

A San Rafael Story

Listen, my kindred, and you'll hear tell
Of the good old days in San Rafael.
That life patriarchal and baronial
Is pictured in passages testimonial
In handsome nostalgic ancestral tomes
That grace the shelves of our various homes;
But this re-creation's for recreation,
Ill-suited to serious publication,
So don't compare my doggerel hack-work
To Lilienthal or to Gerstle Mack work.
Hardly a man or woman's alive
In this sunny September of Seventy-five -
Yes, living today there are few or none
Who remember the day in Eighty-one
When the Lewis Gerstles first moved in
To their country place in remote Marin,
Or the day that shortly thereafter came
When the Louis Slosses did the same.
Two stately homes, impressively placed,
Were equipped in the finest Victorian taste,
And soon, when the fam'lies began to grow,
Smaller cottages sheltered the overflow
In a single joint garden, delightfully spacious,
Where summertime living was easy and gracious.
The gardeners ceaselessly made their rounds
As they raked and they mowed and they watered the grounds;
There were flowers for beauty and trees for shade
And a greenhouse where tropical plants were displayed,
An orchard for fruit and a vineyard for grapes
And vegetable-patches of various shapes.
For obvious reasons, I add no report
On the picnic-pavilion or tennis court.
There were horses in stables and cattle in pens
And chicken-runs with roosters and hens;
There were carriages ready to roll near or far,
But later those journeys were taken by car,
And the picturesque coachmen, who once were in clover,
Subsided and let the chauffeurs take over.
Indoors, in the alcoves and crannies and nooks
There were housemaids and laundresses, nurses and cooks,
All following orders and taking direction
With never a protest or hint of objection.
Let's hope that they got along nicely together
In spite of provocative summery weather -
Their national backgrounds were highly diverse,
And the First World War made those differences worse.
But what about the people upstairs -
Did they order their lives and conduct their affairs
Without dissension or contradiction -
Can family communes be free from friction?
That point's a significant one to raise,
For their harmony was beyond all praise.

You might search in vain through the countryside
For families half as dignified.
Once a daughter-in-law was heard to state -
Her own bringing-up had been less sedate -
That a typical Gerstle altercation
Resembled a Hecht reconciliation.
Restraint was the universal rule
And nobody ever lost his or her cool.
Differences of opinion? Yes,
But handled with great considerateness.
Let me call that a Greenebaum quality
Since it seems to pervade the family.
This laudable trait of discreet forbearance,
Imparted to children by peace-loving parents,
Endured perhaps its severest testing -
Ordeal by semi-permanent guesting -
In Nineteen-six, when catastrophe came
And the City succumbed to quake and flame.
Then these restful retreats of quiet and ease
Were invaded by swarms of refugees;
There was pulling and pushing and crowding and cramping
Suggestive of concentration camping.
Displaced relations were everywhere
And privacy vanished into thin air,
But violence never eventuated,
And finally all were relocated.
I don't remember that summer, it's true,
For though I was there, I was only two,
But a few years later, this growing boy
Recalls an occasion of special joy -
The beautiful wedding of Lloyd and Louise
On the velvety lawn underneath the trees,
And a subsequent celebration hearty -
Grandma's eighty-third birthday party
With feasting and toasting and family stunts
Which would lay an egg now, but which made a hit once.
They were clean as a whistle, devoid of the porny -
By present-day standards, they'd have to be corny.
Our tastes in amusement are not what they were -
Such changes in fashion are bound to occur -
But basics will always remain fundamental
For ladylike ladies and gentlemen gentle.
And now, having struck that exalted note,
I'd like to conclude with an anecdote -
It's a San Rafael story, familiar to few,
Of my Grandpa Sloss, whom I never knew.
My mother used to tell it to me,
And it proves its own authenticity.
She and my father came to dwell
With the rest of the Slosses in San Rafael
Right after their Boston wedding in June
And a transcontinental honeymoon.
On its final day they had traveled far
By carriage and ferry and railroad car,

And the bride was tired - she longed for rest,
And she found herself more than a little depressed.
It wasn't the people, she used to say -
They had been her good friends for many a day -
But her own situation had undergone change
So drastic, it made her whole world seem strange.
She played up as brightly as she was able
At dinner, with twelve or more at the table;
The subsequent talk in the living room
Did little or nothing to lessen her gloom;
And when the long evening came to a close
And all the rest of the family rose
And straightened the cushions, and put out the lights,
And emptied the ash-trays, and set things to rights,
She stood in the middle, ignored and dejected,
A fish out of water, forlorn and neglected.
The only one of the others who saw
And who understood, was her father-in-law.
He was quick to supply what the newcomer lacked
As he smilingly said, with habitual tact,
"Suppose you close up the piano, my dear,
"And that way you too will know why you're here."
As she turned to perform the trivial chore,
Her spirits grew light as a feather once more.
She was one of these people, not merely a friend,
And this was her home and her journey's end.
A kindly word was all that was needed
Where flowery speeches would not have succeeded.
In Uncle Gerstle's most famous letter
This theme is played louder, but hardly better;
Alaska Commercial's crowning glory
And Mother's little domestic story
Both glow with the spirit of men of good will,
Warm-hearted, clear-sighted, who didn't sit still
And wait for confessions of need to be made,
But stepped in beforehand with comfort and aid.
In praise of that spirit, I offer this toast:
To our family's founders, our pride and our boast,
To their gentle and sweet and considerate wives,
For we owe to these four so much more than our lives.
Though they've gone, long since, to their just reward,
Perhaps we, their descendants, may hope that the Lord
Will have set them in meadows of asphodel
That will sometimes remind them of San Rafael.

September 14, 1975

- Richard L. Sloss