

By the way, Betsy, I want you to know I'm having fun with these stories you asked for!

The Monroe Barn, and big black rounded-top box with a button...

Many years ago there used to be a magnificent barn that stood right to the west of Ike and Kaye's Tavern that belonged to your Monroe family, Betsy. I think your grandmother had inherited it. It was huge and had a very large space where hay was stored, but in fact sometimes they had big parties there with a band with fiddles etc. with lots of dancing going on. Well, I only know of one party or ho-down, barn dance or whatever I saw. I can tell you for a fact these people had loads of fun that night--even though I was only about seven or eight I still snuck in. The barn had some rooms and an attic-type space that were large in the back of it. It had a basement area the entire size of the barn it seemed, and there were 10 or 12 barrels of something down there. Since I was a son of bartenders I assumed it was wine. We, the *Capay kids*, didn't play all that much in the barn, having been warned not to--although we did thoroughly explore a few times; but it was kind of mysterious and we just sort of stayed away from it. But I kind of developed a relationship between me and this barn that came about totally by accident. You see, that barn had a very large siren on top of it which I saw but never really paid much attention to. This siren had to be two or three stories off the ground. On the West side of Ike and Kay's Tavern, about six or seven feet off the ground, near the bottle cage of the tavern, was a big black rounded-top box with a button on it. When I first saw it I didn't pay much attention to it, but I was in charge of taking out the empties from the bar so I was in the vicinity of the big black rounded-top box with a button on it almost daily. When I took the bottles out I always played games I made up to amuse myself, such as whichever beer bottle got to the top of the bottle cage first was the winner. So you had team Olympia, Falstaff, Lucky Lager, Coors, Burger Meister, and Budweiser. It was always a tight race between Falstaff Olympia and Budweiser but Coors ended up being the superstar team. I played the same game with the soda pops, with Coke being the big winner. The more I took out the empties the more curious I became about what this big black rounded-top box with a button on it was--to the point where it was becoming a distraction: why was it there? what did it do? who put it there? nobody seemed to care about it--except me.

It looked pretty important so I tried to keep my attention off it--which made it worse. After weeks and weeks of this I very much wanted to push the button. Any rationality I tried to employ was long gone; what concerns I had about any damage it may cause--gone; long gone. Because what I really wanted to do was to push that button, that big black rounded-top box with a button on it. So one day I decided I was going to push it and scouted the area very thoroughly, you know, like really good, really good, like I looked everywhere--except I didn't notice *Uncle Joe* sitting on his front porch right across to street. I had my plan of attack set! It was to kind of sneak down the west side of Ike and Kay's, climb up on the bottle cage and stretch over and pushed the button. Well, that didn't work because the button was too far away from the bottle cage for me to stretch to it. Now, the front part of Ike and Kay's Tavern was a two-story, almost square Hispanic looking building. There was a section of the building that came out the back that was only one story, and Mom and dad had built a dance hall on the end of that. There was

some sort of an electrical box between the big black rounded-top box with a button on it where the one-story building met the two-story building. It was close enough to that edge where I could reach the electrical box from the edge where the two buildings met! There used to be a very large antenna in the backyard that was a ready-made ladder to climb up on the one-story roof. I had a plan! Apparently, *Uncle Joe* was watching me all this time as I tested my different ideas. Looking back, it was as though he knew what I was up to—as though he had been the same kind of kid.

It was time, so I climbed up the antenna barefooted, made my way to the edge of the building, crawled down on the electrical box: there was a pipe that went down into it that I could hold on to and stretched over and pushed the button and that siren on the Monroe barn went off so loud and so instantly that I jumped off the electrical box and hit the ground on my feet, went to my knees, but was at a dead run in seconds. I ran all the way down past the dance hall around the back into the backyard in no time at all. I nervously went in our back door and up into the apartment above Ike and Kay's where no one else was home; so I turned on the TV and sat there awaiting my doom. 5 minutes went by and nothing happened. Then 10 minutes. Then 15 minutes--and nothing was happening. I didn't hear people screaming in the streets or my dad hollering my name or anything--it was just quiet. I was very nervous, but I thought this was very odd—because the constant siren made a huge noise! Oh, well, grownups! So I decided to do it again--and I went through the exact same routine along with the sound of the siren scaring the Hell out of me as I jumped off the electrical box and ran around the back. No one ever noticed or didn't do anything about it. I hit that button three times that day. That was a great relief but almost disappointing!

Now, apparently *Uncle Joe* set over on his porch watching the entire activity being surely entertained by it. I know this to be true because a couple days later when some of the guys from Sacramento came over, I was over at *Uncle Joe's* house sitting on the porch with him. *Uncle Joe* had the other boys go off to do some sort of errand and said, “Ernie, I would like you to go over there and push that button like you did the other day here in a few minutes,” and so I did. He would ask me to preset buttons at the time to create some sort of effects. I never asked him how he knew so much about this siren. I don't know if *Uncle Joe* ever told my parents about this are not. I do know my parents did find out about it way, way later, so I figure someone told them--but I don't think it was *Uncle Joe* because he had so much fun with it.

### The Capay Dam and the Canals

I absolutely loved the Capay Dam and the two irrigation canals that came from it: on the north side it was the Adams Ditch that ran through the Monroe Ranch and on the south side it was the Winters Ditch that ran through the Wood Ranch all the way to Winters. The dam itself was an incredible swimming hole, especially on the south side where it was very deep. You could actually dive in and swim down and come out under the gates and into the canal on the south side. The north side wasn't as deep, though plenty deep to have fun, especially when they had the boards up on top of the dam. You couldn't get

through into the canal on north side like on the south side, but you could swim/walk up the tunnel all the way to the gates, which was fun and gratifying, so we often did it.

The canal that came out of the north side of the dam we called the Monroe Canal--we only knew it as Monroe not Monroe/Duncan Ranch—I didn't know its history then. I also had no idea that the historic Duncan Ranch ran all the way to Brooks! But the canal ran along the bottom of the Monroe Hills and down past the their ranch buildings. There was a road that paralleled it that started at the Monroe ranch and went up past the dam, which we called the Canal Road. Although we swam down that canal a few times as far as the Monroe ranch, which is only a mile or two, it was a lot less entertaining than the canal on the south side. The canal on the north side was smaller, less groomed meaning the banks of the canal was filled with sticker bushes mixed with lots of tall weeds with more stickers. It made it harder to get in and out of the canal, which generally made it less fun. But there was a lot more around the north side canal that was fun than there was on the south, like Cache Creek, the Monroe Hills and the ravines that came down the hills that had spillways into the canal; now those were fun to explore, or to go hunting up them or just climb up the side of the hills and look at the Valley--wonderful view. There was a slide about a half-mile down from the dam where you could stand on the canal road and shoot squirrels in the Monroe Ranch oak grove. That slide was squirrel heaven: if you shot them, they would all slide and then after about 5 minutes come back out again.

There was a ravine that came out right at the dam, actually, with a small creek that would dry up every year. Not too far up it there was a shale slide with an old barn on the Hill right above it. We used to climb that shale slide--because it was there--and then go over to the old barn and hang out a little bit. It was magnificent old barn that had an old owl that lived in it. I never had any idea why that barn was there, but it was and it was great! just like chicken coops and the pillars. Why in the Hell were they there? We were actually chased out of that barn one time by that angry owl. Scared the Hell out of us! We used to go hunting up around there, you know, for Jack rabbits and squirrels or whatever. Ran into a few rattlesnakes in that area which always scared the Hell out of me. Just northwest of the dam was really neat country to me as it had trees and little bit of flatland, etc--really cool. I could never understand why there weren't trees on those hills while there were trees on the other side of the valley, so I came to the conclusion that for some reason it was dryer on the that side of the of Valley. I really don't know why.

The north side of Cache Creek was always more fun to me because there was nobody living up there, just lots of space and things to do. Lots of people lived on the south side--who had a tendency not to like young boys running around their property. The first time I swam from the dam to Capay it was an adventure because you didn't know what was coming up next around each bend. The water flows pretty fast in the canal and it wasn't always easy to climb out of it. There weren't any serious hazards anywhere on the south canal like on the north canal--where there was a pretty serious waterfall that I almost went over once. But once you got used to it, you knew what was coming up, and it became routine. The canal was fun--but especially when it hit Capay, then it was tons of fun. Just before the canal went under the bridge where highway 16 crossed there was a large pipe that went across the canal that had a wooden protective structure around it. It

had large fences around it. This was some sort of a type not nearly as large as the gas line pipe. This part was sort of the start of our Capay Canal stomping grounds. The canal ran along what we used to call the Vannucci Hills all the way through south side of Capay and past the Vannucci farm. I have nothing but absolute wonderful memories of that section of the canal. When I heard you can no longer swim in the canals I just got pissed off. I was living in Oregon when I found out and was just irritated by it.

### The Canal Shack

As you drove through Capay west on Highway 16 it curves to the left and then curves slightly to the right where there is a short stretch of road then over the canal and heading up the valley. Right on the left where Highway 16 curved slightly to the right used to be a little cabin we called the *canal shack*. There was a little driveway with the canal shack on one side and a large patio on the other side right up against the canal bank. The patio stretched 20 or 30 feet along the canal bank and was made of rock under some incredibly beautiful trees. There was a hand pump for a well on the patio with a rock staircase going up to the canal road. There was a cable that stretched across the canal with a ladder next to it and an additional cable about 50 to 100 feet down the canal with a ladder there, as well. Mossy, Rosendo and I spent many, many hours swimming between those two cables. We also spent a lot of time at the bridge where Highway 16 goes over the canal. There were four tunnels that went under that bridge and the water seemed to speed up a bit; swimming there was a lot of fun—not safe, perhaps, but fun.

There was an old man named Artie who owned the canal shack. I think he lived in San Francisco or somewhere in the Bay Area and would come up on some weekends to the canal shack. Sometimes he would bring his family and I would hang out with them there. I never did know what this man did for a profession, he was just a cool the guy who had the keys to the canal shack. The patio was absolutely beautiful with the rock and large trees around it kept it cooled during the summer. An amazing place and I thought Artie was an amazing guy. As years went by Arty become older and older and quit coming to Capay. I never knew what happened to him and the canal shack become an old broken down shack and eventually it was taken down, but I bet that patio is still there. Somebody could have bought the property and just build a house there and you would have a built-in patio--oh well, time moves on.

Some years later the family put another cable across the canal about a quarter of a mile down the canal. We would go up to where the bridge crossed 16 and go with the flow down to the Vannucci's bridge--the Vannucci didn't like us swimming after the bridge and would kick us out. We would start to go further up the canal and come down until we jumped in at the dam, and began floating down to the Vannucci bridge. I would sometimes jump into the canal and float down to the bridge just before the bars and walk into Esparto in the summertime.

Later on, when I got into high school, we would *surf* further down the canal which was incredibly fun. They would be a whole bunch of guys and girls, with a long rope and a board being pulled by a truck. So I have lots of affinity for the canal. One good thing

about the canal: it had a few apricot trees along it and a grape vineyard. We would swim in the canal for so long we would be starving, and we would sneak into the grape vineyard and eat grapes, or just eat apricots off the trees.

The first time I swam from the dam to Capay it was an adventure; it was an adventure because you didn't know what was coming up next around each bend. But in the spring and summertime we would spend hours swimming up and down the canal and really the only thing that stopped us from swimming more was hunger. Thank goodness for the apricot trees along the canal where we would eat our fill—they were incredibly good, especially when you are really hungry. There was also a grape vineyard just east of the Vannucci bridge and we would sneak in there and grab grapes once in a while. The old Greek fella that live there really kept an eye out for his grapes and would kick us out with great fanfare if he caught us. Also, right next to the canal shack it was an old Greek fella we called *the Greek*—who used to drink coffee every morning at Ike and Kay's Tavern with my dad and Jim Monroe and sometimes others and talk politics. He had a very well kept older house with grapevines along the canal. We only took grapes from them one time and the Greek caught us so we stayed away. I really liked the old Greek, but he had no *backoff* protecting his property, so watch out!

As I got older and started going to school in Esparto my favorite canal swimming “hole” became the bars, and instead of Rosendo and Mossy, it was Danny Minerez (spelling) and Ronnie Kidwell, then Steve Hall and Stevie Scribner. The bars are the best places to swim along the canal just because the water sped up and you had all the bars to play around on—on which I almost killed myself several times. I tight-roped the bars and fell down between my legs, then fell into the canal with very fast-moving water—it was an entirely different type of an adventure in itself! Even though it was painful I laugh every time I think about it and think about how crazy young boys can be. We also spent quite a bit time at the Radebaugh's Bridge outside of Esparto where dozens of ranch kids living nearby met up—it was a party all summer! This splintery wodden bridge was quite low to the water which made it easy to dive in and crawl out onto the bridge. Then on down beyond that bridge was close to where the Tom Monroe family moved to where we would surf--which was the ultimate activity I'd ever spent in that canal. I had so many adventures in the canals: I swam from the dam down way past where canal surfed; I've been thrown into the canal because I upset somebody; I had Romance along the canal; fights; and tons and tons of fun—but, man, canal surfing beat it all! From the first time I crawled into the canal at the canal shack, which scared the Hell out of me for about two hours, until it turned to fun!--those scared-to-fun things make me smile when I think about even today.