

## Capay is a Funny Little Town—Population 50!

Capay had a population of 50 on the sign for the entire time I lived there in the 1950s and 60s, and every time I visited it since. That number 50 didn't take into account the town winos and labor camp workers that in my opinion added to the town character. It's funny, why would a town of 50 have three bars? Capay even had a gas station at one time! Capay also had an outhouse-sized jail--at least it looked like one because it had bars on the windows although the door was gone. Anyway, why was that little brick building there? There is also evidence of a bridge that crossed Cache Creek by the pipeline and a couple buildings that looked like chicken coops nearby there. Nobody seemed to know about these things! I guess I was too busy exploring and discovering but never talked to the right people about what it all meant!

Also, people just seemed to show up in Capay for no known reason. There was a man named Leif Hanson who seemed to just show up one day and lived with us for years. He wasn't a bum or a wino because he didn't drink at all and had a profession, but lived in the shed in the backyard, and then put a trailer house behind the shed and lived there for quite some time. He was a TV repairman who worked at Wyatt's Hardware in Esparto. Leif was a fisherman, an Olympic Sky jumper for Norway, somewhat of a mechanic. He took me more places and did more things with me than Dad every thought about. Like snow skiing; fishing in different lakes; to the Sacramento River; and my favorite, Cache Creek way above the dam; or up in Rumsey. Leif was well known in Capay and Esparto, tended bar a little bit for Dad, was a really good cook; and generally a really good family friend. That is all I know about him! It's a mystery! Grown-ups didn't seem like they wanted to tell kids--or at least this kid--their past!

I knew all of the winos because they all bought wine (Tokay was the wine of choice) from Ike and Kay's Tavern and sometimes did odd jobs for my dad, Ike. The senior town wino's name was Freddy. He was an older fella, who seemed to be well known and liked. He lived in a cabin down by the Sanchez labor camp and Vannucci's almond huller. I believe all of that property was owned by the Vannuccis. Freddy did odd jobs around town for food and wine. Very nice old man, but when he had too much wine he walked down the side of Highway 16 having a huge detailed heated conversation with somebody—that none of us could see. When I first saw him doing that it scared the Hell out of me, but I followed him where he was going to go because I couldn't figure out what he was doing. I guess I was about seven. I asked Dad about him and he said, "Oh, don't worry about Freddy, he's harmless," which didn't answer my question so I asked Uncle Joe, "Who is Freddy talking to?" and Uncle Joe just said, "He's an old man who just had too much to drink." Anyway, that was close enough of an answer to satisfy my curiosity--which was about the best answer I could get when I asked questions. Freddy didn't hang out with the other winos; he seemed more sophisticated. I always wondered what his history was, but no grown-up seemed to want to tell me. So it

remains a mystery. Actually, most of these guys were—and will remain, I guess—mysteries.

Capay had a tendency to just pull in guys who were down and out. This Mexican fella drifted into town, who was probably in his 30s, named Johnny. Everyone called him Little Johnny or Deafy. He was an ex-boxer and he was deaf and definitely liked the bottle. I never did really know where he actually stayed, probably the labor camp or one of the old houses in town, but he did different work for different people over the years.

There was another guy named Elmer who actually lived in the shed in our backyard for a little while. He worked for Dad for some years as a handyman, cleaned the bar, kept the grass cut and the garden weeded--and stole bottles of wine from our little store, etc. I use to watch him steal wine; I thought it was funny. He also did farm work for people. Nice guy who had a family somewhere but that's all I could find out. (I got most information about people from just hanging out in the bar--though half of that crap was crap, I finally figured out!)

There was another fellow named George who showed up one day and bought the old house next to Shorty Clark's house and a whole bunch of other properties. He was married and lived in Alameda, California, and was a civilian worker at one of the Naval yards, but wanted to retire in Capay. I only saw his wife maybe twice. This guy was a blast. He would hang out at Ike and Kay's, named himself the mayor of Capay, but never befriended the Brackets or the Clarks, etc. For the kids of Capay he would pay us lots of money and took us camping and fishing and some other really cool places if we worked for him. He wanted to really fix up the house, so he paid us to go to Cache Creek and find rocks for him that he was going to build a garden wall with. We helped him plant trees, etc. Unfortunately for him his house burned down and he ended up living in another house that he bought by the canal until he passed away in the early 70s. We called him Uncle George, and knew only that he bought a lot of property like a good chunk of Cache Creek between the pipeline and the Capay Bridge. He ended up befriending Elmer who passed away about the same time.

There was also this Mexican fella who apparently had a great job in the Bay Area who bought the almond orchard behind the Capay School along with the house that was there. He rented out the house and would stay in a little cabin next to the house when he came up on the weekends. I would change irrigation pipe in his orchard for him. Very nice man; single; was going to retire in Capay. I left town before he actually retired so I don't know what happened after that.

Capay was a funny little town, rich with characters that lived there for a very long time. The man and wife who ran the Capay Post Office for years were absolutely wonderful people--they were so nice they scared the Hell out of me and I stayed away! I would get the mail and they were just so pleasant and were very willing and delighted to talk to me--which, for some reason, scared the Hell out of me! All the devious things I did in Capay, I guess—my guilt made me leave them alone. I can't even remember their names.

Then there was the elderly lady who lived in the old house directly across from Ike and Kay's. She drove a very old car like a model A or something from the 30s. Even though the house was very old she kept it very neat and clean. She would sit out on her front porch, which was screened in, and just kind of looked at things for hours at a time. If she saw me doing anything I wasn't supposed to, Mom and Dad knew instantly--or she would come after me: A great watchman of the community. She was very nice until I did something wrong. She scared the Hell out of me, too—for good reason!

There was another elderly lady who lived next to the Country Club. She had a garden and a very small orange orchard that was between her house and our backyard. She took care of that orchard and would have Freddy help her. This Greek widow all in black, whose sons owned the other tavern in town, her house was very neat and tidy as well as the yard. But, again, if she saw me doing something I wasn't supposed to, Mom and Dad found out about it very quickly. She was very nice—but she, too, scared the Hell out of me! Two very nice ladies, but they would grab me by my ear if I was doing something weird around their property. Otherwise, they were very nice and delighted to talk to me--which scared the Hell out of me! I guess that was what they were trying to do... I can't remember their names, either. The nice ones remain anonymous in my memory.

There were several Greek families living in town that I really didn't know except one old man called "The Old Greek" or just "The Greek"--the only names I knew him by. He used to come to Ike and Kay's in the morning for coffee and talk politics with Dad and Jim Monroe. Other farmers and people would come and go, but Dad, The Old Greek, and Jim Monroe were staples for some years. I absolutely loved the way this old man talked. He had a gravelly voice with the Greek accent and smoked roll-your-own cigarettes. He'd take a hit and exhale while he talked! Like something out of a movie. He drove an old Studebaker pickup and lived on the left-hand side of Highway 16 just before it curves heading up into Capay Valley. He had a very old house but it was very well kept. He had lots of grapes and other vegetation in his yard, and you did not mess with his house or yard or anything without him being all over you. Not mean, but not nice--I liked him. My sister Dawn and I went to his house one time to get some stuff for Mom, and I was riding in the back of his truck having fun and for some reason when he slowed down to stop at the bar I decided it would be fun to jump out of the truck when it was going about 10 miles an hour as this lady we called Miss Louie who we bought the bar from, was pulling out--which near-miss scared the Hell out of all concerned! Luckily, I was fairly athletic and hit the ground with my feet and tucked, so I rolled in front of Ike and Kay's about six times and I only skinned my elbows and knees--though pissed off a lot of grown-ups!

Another new-comer we had was a Navel—or was it Air Force?--officer who bought the old brick house across from the post office with his wife and three kids for a few years. Cool kids, but never really liked Capay—population 50! I gather being

military brats they had a lot of adventures in exotic places and this was just too tame—they never got to know the place the way I knew it, obviously!

We had a family name Kepner, who were a very nice family; pretty much kept to themselves. Of course there were the Brackets, the Masters, the Hansens, and Sanchez that I mentioned in earlier stories. All these people together made Capay what it was. You know, there used to be a small set of studio-type apartments near where the Capay Junction is now—are they still there? The fellow who used to own the shoe repair shop in Esparto lived there for years and years and there was another fellow who lived there for years and years who worked somewhere in Woodland. For a Town of 50 people it was quite diversified with its characters that really made up the town.

Capay is a funny little town; I fit right in: Little Ernie the crazy little ^%\$#^\*.

### **Laber Camps and *Internationals***

Calling Ike and Kay's Tavern my "home" afforded me the opportunity to see lots and lots of people—even though at the time I had no idea what I was seeing! For a town of 50 and a few resident "bums," I saw many new faces each year that would come into Ike and Kay's.

I realized years later these were people who used to come and go because they followed the seasonal farm work. Whole families used to show up in the springtime and leave in the fall, following work. I never understood it at the time, but a fair amount of people drifted into Capay just following farm work. In fact, in the 50s and early 60s, truckloads of labor workers from Mexico would show up in the spring and leave back to Mexico in the fall. Locally they were called internationals. That's when I met Rosendo Sanchez, as his mom and dad owned and operated the labor camp in Capay. Internationals were very cool people trying to make a better life for their families in Mexico by doing farm work in America. Mixed in with them were your down-and-outs, winos, etc. I'm guessing it was quite an operation, really, as you had cooks, supply purchasing, transportation, scheduling, job procurement, payroll, etc. At some point in the early 60s the Internationals just stopped coming—I now assume this was the end of the Bracero program or something—but you had your down-and-outs, your winos, and your whole families still coming because the work went on. The Internationals were great and I missed them. I even played hide and seek with some of the younger ones with Rosendo and Mossy. The down-and-outers and winos I could have done without—but even some of them were cool.

One of my best friends in Esparto was Danny Manerez (spelling?) whose father ran a labor camp in Esparto, as well, but not as cool as the one in Capay. You have to remember this was before the tomato harvester, when tomatoes were still handpicked and weeded, etc. Also, sugar beet fields were weeded, not to mention the intense amount of labor harvesting all those beets and apricots, almonds, and tomatoes, etc.

There were also quite a few fellas that I only knew by face, who plowed fields and or drove grain harvesters. They would come to Ike and Kay's covered with dirt from plowing and have one of Mom's chili burgers or hamburgers, and a couple of beers for lunch and head back out! They looked remarkable to me, rugged, tough looking, but very

polite and respectful--and enjoyed talking to Mom and Dad. Then I would see them cleaned up on a Friday or Saturday night, or mostly on Sunday afternoons, and with a few beers under their belts, they would be livelier--sometimes too lively! These guys didn't seem to have families, they were just there working for one of the farmers. I couldn't figure these guys out until one day I just came to the conclusion that they were just trying to survive the best way they could and some of them had sordid pasts. There are also guys who had families who worked for a farmer as well. I really liked these people even though I could not tell you very many of their names.

I can recall two families that would show up in the spring and attend school in Esparto with the rest of us until summertime. Sometimes they would still be there when school started (sometimes not), but they would all be gone by Halloween, no later than Thanksgiving. Another 2 or 3 families I recall seeing only for one or two years and never seeing them again. I actually learned about this in school but never related it to what I was actually seeing: People and families actually living in camps following and doing farm work. In Capay there used to be three or four old houses that would be empty most of the time where these families would live while following formwork up and down California.

### **Cache Creek from above Low Water Bridge to Rumsey**

I was not into aesthetics--at least I thought at the time--I was into action, and the best action on Cache Creek for me started from the mountains above Low-water Bridge down through Rumsey Canyon.

Back in 1967 some guy (I don't remember his name) bought some property about 4 or 5 miles above Low-water Bridge where he was going to make it into some sort of a resort; and he was selling lots to people. Dad purchased 2 with the idea of putting a small store there. So we used to go up there a lot during the summer of 1966 and 67. Lots of great rockslides for climbing with lots of swimming with fast water, very cold, and inner-tubing with a very large airplane inner-tube with the canvas wrapped around one side of it. We used to go down all the way to Low-water Bridge, which was an incredible adventure in itself. In a large inner-tube like this you just sat in it, and just kind of went with the flow of the water, which meant you jumped out of it when there was a water fall or really bad rapids! There were some great adventures up there, including pouring Mom and Dad's beer in a radiator so we could make it home after the truck overheated. This was years before the rafting and kayaking companies that are there now, of course.

If Ike and Kay's Tavern had been in Rumsey, that would have been OK with me! My absolute favorite place was Rumsey Canyon. The water ran fast, it was cold, deep, and it was extremely aesthetic--although I didn't realize then that I liked the aesthetics. There is something about that canyon where someone climbed way up the cliff to put their initials, the abandoned Girl Scout cabin up on the old road, the sand, the rocks, the old cement bridge further down, and the old Boy Scout Cabin on the creek bank. Lots of animal-life, like water snakes, frogs, squirrels, deer, etc. It's amazing how Cache Creek

changes as it travels through the Ramsey Canyon, Capay Valley to the Capay Bridge! It was funny how the flow of the water slowed down and the temperature of the water became warmer just east of the Rumsey Canyon. To me that's what was really cool about Cache Creek, the way it changed as it headed down Capay Valley!

### **A'monds versus Almonds**

I have now lived in all the time zones in the United States and they all have definite differences. For example, if you walk into a store most places and ask for a'monds you'll get a blank look--anywhere in the country other than Northern California for the most part. I have a friend who lives in Georgia who owns a very large a'mond farm in northern California who will say "I have an almond farm," but will say her grandpa always called them a'monds. If I tell people about "knocking almonds," well, it just doesn't seem the same to me, so I would say a'monds and just explain the different pronunciations of the word, and then I would tell them this story:

As a kid I used to knock a'monds—as a matter of fact, the locals will say they are called *almonds* on the tree and then a'monds when we knock the 'L out of them. Anyway, knocking a'monds was done with 2 tractors, and 2 sleds made of 4 10-foot long 2x4's and chicken wire. The chicken wire was maybe 10' x 50'. One end of the chicken wire was wrapped around one of the 2x4s then nail or screwed together with the other 2x4. The same was done with the other end. A cable was attached to one end of the sled so you could attach it to a tractor (or even a pick up truck--I've seen both). You would center both sleds to an a'mond tree and go to work with lots of canvas, very long poles, and what looks like a sledgehammer handle with black heavy rubber around the end of it, called a mall. You basically wrapped canvas around the tree, beat the Hell out of the tree with the mall, then used the long poles to get the a'monds you couldn't reach or knock down--in 90 to 100F weather! You always wore a hat because the a'monds—leaves, bark, dirt and pollin--would fall on your head while you would beat the tree! When the canvas became full of a'monds you shoveled them into the trailer, truck or whatever! I think this method was used by people who owned small a'mond orchards—don't know what the big farmers elsewhere did.

When you were very serious about harvesting a lot of a'monds--meaning you have a lot of acres--you had a very long narrow trailer with a single-axle center. This trailer would be 40' to 60' long (not sure exactly how long, but long enough to cover the size of an a'mond tree). There was a pipe that ran down the center of this long trailer with supports for the pipe midway down the trailer. Two very Long canvases were attached to the pipe in the trailer. The trailer was attached to a tractor. You drove the tractor down the center of the rows and centered the tires of the trailer between two almond trees. With two people, you pulled the canvas out to one side of the trailer which reached almost to the center of the next row, tucked it around the tree, then pulled the other canvas out in the same manner and tucked it around the tree. You then removed the a'monds from the

tree as described above. When done, you then pulled the canvas all the way back to the trailer where you actually walked over the trailer and pulled the canvas all the way to the other tree in the adjacent row ,dropping the a'monds in the trailer as you passed over. Repeat the same actions on the new tree. With this method you did 2 rows at a time and only needed one tractor.

Some people used carts, pickup trucks or just wrapped canvas around the tree then shoveled the a'monds into a truck or whatever to harvest small orchards, or sometimes a few trees--but no matter what you did, it was a lot of work! In high heat!

In 1968 I knocked a'monds with Steve Hall, Tommy Monroe and Jim Nires. We didn't get a lot of work done but we had a whole lot of fun driving around in Tommy's flatbed truck.a And if I recall correctly, I almost accidentally shot Tommy in the apartment above Ike and Kay's. The summer of 68 was wild...!

### **Green Pool--very Aesthetic**

Have you ever experienced when you were a kid, hearing grown-ups telling stories and the stories they were telling became five times larger in your mind than the story they were actually telling! On top of that, whoever was telling the story added 5 to 10 times exaggeration! Kids can get some pretty large ideas from the story. Well, at least I did as a kid come out with some tremendously “large ideas.”

When I was young boy in Capay, I used to hear about this thing called Green Pool. It was quite a mystery to me for years as I heard a fair amount about it from younger guys who used to hang out at Ike and Kay's Tavern! It seemed like there were a lot of other things happening at Green Pool other than swimming, which really fired up my active, young mind. So, when I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade I had great excitement when I was heading to Green Pool with some older kids for my first time. When I got there I found a beautiful space, beautiful looking swimming hole, very beautiful, very calm, very mild—“aesthetic,” I would call it now! I wasn't looking for that! I was looking for the things I heard about in all those stories at Ike and Kay's! WOW! I can imagine that some of those stories, and I do mean only some, could have occurred at different times. I can definitely see high school parties occurring at Green Pool, but I've never been to one. I had the idea it was an oasis with lots of activities occurring all the time--that I dare not go into detail! It is absolutely remarkable what a kid recalls from listening to grown-ups telling stories--or at least this kid!

I was a little upset that day, expecting something quite different, but now it makes me smile because life is absolutely remarkable, and I truly believed the stories that parents and grandparents and the people at Ike and Kay's told me--or told others that I listened in on. Of course, when I just “listened in” is when I got the “hot stuff,” especially when they didn't know I was there...I think.