremonial leaders decided exactly when these events were to be held. In the 1970s, in the active

\[\text{Pomoan year (from The Makahmo Pomo, 1985)}\]
Indian community of Kashaya near Stewart’s Point, the First Fruits ceremony of the Strawberry Festival was held annually. Despite the fact that scores of people from other Indian groups and their guests came from long distances to celebrate the event, the date of the festival was not announced until a short time before, based on the careful observations made by the Kashaya ceremonial leader.

Two noted anthropologists have described the result of Native American land-management practices as follows:

The Indian preservation of the land and its products for the ten thousand or more years of their undisputed occupancy was such that the White invaders wrested from them a garden, not the wilderness it salved their consciences to call it (47).

The Mihilakawna and Makahmo used a variety of plant-management techniques, which both deliberately and indirectly affected the quality of local resources and the overall composition of their environment. The aim of these techniques was to obtain an adequate plant supply for the group, while maintaining the plant’s continued viability. Based on an understanding of the plants and their reproductive requirements, these Pomoan groups employed various collection strategies to achieve their dual goals and meet their present and future needs. Their plant-management techniques included pruning, cultivation, weeding and clearing, selective harvesting, and controlled burning. Adherence to these practices was extensively regulated by social sanctions and religious taboos. One Makahmo elder expressed her view of the relationship between the human and plant worlds as follows:

When people don’t use the plants they get scarce. You must use them so they will come up again. All plants are like that. If they’re not gathered from, or talked to and cared about, they’ll die (48).

Ritual observances and restrictions on collection reduced harvesting pressures upon certain species, while making the collectors acutely aware of their use of and dependence upon these resources. For example, menstruating women and their men did not gather sedge; violation of this prohibition might result in sickness, rattlesnake bites, or other repercussions. In addition, basketry roots were collected only during daylight hours due to a belief that roots dug after dark would turn black. Hunting was also regulated by strict rules. Before a hunt, men kept away from their women for four days: sexual activity was believed not only to cause poor luck in hunting, but also, at times, punishment by the supernatural. Men whose women were menstruating refrained from hunting for fear of the same consequences. Some individuals possessed special songs to bring them luck in their collecting and hunting activities. Special songs were, in fact, required for protection in order to collect certain medicinally important or poisonous plants. This restriction served not only to enhance the importance of the collector and the power of the potion, but also to preserve rare plants and to protect the uninitiated from misuse of dangerous species (49).

Range Management

The relative value of trees and grasses has alternated over the years. Prior to the post-World War II building boom, most local ranchers viewed trees, especially the abundant fir, as an economic liability. As trees are natural competitors with grasses, land clearing was practiced extensively in the study area to increase the forage. Through controlled burning and tree girdling, these ranchers increased the extent of grasslands at the expense of woodland, forest, and chaparral plant communities. According to a local rancher, “the old-timers in this country girdled enough timber to build a bridge from here to Los Angeles.” Eventually, with the increased value of timber, trees were no longer girdled. Girdling removed large areas of timber from the area—forests, which, due to the current value of timber, are presently being replanted (50).

Controlled burning was used in association with and in addition to tree girdling to improve and increase the forage. The grasslands had been enlarged and maintained, in part, by the efforts of Native Californians to increase the forage for deer. This practice was disapproved of by the Mexican authorities in Upper California. One of the articles in General Vallejo’s treaty with several local Indian groups in 1836 stipulated that “the fields shall not be burned at time of drought on any pretext” (51). Later in the 19th century, most ranchers in the area practiced controlled burning. Although the practice was discouraged during much of the 20th century, by the 1980s many ranchers were again burning portions of their acreage.
The constructive use of fire has not always been a recognized principle or a respectable practice. In his recent history of *Fire in America*, Stephen Pyne relates the development of wildland fire protection to the industrial revolution and the rise of large-scale commercial forestry. Coincidentally, one of the first advocates of “light burning” to appear in print in the 19th century in California was Joaquin Miller, a sentimentalist poet and relative of Dry Creek uplands settler Malinda Miller Scott. Miller, who advocated burning as a return to the “Indian way” of land management, found agreement among many pioneer settlers, stockmen in particular. One early Dry Creek homesteader, George C. Matthews, was an acknowledged authority on controlled burning techniques, and ranchers from all over the state sought his advice. According to local people, Matthews, who “burned a sheep range out of a chemise patch,” ranks as one of the few men ever to make a tremendous success in sheep ranching. Many old timers recalled that Matthews would burn a twisted piece of paper to test the humidity and to make sure the conditions were just right for a burn.

Following the turn of the century, these techniques came into conflict with the newly established Bureau of Forestry and, within a few decades, controlled burning was generally condemned by government technical advisors. Burning on state and federal lands had been illegal since the 1870s, and the penalties increased in 1901. Regardless of its illegality and despite warnings and complaints, many old-time ranchers in the North Coast Ranges and elsewhere continued to burn the range periodically. Even with the consent of neighbors, ranchers often had to burn on the sly, as suggested by the following letter written to a Dry Creek upland rancher in 1903:

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While I was in town to day your friend Walgamot came in and said you had set the whole country on fire he claims to have tracked your horse he is going to telephone to Santa Rosa to day I told him he could not do any thing for he never seen you set the fire be careful as They are watching you (52).
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The rancher’s view eventually prevailed, and controlled burning is now perceived by the government as an effective fire-prevention technique and an appropriate land-management tool. Pyne summarizes the history of modern fire protection as, basically,

the story of how one fire regime, that of frontier economics, was replaced by another, that of an industrial state. Not until the 1940s did the Indian practices preserved in western reservations and the frontier habits perpetuated in the piney woods of the South work out a modus vivendi with modern forestry (53).

After more than a half a century of covert burning, in 1965, George Matthews received the California Wool Growers Association’s highest award in recognition of his contribution to the sheep industry. The award describes Matthews as:

A true and living pioneer of California’s North Coast sheep industry, whose unquenchable spirit sustained his hand against all manner of predators—bear, panthers, and coyotes—; showed others the way to conquer wild fires; demonstrated how to reclaim the wilderness, make pastures out of brushland; adapted himself to changes spanning nearly a century close to Nature and Man—all of which mark him as a man of character, acumen and as a benefactor to his neighbor and his industry (54).
One reason for the desired expansion of grassland may have been the reduced capacity of the existing range. It was not until 1895 that declining range conditions in the West generally prompted the Department of Agriculture to begin scientific research on methods for the restoration and improvement of grazing land, thus initiating the science of “range management.” Progress, however, was not immediate; as late as 1912, there was not even a semi-technical book on the subject of range management to aid the rancher. Still, some aspects of these new practices were probably attempted locally to enhance the productivity of ranches in the early 20th century. Eventually, range-management classes were taught at the University of California, Berkeley, beginning in 1922 (55).

**Lake Sonoma as a Land-Management Decision**

The source of land-management decisions has changed dramatically over the years. The local Pomoan Indians maintained a state of near equilibrium through powerful social sanctions and ritual observances that controlled most aspects of their use of the resource base. The settlers who displaced them practiced a variety of intensive uses of the land, some of which were ultimately destructive. Around the turn of the century, dwindling natural resources and the settlement of the vast majority of the agricultural frontier sparked a new federal land policy and the eventual withdrawal of public domain from private claim.

Federal land policy has steadily increased in scope, influence, and authority. Current land-management goals are different from those of the past, and, in some cases, seek the reversal of changes brought about by earlier practices. The perceived value of the Lake Sonoma Area no longer rests in its agricultural worth to individual settlers or in its development potential to real-estate speculators. The land-management objectives are now viewed as furthering regional and national goals, carefully conceived and regulated by government specialists. Thus, historic land-management decisions have passed from many individuals each controlling a small area, to a small number of bureaucracies controlling vast areas. The range of these decisions has grown from basic and few in number, to a broadly defined base including environmental considerations and the long human history of the area.
From the overlook above soon-to-be Lake Sonoma, 7-year-old Maria Praetzellis looks toward Pritchett Peaks (photo by Adrian Praetzellis)
Renowned basketmaker Laura Somersal weaving a twined basket (photo by Scott Patterson)