

Losing the Last Leaf While Swimming Laps

By Dorothy Bowen, guest writer

We live in Orinda's Left Bank: The El Toyonal quadrant of old summer cabins and their eccentric inhabitants. All the streets have Spanish names, bestowed by the developer, E. I. deLaveaga, but only a few have his signature Spanish haciendas, alas.

The best place to swim, in fact, the only place, is the equally historic Park Pool. But, alas, again, even in its new incarnation, it is only open during the summer months. During the fall, winter and early spring, refugees from OPP must seek other venues. One of the best is the Olympic size pool at Soda Center at Campolindo High School.

While it doesn't have the lake like shape of OPP, preserved in its reconstruction at great effort and expense, it does have friendly lifeguards and is surrounded by redwoods and sycamores. It is the site of the Spanish land grant, Rancho Laguna de los Palos Colorados

I return to Soda Center in the fall, just as the sycamores are losing their leaves. Day by day, they are almost gone until only one remains, clinging to the topmost branch.

When I return from my swim, I tell my grandchildren O. Henry's story, The Last Leaf. You remember: Two young starving artists are living in Greenwich Village. One is very ill with pneumonia. She looks at the tree outside her window and says, "When the last leaf falls, I must go, too." An old man, a failed artist, hears of her despair and braves the storm to paint a leaf on the wall behind the tree.

Then....But you don't want me

to tell you more. O. Henry's stories are all about endings.

Imagine my dismay when I returned this fall to find that not only the last leaf was gone, but the entire line of sycamores had disappeared and a rank of bleachers rose in their place.

Oh, they had the usual excuses: The leaves were clogging the pool filters. The roots were undermining the cement walkways.

It reminds me of swimming at Strawberry Canyon in the '60s. Women had to wear bathing caps because long hair clogged the filters. Then men began wearing long hair and beards and suddenly long hair was no longer a menace. No one would dream of asking a man to do anything as effeminate as wearing a bathing cap.

But, I wonder, is there a more symbolic issue here? I've done laps holding on to the last leaf for many years now. Is the total disappearance of the trees a fatal omen? Who will paint the last leaf on the gymnasium wall for me to make it through the winter?

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