

## Balance Between Stability and Change

By Muriel Zeller (April 20, 2006)

Personal ownership of land is a myth. And this myth dies hardest in the West for it is inextricable from our ideals of rugged individualism and personal freedom. Consider the words of William Kittredge in the title essay of Owning It All, "The truth is, we never owned all the land and water. We don't even own very much of them privately. And we don't own anything absolutely or forever. As our society grows more and more complex and interwoven, our entitlement becomes less and less absolute, more and more likely to be legally diminished. Our rights to property will never take precedence over the needs of society. Nor should they, we all must agree in our grudging hearts." I have a "grudging heart," yet, I have lived long enough to appreciate the wisdom of what Kittredge wrote. For at the core of it is the realization that we are a community of conflicting needs, and if we are to preserve any of the land, we must reconcile those needs. We must shift our focus from ownership to stewardship, which is according to Webster's "the individual's responsibility to manage his life and *property* (emphasis mine) with proper regard for the rights of others."

So, we are left to determine what is "proper regard." I have lived in Valley Springs for about twenty years, but I have been part of the area all my life. My grandmother owned around 350 acres near Wallace and ran a few cattle. I spent some of the best times of my life there. My love of the land is, literally, grounded in experience. The land gave me a sense of security and continuity, a history, an identity. I believed in ownership, hence, my "grudging heart." However, I learned, in fact, that we own nothing "absolutely or forever" when my grandmother died, and my parents began to subdivide and sell the ranch. It is my personal sorrow, my own sense of loss that has forced me to recognize a greater sense of loss when I see the piecemeal and agitated development taking place in and around Valley Springs without "proper regard for the rights of others."

Change is inevitable, but "the balance between stability and change has been overthrown." Though these words from Wendell Berry were taken from an essay on poetry, they resonated with me. And I would add that the balance has been "overthrown" by material interests and a lack of respect for tradition, which is not to imply that tradition is inherently good, but rather that it should be considered, its best harvested and reseeded. This, of course, leads back to questions of judgement, regard, and the discussion of competing interests, and this discussion, of necessity and fairness, must be a *community* discussion.

I am advocating for the preservation of ranch land, open space, and wildlife habitat. I am advocating for concentrated development with respect for the environment. I am advocating for conservation easements, the Williamson Act, and incentives for developers and property owners who are stewards of the land. I am advocating for compliance with our environmental protection laws. I am advocating respect for our neighbors and concern for what our children will inherit. I am advocating for a dream, the possibility of a better order than we have now.