

REMARKS AT SLOSS-GERSTLE FAMILY PICNIC

Gerstle Park, San Rafael -- August 29, 1981

By Frank H. Sloss

One hundred years ago, Lewis and Hannah Gerstle acquired these beautiful acres of land. The centennial of that event provides an occasion for this gathering.

What is now Gerstle Park was originally known as Violet Terrace, but it soon became part of a larger entity that had no official name. The tract to the east -- right over there -- was bought not long after 1881 by Louis and Sarah Sloss -- that is, by Lewis Gerstle's most intimate business associate and Hannah Gerstle's devoted sister. For practical purposes, the two adjoining estates became one, just as the two families were practically one. While I never actually lived here, as a boy I was often brought here to visit my grandmother and to play with my contemporaries in the family -- Levisons and Samuelses on the Gerstle side, Ackermans and Wiels on the Sloss side, and, bewilderingly enough, Lilienthals on both sides. We all revelled indiscriminately in raspberries from the Sloss bushes just over there, with cream from the Gerstle cows down that way. We never knew where one property stopped and the other started, for there was no fence between them; paths ran right across the dividing line. The poet Robert Frost once wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." The corollary is also true: there is something heart-warming about a boundary that is totally ignored.

Indeed, almost everything we can remember about the life that was lived here is heart-warming. There was elegance without ostentation; I suppose the Slosses and the Gerstles could have afforded to build baronial manors like Filoli, but that was not their style. There was graciousness without condescension, and there was courtesy without servility. There was quiet affection combined with calm serenity. There was respect for the past, and there was faith in the future. It is more than mere nostalgia that makes us sigh for the loss of what once existed here and can never again exist anywhere.

That life has vanished, but its influence has not. We, the Gerstle and Sloss descendants, have become a numerous clan, and anthropologists tell us that there is such a thing as tribal memory. Surely there lies deep in us some feeling of kinship and of a common tradition. That sentiment is what draws us back today, for the second time in six years, to renew old ties within the family and to establish new ones as our numbers continue to grow.

We are, I suppose, by now a motley crew -- or so we might look to an outsider. We have had our share of mild eccentrics; we have had extremists of the left and of the right, but nice extremists; we have had various breeds of more or less amiable neurotics. But we have not, so far as I know, had anyone who would be classed as a villain or a criminal. And certainly some have achieved prominence, and a few have attained high distinction.

Is there any quality that can be said to run through us all as a group? I think there is. I would define it as a sense of

obligation to meet the world with civility, and to return to society at least as much as we have drawn from it, and preferably a little more. If I am right in that, then we have learned the lessons that the original Gerstles and Slosses wanted to instill in their descendants.

It is fitting that we meet under these redwood trees, the silent witnesses to the transfer of this property to the family a century ago and then into the hands of the public fifty years later. They symbolize the continuity that we recognize in spite of the cataclysmic changes of the last hundred years. I suppose that each of these trees now has a hundred more rings than in 1881, but they are still the same trees. As we look up at them with the reverence that a redwood grove inspires in every Californian, let us hope that they are looking down at us with at least a small measure of approval.