

## IT'S THE LETTUCE:

I'm sitting in a living room in Santa Rosa, California. It's relatively early in the morning. The day is foggy. I can see a block or so in either direction. It would be lovely on just about any other day. It would be another quiet, moody morning.

But there is a jackhammer roaring at full blast about two houses away. It kind of spoils the mood. At home I'd be watching the deer. Here, I'm looking for earplugs.

There is a jackhammer going because the owner of the house is upgrading his HVAC. This upgrade will no doubt lead to increased value and therefore a better price when it comes time to sell. The house is a tidy little cracker box dating from the middle of the twentieth century. It's the kind of house that Santa Rosa is full of.

It appears to have two bedrooms and one and a half baths, a living room that runs into the dining room, a small kitchen and an all purpose utility room. It is a single storey structure with no basement or attic. The house is about 1300 square feet. The lot is about three times the square footage of the house and contains a two-car garage and a garden shed sitting beside a tidy little lawn and rose bushes.

There are houses for sale in this neighborhood (a middle class neighborhood) which are from the same period and offer the same amenities. Judging by these and other local listings I would guess that the house down the street will come on the market at about \$650,000.

That's \$650,000 for a smallish house on a nondescript street in a run of the mill part of town with no land to speak of. Oh my.

I know of a place on Highway 16, a few miles from us, that has five bedrooms and three baths in 2,800 square feet, with several out buildings all on forty some acres. It's about twenty years old and is in the middle of some of the prettiest country that you'll ever see. It will sell for about \$500,000.

I might be comparing beets to oranges but the disparity in price is astounding. There must be good reasons for the tremendous difference in value between Sonoma County and Houston County. There must be compelling factors that would drive otherwise reasonable folks pay what they pay for homes and land here.

Well, let's start with the number one reason. The climate. There's no getting around the fact that a tough winter day here is rainy and forty-five degrees while a tough winter day at home is about fifteen below zero with the snow so deep you can't get out the driveway. On the other hand, the rainy season here leads to numerous mudslides every year while we have a slide every hundred years or so. Our slides were on a scale with the worst of them but, if I'm going to be looking over my shoulder, I would rather it be once every hundred years. Not once a week.

Another benefit of the mild climate is that so many people can live on the streets. They range from teens to seniors and span all ethnic and cultural groups. No one has a corner on homelessness here. A great many seem to be disconnected from what might be called reality, which actually makes perfect sense. If you were on your own with no prospect of a better tomorrow why in the world would you need to be up on current events or the markets? There's certainly no need to vote. The folks in office are just going to ignore you anyway.

Speaking of Elected Office. They have a Governor here who used to be a movie star, champion body builder and an immigrant. Now he talks a lot about the "immigrant problem" in a state whose biggest industry is totally dependent on im-migrant labor. We had a wrestler for a Governor once. But we got over it. It looks like California's muscle man might be here for a while. I wish him luck. California has some of the richest people and some of the poorest people in the country and they are definitely not on the same page with their hopes and plans.

One of the pluses here on the left coast is that you have so many neighbors. There are people everywhere, especially on the highways. I remember that during the reconstruction of Highway 16, I used to get impatient at the daily five-minute delays along the route home. From now on I will just recall the traffic on Highway 101 when I want to feel better. On a bad morning it can take three hours to travel from Santa Rosa to San Francisco. The distance between the two is about fifty miles.

Then it hit me as I was browsing the produce at the local market. I was surrounded by beautiful, local, just picked greens. Here I am in the middle of January and I have abundant choices for the evening's salad. This is the reason that so many people put up with the slides, the fires, the traffic, the crowding and the Governor. It's the lettuce.