

Sustainably Speaking

Collapse +11 Years

The Napa Valley Today

Journal of Mick Winter – December 15, 2020

Today's one of the two days a week when I work at the office instead of home. It's a little late to go by bike so I check my cell phone. The streetcar is due in 10 minutes. If I lived much further from the trolley stop, I'd probably flag a jitney or autorickshaw and take it all the way to work. Although they cost a little more, they get you exactly where you want to go. But I've got time to walk to the trolley, so I'll ride the rails this morning.

I'm happy to see my streetcar is one of the old-fashioned designs. I prefer them over the new, ultramodern style. They're just as comfortable but in a more homey kind of way. Aboard the trolley, I see many of my usual fellow riders. There are also a few people with suitcases. They're probably connecting with the train to the Vallejo Ferry. Streetcars are a great way to travel in town. Every town in the valley has them. Except Yountville, which is very walkable and compact.

Work is pretty routine today. A little paper shuffling, but most of my time is spent online in conversation with our other branches around the world—at least where the time zones are convenient. First thing in the morning, a group of us meet in the teleconference room for a long strategy session with colleagues in France and Chile. The wall-sized screen is just like being there, without the jet lag and the uncomfortable, and very expensive, air travel.

At lunch we walk to one of many nearby restaurants. Menus are more limited than they used to be since if a food isn't in season locally, it isn't on the menu. But at least we know that everything we eat is healthy, tasty and locally-grown. “Locally” is pretty much anything grown within 150 miles so it's not very restrictive.

Prior to the Crash of '08 and the Collapse of '09, Napa County was considered the Bay Area's most agricultural county. Ironic actually, since we produced almost no food. Once it became apparent that that had to change, the Napa County Farm Bureau, working with the County's Agricultural Commissioner, came up with a plan for dramatically increased food production. A few grape growers used some of their unplanted land for food and a very few even converted grapes to food, but in most cases it was a question of determining what currently unused land could be suitable for food production. Not surprisingly, there were thousands of acres with potential. Now Napa County is producing nearly half of its own produce and fruit on farms, as well as beef and other livestock, and another 25% or so in neighborhood and community gardens. We don't even refer to this food as “organic” anymore. It's just “food”, grown organically as its been throughout most of humanity's history.

Farmers markets are no longer a special event with high-priced goods. They're a six days a week, year-round activity where most people buy much of their vegetables, fruit, nuts, grains, meats, dairy and other locally-grown and locally-made food products. At least everything that they don't grow themselves. Napa now has four farmers markets. At Bel Aire Plaza, at River Park Marketplace, in Browns Valley, and near Oxbow-Copia Community Center. The few “supermarkets” left are much smaller than before and focus on imported foods and household items not produced in Northern

California.

Our other major source of food is our own home, neighborhood and community gardens. They sprang up almost overnight as people quickly realized that if they wanted affordable food they had to grow it themselves. Now every home has a backyard, deck or at least kitchen garden, and most lawns have been converted to gardens. Our own lawns went early on and are now vegetables, walnuts, olives, blackberries, and multigraft citrus trees. We also grow food in our larger neighborhood garden.

On the way home from work, I drop into a few mini-shops at the trolley stop to pick up dry cleaning, a new saw blade, some salmon for dinner, and a package at the combined UPS/FedEx/Post Office window. Large packages are still delivered to homes, but it saves everyone time and money to have a central location for small deliveries. Almost everyone in town is no more than a five or ten minute walk from mini-shops, and all neighborhoods at least have small grocery stores.

This weekend my wife and I are planning on going out of town. Thanks to the Napa Valley Railroad, we're connected with Calistoga to the north; Solano county, Amtrak and BART to the east; the Vallejo Ferry and San Francisco to the south; and Marin and Sonoma counties to the west. So our destination choices are unlimited.

Speaking of trains, everything started falling into place when the voters in Marin and Sonoma counties finally approved their train in November 2008. Once Napa woke up to what was going on, it quickly supported a link between Sonoma county and Solano county, which of course passed right through Jamieson Canyon and southern Napa county. That set up a easy and obvious connection for a Calistoga-Vallejo train. Finally, after nearly 100 years, Napa Valley residents are again connected by train with the world.

It's amazing how much quieter the town is these days. There's a lot less traffic, of course, since so many people are walking or riding bicycles. Vehicle use has dropped nearly 80% and that makes Napa safer for pedestrians, bicycles and, most importantly, kids. But it's also quieter because so many vehicles are electric rather than gas-powered. (Even gas lawn mowers and leaf blowers are gone.) Most remaining internal combustion engines run on biofuel made from pomace and other ag byproducts.

Probably the most popular vehicles other than bikes are electric scooters. It didn't hurt that part of the Napa Pipe development is an electric scooter factory, powered 100% by concentrated solar energy. That solar energy plant turned out to be big enough to also power south Napa. A plant off Big Ranch Road took care of the rest of Napa and each of the other towns established its own power source. Naturally, Calistoga uses geothermal as well as solar. Some neighborhoods in Napa even have their own power sources. And most homes now have solar roofs, wind turbines, or, in some locations, mini-hydro power.

Speaking of Napa Pipe, that turned out to be a huge bonus for the community. Once the community recognized that the developer intended actual housing, not second homes for infrequent visitors, people accepted the project. And the city of Napa actually enforced that policy, making sure that no purchaser had another home elsewhere. Of course the market helped since due to the economy, many people were getting rid of second homes throughout the valley. Now it's a thriving mix of singles, families and retired people.

Thanks to walking, bicycling and better diet, local physicians and hospitals have noticed that not only has the obesity rate dramatically declined, but so have diabetes, pre-diabetes, and cholesterol levels in both children and adults. Teachers say they've noticed the students seem more alert and attentive. In

fact, surprisingly, higher energy levels may have even reduced ADHD behavior.

Tourism has declined but not as much as feared. Most visitors are still from Northern California and seldom stay more than one night, if that. A number of bed and breakfast inns have been transformed into boarding houses. Some large hotels were converted to apartments, and several planned hotels never happened at all, but that turned out to be a plus. The vacant properties were turned into community sites, with recreation, cultural, educational and job-training activities, and space for small local business startups.

The wine industry has also changed, with less of our economy being dependent on wine growing. With smaller profits than they were used to, most corporations left the valley, selling their wineries to local buyers. Although prices have dropped, most wineries are still in business. Whenever we run out at home, we take some empty gallon jugs to local wineries and fill them up again. Just like the old days in the valley.

Like most neighborhoods, ours has a small coffee shop/meeting place. Some neighborhoods have theirs right in their co-working center, but we chose to have ours in a separate area. People hang out there throughout the day, at-home workers and retired folks mornings and afternoons, kids after school, and all types in the evening.

Our neighborhood association meets monthly so we can all check in, socialize, deal with any problems or needs, and plan any lobbying or coordination we want to do with the city government. It's amazing how much more attention we started getting from the city once we got our neighborhood organized and speaking with one voice.

After the U.S. Government defaulted on its debts in the May Day Massacre of 2009 and came up with the New Dollar, we in the Napa Valley decided we'd have more faith in our own local currency. Since our old dollars had lost 90% of their value, we were determined not to get caught like that again. Creating NapaNotes proved to be a big success, and now they're the common paper currency used throughout the valley. Sure, businesses also accept New Dollars and since the federal government won't let them charge a penalty for using New Dollars, they mark up the prices and then give a 10% discount for NapaNotes. Two of our local banks survived The Collapse, and they've both been very supportive of our local currency.

Local businesses love Napa Notes since they can be spent only in the valley. Once most of the chain stores pulled out, the surviving locally-owned stores started to prosper, at least as much as one can in the middle of a depression. New stores appeared to replace those destroyed by the chains before The Collapse, and businesses specializing in repair and maintenance are doing exceptionally well.

Since I've got a few extra NapaNotes around the house, I think it's time we went out for dinner. Maybe we'll even call an autorickshaw and do it in style. More tomorrow.

Mick Winter lives in Napa. Although he is the author of *Peak Oil Prep: Prepare for Peak Oil, Climate Change and Economic Collapse* (www.peakoilprep.com), he's not as sustainable as he'd like. His contact info is at www.mickwinter.com.

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Revised blurb for front of magazine:

Mick Winter, in earlier incarnations, was an advertising copywriter, wildlife film screenwriter, and teacher of meditation. He is currently fascinated with the idea of using cell phones to change society. He hosts NapaNow.com, DryDipstick.com, and RadioFreeCuba.com. And, naturally, MickWinter.com.