

88-41

spirit of place

by Steve French

Laguna worth preserving

I don't know how many of you know about the Laguna de Santa Rosa, but I discovered it by moving near it. From our back field and from our windows we can see out over the top of what's known as an Oak Savannah. This is the valley floor of the Santa Rosa valley. The oaks are Valley Oaks, *Quercus lobata*, and at one time covered the floors of all the major plains of California including the Central Valley. Near Sebastopol, the oaks cover the flood plain of the Laguna. When the winter rains arrive, the Laguna is my guide to the severity of flooding. We can look out the window and see a large lake stretching throughout our view. During the drought of '76-'77, our neighborhood smelled of raw sewage (lovely) because Santa Rosa couldn't drain the stuff into the Russian River. They dammed the Laguna and kept it there instead. When the first good rains came, the dams failed, and the sewage drained into the river. Our neighborhood was saved, but they sure were angry in Guerneville!

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is 14 miles of waterway stretching from Cotati to near Mirabel on the Russian River. It is the drainage for the Santa Rosa plain into the River. Before the turn of the century, it was a series of lakes. As Sonoma County became settled and agriculture dominated the economy of the area, the Laguna was seen as 'The Swamp' — something to be dredged and filled in and dried up. Only recently has the Laguna been recognized as the major wildlife resource in Sonoma County. 'The Swamp' is now known as 'Wetlands'.

Biologists have called it the second largest freshwater marsh system in Northern California, Clear Lake being the largest. The Laguna is now seen by many people as something to be preserved and hopefully enhanced. It's valuable as a flood control storage area and as a greenbelt separating West Sonoma County from Santa Rosa's tacky suburban sprawl. It's a home for many species of birds and animals, and contains different plant communities, such as riparian thickets, and vernal pools. From our backyard I've seen many species of hawks, and I can see Great Blue Herons

nesting in the tops of a thicket of Eucalyptus. Of course I've seen many other types of birds but being an inept birder, I can admire them but I don't know their names. There is a lot of human activity in the Laguna region, both commercial and noncommercial; hay farms, poultry raising, dairy operations, horse breeding and ranchettes; small retail stores, highways and urban strip commercial.

Ownership of the Laguna is divided into a patchwork of private and public holdings. Government agencies with responsibilities for the Laguna include the Dept. of Forestry, Dept. of Fish and Game, The Army Corps of Engineers, and The Environmental Protection Agency. There are governmental agencies involved with the Laguna on federal, state, county and city levels.

The current main threats to the integrity of the Laguna are reduction of open space, filling in the flood plain and increased development in the watershed. No action has been taken by the county or Santa Rosa to preserve the Laguna. Only little Sebastopol, by forming a Citizens Advisory Committee to inform the Sebastopol city council on management of the Laguna, has taken a step. The council is made up of local people who either live on or near the Laguna, or are aware of its significance.

The advisory committee, being composed of volunteers, has its hands full with a project regional in scope. The members realize that will not be the end of their task, but probably a beginning towards implementation of a plan. Right now they are interested in educating themselves and others about the significance of the Laguna. They realize it will take the efforts of many concerned citizens to make the preservation of the Laguna a reality.

(ED. Note: Steve French has been a landscape designer/contractor for 10 years in Sonoma County. We would appreciate your comments about this column. Please call 823-7845.)