



## THE HEART OF CALIFORNIA: EXPLORING THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

Aaron Gilbreath

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TRAVEL ESSAYIST AARON GILBREATH EXAMINES NATIVE CALIFORNIA HISTORY and the American present in an imaginative book, *The Heart of California: Exploring the San Joaquin Valley*.

His muse is Frank Forrest Latta, an oral historian, devoted ethnographer, and author of more than three thousand articles and nine books, including *Handbook of Yokuts* (1949). Mr. Latta's prodigious ghost guides Mr. Gilbreath's narrative like a shining North Star.

"The Yokuts were composed of about sixty separate, individually named subtribes who had their own leaders, territories, beliefs, and customs—and called themselves *Yokoch*, 'the people,'" Mr. Gilbreath writes. "These largely peaceful people didn't farm. Instead, they moved seasonally through different habitats."

Tulare Lake, with twenty-foot reeds, housed and fed the Yokuts for five thousand years. "The area's mixture of forested foothills, wooded waterways, and marshy lowlands allowed members of the Yokuts, Miwok, and Tübatulabal Native American groups to thrive. Between thirty thousand and eighty thousand of them were Yokuts people—the densest non-agricultural population in North America," Mr. Gilbreath reports.

After the Great Depression, farmers moved in and blocked off four rivers that fed Tulare to grow cotton.

In 1938, Mr. Latta captained a fifteen-foot skiff named *Alta* with a teenage crew down the undomesticated Kern River from Bakersfield, ending at Treasure Island in San Francisco. His unmatched venture was published in the *Bakersfield Californian*. Mr. Gilbreath read a rare copy and was compelled to replicate his cruise by car during a drought.

He bears witness to silent farms—salinated, dried up, and desolate—alongside urban decay and human decline. Sacred

lands of vibrant migrating waterfowl, fish, and wildlife are now dedicated to research by ecological non-profits and overseen by government agencies. Grids of livestock, poultry, fruits, nuts, and vegetable farms with productive soil vying for precious water dominate the remaining landscape.

In bucolic Hanford, he describes, with reluctant indulgence, "The aquifers were dropping, and the land was turning to salt, but tonight we licked our cream, savoring the fruits of farmer's labor while ignoring the effects."

The effects? In the 1980s, sixteen different agricultural pesticides were identified as so pervasive, "even the fog's toxic." Hanford's tap water smelled and tasted like sulfur. It's the elephant in the room locals ignored.

Mr. Gilbreath explains the importance of the Kern River and the Valley's complicated hydrology with respect and genuine concern regarding economic and ecological conflicts. He is faithful to the principles of causation.

Digressing on the invisible working class, Mr. Gilbreath shares candid stories about truck drivers and sex workers in rest stops amidst the brown flatlands and dusty highways. Throughout the book, he relates uncensored dialogue taken from authentic conversations. His juxtaposition of poetic analogies and profane expressions creates a time travel paradox.

Mr. Gilbreath's trek of fourteen days culminated in a twenty-year project and ends with fourteen pages of bibliography (including two attributions to Heyday authors) and no index.

Contemplating his map of "[I]ndigenous groups of the southern San Joaquin Valley, 1948," I mourned their losses. But knowing California's First Peoples' extraordinary spirit perseveres into the twenty-first century lightens my heart.