

Everyone Has Roots Somewhere

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Mark Venekamp's story ("Leaving brings feel of home," Readers Write, March 15) stirred a need to write my story. I grew up in similar circumstances in Thousand Oaks, Calif., then a small community where my family farmed for five generations.

I lived on a rural road, on land my great great-grandfather divided between his eight children. The elementary school I attended was filled with first and second cousins. My roots were deep; I was 12 years old before I ever entered a room where everyone there didn't know and love me. I came to see death as an occasion for grand family reunions. My world included a half-dozen Catholic funerals by the time I was 10; elegant funerals of ancient, regal German great aunts and uncles, great-grandmothers.

In 1959, Los Angeles exploded into our farming community. We moved to a tiny town, Shandon, east of Paso Robles, Calif., where my father established a sheep farm. Shandon was a closed community that required my six brothers and sisters and me to find a way to fit in. We were the odd, sheep-raising Catholic family in a Protestant community of cattlemen and pioneer families with their own deep roots. Everything in me wanted to shout, "I have deep roots, too!" But I said nothing.

During the first week in my new school, the class took a field trip. Afterward, we were required to write an article for the Paso Robles Press about the field trip. The teacher read the top articles and after three tie votes, someone shifted their vote from the popular boy's to mine. When I saw my byline printed in the newspaper, I knew I had found a way to survive my loneliness. I would be a writer.

In later years I wrote a memoir of my family roots, "Branches on the Conejo: Leaving the Soil after Five Generations." I later wrote another memoir about the small steps of a woman's journey, "Ordinary Aphrodite." As a writer I learned to see the world with eyes wide open. My husband and I traveled the West and I wrote short stories and essays for magazines.

In 2012, we saw a house and 10 acres in rural Grants Pass that we loved, but I wanted to meet the neighbors before we made a decision. Jack and Ruth are lovely people, he in his 80s. It turns out that he and I attended the same college, Cal Poly. But more surprisingly, his family was a pioneer

family from Shandon. He asked if I had ever heard of Truesdale Road. I told him that my family had lived on Truesdale Road. His grandfather was the Truesdale, he said. His family is all buried in the Shandon Cemetery. I took that as a sign and we bought the property.

When I am downtown I'll hear it repeated five, six times a day, the boast that someone is a lifetime Grants Pass resident. I understand the pride, the sense of place that this feeling expresses. In many ways I envy them. But I also understand that everyone has deep roots somewhere. I honor mine by writing our history for other newcomers to discover.

What I have learned is that there are two kinds of joy. There is the joy that comes from having deep roots; a family in one place for five generations. But there is another kind of joy in leaving the roots behind.

I am an Oregonian now, one of the working people with a smile for others and appreciation for the basic joys in life. I see bent-over, work worn men on the streets of Grants Pass and they remind me of my father, who passed, like some of his hard-working neighbors, of a heart attack when he was 59.

Life is good in the woods. I live among the treetops now, seeing life in a new and fuller way. Still, I'm so grateful for the people who have tended the deep roots of my new home, Grants Pass. Thank you to everyone who shares their history with others.

Anne Schroeder lives in the Hugo area.

Tell stories in your own words in the Daily Courier's feature, "Readers Write," which appears on Sundays. Just write up your story in 700 or fewer words and send it to Readers Write, c/o the Daily Courier, P.O. Box 1468, Grants Pass, OR 97528. Or email it to news@thedailycourier.com and put "Readers Write" in the subject line. If you have any questions about a possible story, feel free to call Daily Courier Editor Kevin Widdison at 541-474-3717.