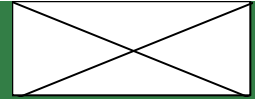


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The changing landscape of the Laguna in Cotati since 1953



By Jenny Blaker September 1, 2011 12:07 pm

When I came to Cotati in 1996, I was curious about the large ditch behind our house, and soon learned it was actually near the beginning of the Laguna: the largest tributary to the Russian River, the largest freshwater wetlands complex on the northern California coast, and an important wildlife area.

I was puzzled by maps that showed the “Laguna de Santa Rosa Flood Control Channel,” dead straight with angled corners; not at all natural-looking. Was it ever a natural creek, or was it an entirely engineered channel, and when and why was it straightened, and cut into its “trapezoidal” shape?

My curiosity and interest led me to a class on “Watershed Ecology & Restoration” at Santa Rosa Junior College in 2003. Wade Belew, now Stewardship Coordinator of Cotati Creek Critters, was there too, also because of his interest in this section of the Laguna.

In 2005, I took a fascinating class in Historical Geography at Sonoma State University as part of a Master’s program, “Action for a Viable Future.” We were asked to write a paper on the history of a place, as far back as we could go in time, to the present day.

I learned about the Coast Miwoks who have lived here for thousands of years, and about the changes over time as land was drained to make way for roads, the railway, agriculture, housing and urban development.

In 2011, I met Arthur Dawson of the Sonoma Ecology Center, who was researching the historical ecology of the southern Laguna watershed, and thanks to him, I was privileged to interview Farmer John, who has lived in Cotati since 1953, and who has recently celebrated his 90th birthday.

Photos from 1953 show Rohnert Park under construction, and the natural creek (the Laguna)

being ditched and put into culverts. The person Farmer John bought his house from talked about salmon coming upstream all that way from the Pacific Ocean to the south of Cotati! The creek then was full of willows, cattails, and tules.

Recently, other people have told me that in the 60s and 70s, there was enough water in the creek for kids to swim and even to jump off a rope into the water. They saw turtles and crawdads all the time and even caught trout.

Walter Earle, owner of Mostly Natives plant nursery in Tomales, told me that in the late 70s, the City sprayed weeds alongside the channel with herbicides, and concerned residents formed a committee to explore less toxic approaches.

Sky Hoyt, the owner of Windmill Nursery in Cotati, submitted a bid to mow as many of the roadsides and paths as possible - and hired me to operate his equipment.

One of the areas we mowed was the path along the Laguna near downtown. Mostly, I mowed the waist high grasses while leaving the coyote brush and other native vegetation. We mowed the grasses all the way down into the channel, where it became boggy.

By 1996, the grass on the banks was mowed by City contractors, while thick vegetation grew in the channel itself, thriving in the water and sunlight. In 2005, Cotati Creek Critters received a grant from the California Department of Water Resources and, with the support of the City and Sonoma County Water Agency, thousands of volunteers planted 2,000 native trees and shrubs along a one mile section of the Laguna channel, to create a canopy of trees, to help shade the vegetation out of the channel, to keep water cool, and to provide habitat for birds and other creatures.

Heather Picard, owner of Equinox Landscape Construction, recently wrote: "In the eight years that I've lived in Cotati, I have seen the most amazing transformation occur along the Laguna channel. I used to go for regular runs and walks down a barren path between the bridge near E. Cotati Blvd. and Ladybug Park.

It was dry and blindingly hot in the summer with no shade and little to look at. After the rains, only the occasional pair of mallards floating down the creek brightened up the scenery. It felt sad and neglected, something I tolerated to get myself out to the country roads for some scenery. Now when I run down that path, I wish that it would never end. It is a lush green jungle all year round. I love listening to the cacophony of birds and looking for critters in the native plants and trees. And every time I go out there, I feel grateful to Cotati Creek Critters for taking on the task of restoring beauty and habitat to our sweet creek.

They have literally brought new life to Cotati by building soil, cultivating plants, cleaning the water and growing our community through education and volunteerism."

Jenny Blaker is outreach coordinator of Cotati Creek Critters. This fall, Cotati Creek Critters plans to expand its work downstream to a new area, planting 350 new trees and shrubs alongside the Laguna channel from Gravenstein Way to Commerce Blvd. See

www.CotatiCreekCritters.info for further information. Blaker welcomes any opportunity to learn more about the history of Cotati's creeks through interviews, photographs, maps, documents, etc. Please e-mail jenny@creeks.cotati.info.

Comments

Jenny Blaker
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