

CAPAY VALLEY

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greatercapayvalley.org

The Greater Capay Valley Historical Society
PO Box 442
Esparto, CA
95627

EMAIL
EMONROE353@GMAIL.COM



Focusing on the Greater Capay Valley, including towns and areas surrounding and leading to Cache Creek and up the Capay Valley

Pictures, Stories and Research to reveal and celebrate a very special place.

In this issue, the article on Mockingbirds mentions that the Scrub Jay is only in this area rarely and for a short time, so I asked my ornithology-author Jim Hiatt why I recall them so plentiful and often on the Monroe Ranch in my youth. He explained that the unique nature of that magical Valley Oak Grove creates the perfect habitat for them, unlike the rest of Hungry Hollow. This made me wonder more about this “magical oak grove” with which the early native people had such a symbiotic relationship, and that the later Spanish-speaking pioneers called Los Robles and later English-speaking pioneers called Thousand Oaks--and my own Scots ancestors dubbed Duncan Grove, such a large part of it being on the ranch pieced together by the plentiful Duncan family. I had already written about the Scrub Jay’s symbiotic relationship with the oaks in volume 3--as well as the delightful magpies and the botany of our native Valley Oaks--but I have found much more on them since then. So I will be celebrating this grove, along with other features of this valley, in this issue.



Above, an old tractor today sits in the “Duncan Grove” on the old Duncan-Monroe Ranch in Hungry Hollow.

At the turn of the last century, this grove was the site of many a social gathering of the Capay families: picnics, reunions--even rodeos! But more than that, it fed and sheltered people for 8000 years--and wildlife for even longer! Having grown up in its shade, I can tell you it imparts a magical or spiritual pull on you--like many places around the world, often places surrounded by groves of trees and close to a high water table as we have here. Simply and scientifically *magnetic*? Or something more? Who knows, but it is *special*...

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At right and below: an ancient Valley Oak towers over the Gibson Mansion Museum in Woodland--thought to be well over 300 years old, it was there long before the Gibson family built the house in the late 1850s.



Below that is Duncan Grove today with antique farming equipment, collected by current owner Paul Smith.



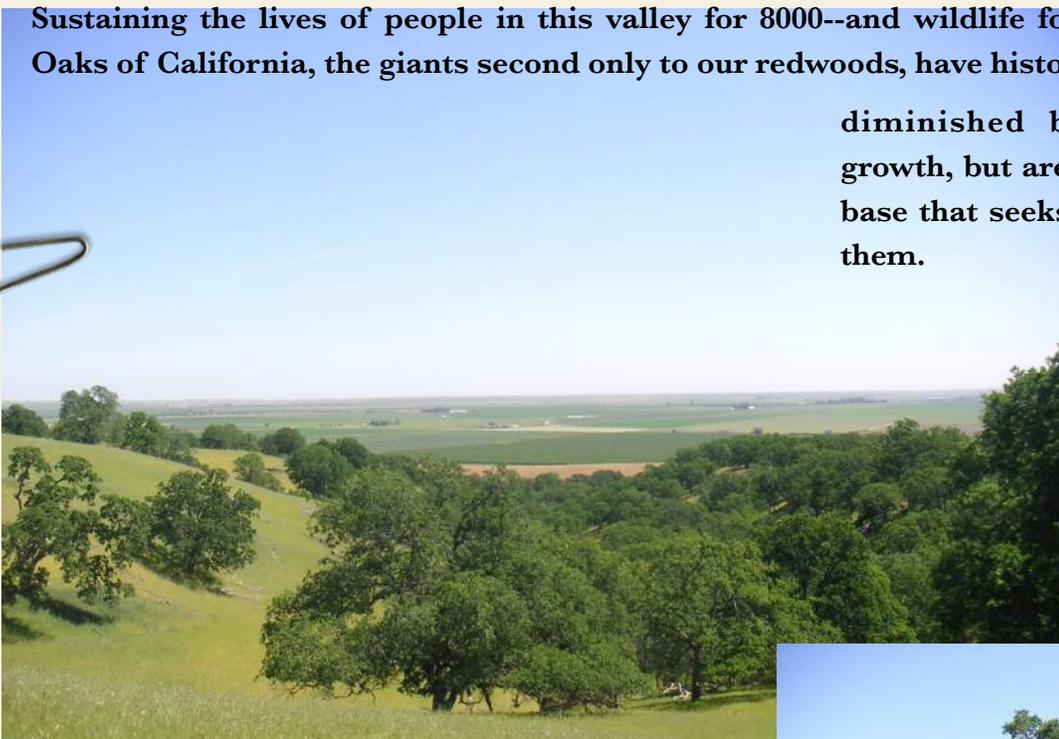


Our Living, Breathing Valley Oak Groves of Capay Valley!

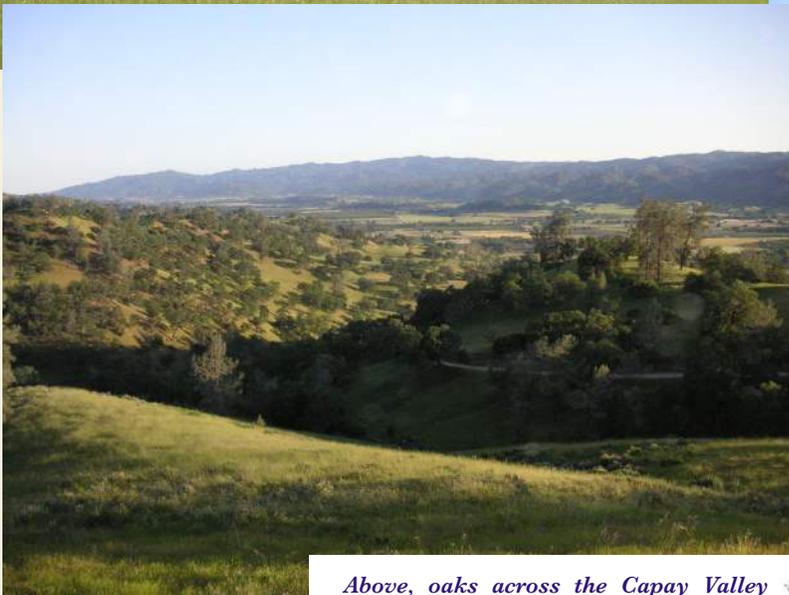
Sustaining the lives of people in this valley for 8000--and wildlife for millions! The Valley Oaks of California, the giants second only to our redwoods, have historically been

diminished by farming and city growth, but are beginning to win a fan base that seeks to restore and protect them.

Seen at left in the Hungry Hollow Hills looking east, they often fill the crotches and valleys of our rolling hills--avoiding the powerful winds and seeking high water tables. Since we only have rain 4 months of the year in the Sacramento Valley, they



are perfectly adapted by their long tap roots to tap into water held underground, and have the ability to hold huge amounts of water in their cistern-like root systems. Pioneers knew to settle near these groves because that is where



Above, oaks across the Capay Valley Hills looking southeast.

the high water table would be, thus, a most likely good supply of ground water--not to mention shade for our very hot, long summers!



HISTORIC OAKDALE RANCH

Hwy 16 & Co. Rd. 86A * 17785 Co. Rd. 86A

Esparto, CA 95627

Email: oakdaleranch@hotmail.com * www.historicoakdaleranch.com * Phone: (530) 787-4744

The newest event venue at the gateway to the beautiful Capay Valley.



California Valley Oaks are evolved from the White Oak line, which is officially known as the subgenus *Lepidobalanus*. This subgenus includes numerous oaks from California and elsewhere, which share similar leaves, acorns, pewter-colored rippled bark and wood pulp. Early settlers had a variety of common names for the Valley oak including: White oak, bottom oak, swamp oak, water oak and mush oak. The Spanish-speaking settlers called the tree "roble" because the tree looked like the white oaks they knew in Europe, thus they called the huge grove in Capay Valley *Los Robles*; later dubbed Thousand Oaks and eventually Duncans Grove.

According to wikipedia, *Quercus lobata*, commonly called the Valley oak, is the largest of North American oaks. It is perfectly suited to this part of California, growing mostly in the hot interior valleys and foothills. Known to attain the age of up to 600 years [other sources claim 300 to 400 years], this deciduous oak requires year-round access to groundwater.

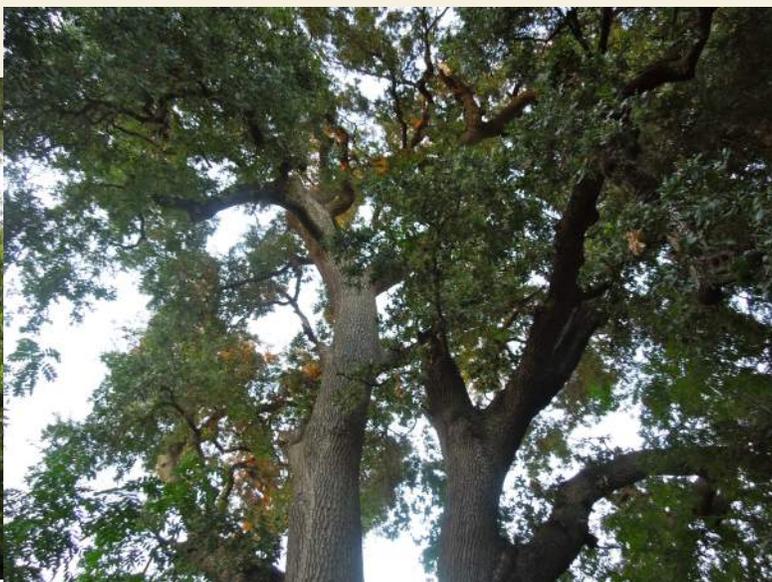
"The sturdy trunk of the Valley Oak may exceed two to three meters in diameter and its stature may surpass 30 meters in height. The branches have an irregular, spreading and arching appearance that produce a profound leafless silhouette in the clear winter sky"--as seen at upper right on the Duncan-Monroe Ranch in November, 1960s.

"During Autumn leaves turn a yellow to light orange color but become brown during mid to late fall. In advancing age the branches assume a drooping characteristic."



In the picture directly below, the leaves are beginning to turn golden-red.

Valley oak tolerates cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers, but requires abundant water. It is most abundant in rich deep soils of valley floors below 600 meters in elevation. Valley oak is found in dense riparian forests, open foothill woodlands and valley savannas. Commonly associated trees are Coast Live Oak, Interior Live Oak, Blue Oak, Black Walnut, California Sycamore and Digger Pine. In the Capay Valley, we have three designated *groves*: Duncan Grove in Capay and north across Cache Creek; CR 82B (one of its giants seen at bottom left); and near the Canon School in Brooks.





Because of the farming practices in the Central Valley for over 100 years, our Valley Oaks--especially the groves--are endangered. Since they depend upon the scattering of acorns to grow replacement trees, when the ancient trees of 300 (to 600?) years die, their replacement trees have often been plowed under. According to the "Yolo County Historic Resources Survey 1986," courtesy of The Yolo County Archives, our Capay Valley groves are unique today in that "At one time these oak groves were widespread throughout the county, but now are to be found in only a relatively few isolated locations....groves in either pure stands or as*

riparian vegetation in mixed stands with various other native species including California Black Walnut, Cottonwood, Willow [seen along Cache Creek], Live Oak, Digger Pine, Sycamore, Blue Oak, etc." [like those still covering many of our rolling hills]. In spite of the two on-line sites I found that claim they can grow to 600 years, this survey claims "the extreme age of Valley Oak is 300-400* years," but in either case, they will not be replaced by other oaks if we do not nurture their offspring. "The original pioneers located their farms where they found stands of Valley Oaks, because this is where the highest water table was to be found. They promptly cut down many of the trees and undertook farming there." One of the reasons Capay Valley still has significant groves is that the valley population valued these groves and left them remarkably intact. *It also helped that the wood, "dull brown approaching yellow," was soft and not "used extensively for milling."* While the practice of "mowing, scraping and using the ground beneath the groves diminishes the acorn seedlings' ability to survive," the Survey lists 13 historic groves between Rumsey and Putah Creek in Winters--3 in Capay Valley, alone!

Throughout the Capay Valley, many farms include orchards and vineyards, but often a few acres tucked in and around the oak stands. And then you will see a rarer, massive planting as on this page on the old Duncan Ranch--sadly, many old-growth oaks were removed rather than incorporated...sadly...

Acorn and leaves--and wasp-created galls:

Over most of the range, acorns fall in October. A variety of mammals and birds eat them, including the Acorn Woodpecker, Western Scrub Jay, Yellow-billed Magpie, and California ground squirrel. The acorns are also attacked by bruchid beetles, but can survive moderate levels of infestation. Surviving acorns all germinate in their first winter, and none remain by mid-winter. The acorns are medium to dark brown and range from two to three centimeters in length. The caps have deep stippling and are found most often as singlets, but occasionally as doublets.

*Globular galls up to several cm. in diameter are frequently attached to twigs of mature specimens of Valley Oak. These house the larval stage of small indigenous wasps *Andricus californicus*. A related wasp species, *A. kingi*, produces small galls shaped like*

*Hershey's kisses on leaf surfaces. The valley oak is the only known food plant of *Chionodes petalumensis* caterpillars.*

Like many oaks, Valley Oaks can tolerate wild fires.

Although smaller individuals may be top-killed, most re-sprout from the root crown.

http://www.calflora.org/cgi-bin/species_query.cgi?where-calrecnum=7001

and:

<http://>

www.californiaoaks.org/index.html and

<http://www.wikipedia.com>





Life at the turn of the last century in the Valley Oak grove called *Thousand Oaks* of Capay Valley, recalled in a pioneer's own words...

Quotes from Mary Elizabeth Franklin Duncan to *The Esparto Exponent* in 1931:

The reporter wrote, “Mrs. Mary E. Duncan lives in one of the fine old homes of Western Yolo, *Thousand Oaks*, as it was named years ago because of the grove of oaks that dot the farm. Several of them are within the yard, making a welcome shade there and offering a happy home for birds throughout the summer time,” then goes on to quote “Mother Dunc” in her later years:

“My father, Benjamin Franklin, [probably not a direct descendant of the more famous Ben Franklin—though family lore always claimed he was...] came to California when a very young man in 1850, coming from Missouri with Dr. Lane, who settled on what is now [in 1931] the Archer place just north of Madison...My father, together with several other young men [including one who would become her husband in 1879—Wyatt Godfrey “Doc” Duncan] had come from Missouri, working in the mines for a time. I have a ‘letterbook’ in which my father wrote to my grandmother during that time. These ‘letterbooks’ were small pamphlets, the size fitting an envelope and containing just enough writing paper to be carried by a two-cent stamp. They were issued by a firm in San Francisco that had charge of mail and express carriage throughout the States at that time. This letter was written in September, and my father makes note of the fact that no rain had fallen for several months, which seemed strange to him after the frequent summer rains in his Missouri home.”

“1864 was one of the hard years I remember; there was no rain that year and people were hard put to get along...That was the year that my father and his brother drove oxen and the covered wagon up into the mountains to get food for the stock—rain had been more plentiful in the mountains and there was hay for the oxen and work for the men in haying. Grandmother and I made the trip home by stage. Farmers in Yolo County drove their stock into Lake County that year for feed over along the coast. I remember them telling that the Lake county folks didn’t mind them driving in their stock, if only they would leave their squirrels at home—but then squirrels were hungry, too, and they, too, had to move to other pastures.”--were our Valley Oak acorns scarce, too?

“In 1879 [March 13] I married [Doc Duncan] and came to Capay to make my home [in the brand new house he had just built north of Capay in Hungry Hollow]; only it was not called Capay then, but Langville or Langtown, after John Lang, one of the early settlers. We drove from Woodland in a fine buggy, behind two beautiful horses, the main traveled road being then due west to the turn where the Bill Orchard now stands, and we forded the creek to the ranch, for there was no bridge. Dave Levi then conducted a store in the lower part of the Odd Fellows Building while his brother, Wolf Levi, had a store at Madison. Other than the stores, there were mostly saloons. Esparto was a grain field. Freeman & Grimes and C & B Orengo also had stores in Capay.”



Mother Dunc at home in her typical attire: self-made gingham dress, with a beloved book in hand. Mary’s mother, Elvira Wright Franklin, died at 25 years old, after crossing the plains in an oxen drawn wagon in 1857 with a toddler and in her last trimester of her second pregnancy. She delivered a month later in Cache Creek Township and also had Mary and another son before dying and leaving her children to be raised by her husband and mother-in-law, Mary H. Franklin. Life was rough on women!



At left: Doc and Mary Duncan with toddler-daughter Elvira Grey and some cousins, resting en route home from some journey by horse and buggy. [Circa 1887 from Sheryl Arendt] Mary said, “Dr. Craig came to Capay [1876] a year or so before I did; he was a young doctor then, riding on horseback to see his patients, fording the creek, for there were no bridges, and many times he was forced to cross back and forth across Cache Creek when he was obliged to swim his horse to make it.” One such day in June 1883 he was going to Hungry Hollow to deliver her first child, a girl they always called “Grey”—who would go on to marry James William Monroe, future 28-year sheriff of Yolo County. Doc Craig would also deliver the first three of this couple’s 7 children in Capay between 1904 and 1908—one of them Forrest Duncan Monroe, a future 32-year sheriff of Yolo County!