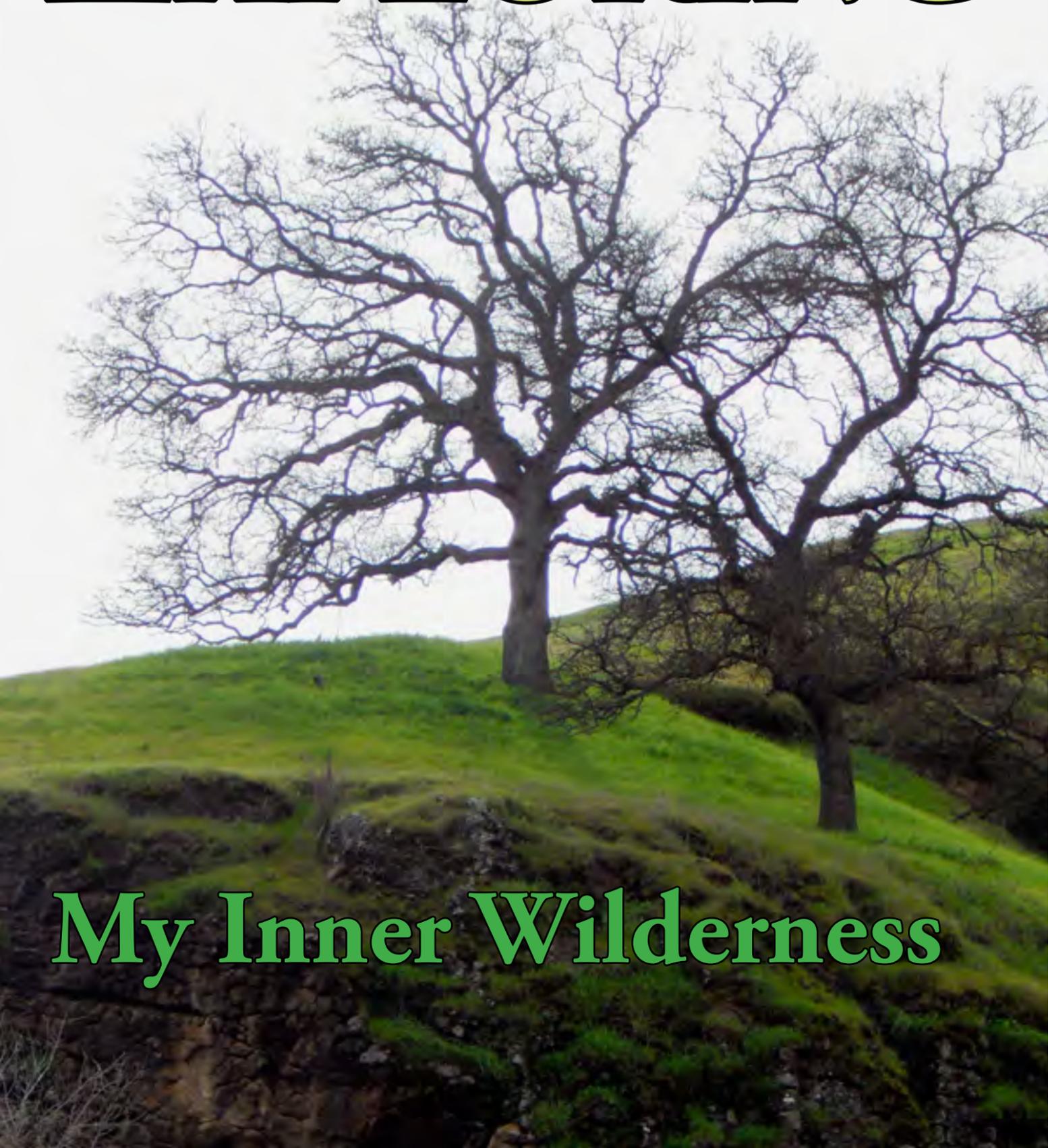


EXPLORING



My Inner Wilderness

*From the Personal Journal of Deveron Long
March 5, 2011*

My anticipation heightens as I approach the last row of commercial buildings at the edge of the small Central Valley town. How many of Oakdale's 19,000 inhabitants are cowboys, I wonder? I pass feed, tack, and saddle stores; western apparel establishments; a tiny shop that specializes in custom cowboy hats; an old railroad museum; an Indian trading post (why are they still using the term Indian?); and finally, on the outskirts of town I pass the rodeo arena. Today I realize that Oakdale's colorful character is only slightly diminished with the recent closing of the Hershey plant. Will the emphasis shift from chocolate festivals back to Oakdale's historic roots during the Gold Rush?

Moments later on my sojourn, a manicured golf course and stately mansions pass proudly on the left, but all my attention is directed ahead at the scenery I've been awaiting: California's Central Valley foothills. Eight months out of the year these gently rolling hills that flank the Sierra Nevada mountains are golden oceanic waves of wild grasses dotted with an occasional majestic oak tree or a random outcropping of jagged granite. On this March day vibrant green velvet folds of opulent fabric drape across the undulating land-

scape as far as I can see. I am wholly transported into another dimension in a most visceral way as I drive in my car—rising and falling, rising and falling—an erotic green voyage across sensuous green folds. My stomach and heart merge together somewhere in the center of my chest as I ride every dip and curve of the road.

By the time I arrive at Knight's Ferry, my destination for this intentional walk, I am already in an altered state.

Not but a handful of steps out of the parking lot, my walk begins with a power struggle between two sides of myself. The spiritual side of myself wishes to wander in abandon and delight, breathing in the location, and capturing reverent photographs. The more analytical side of me insists

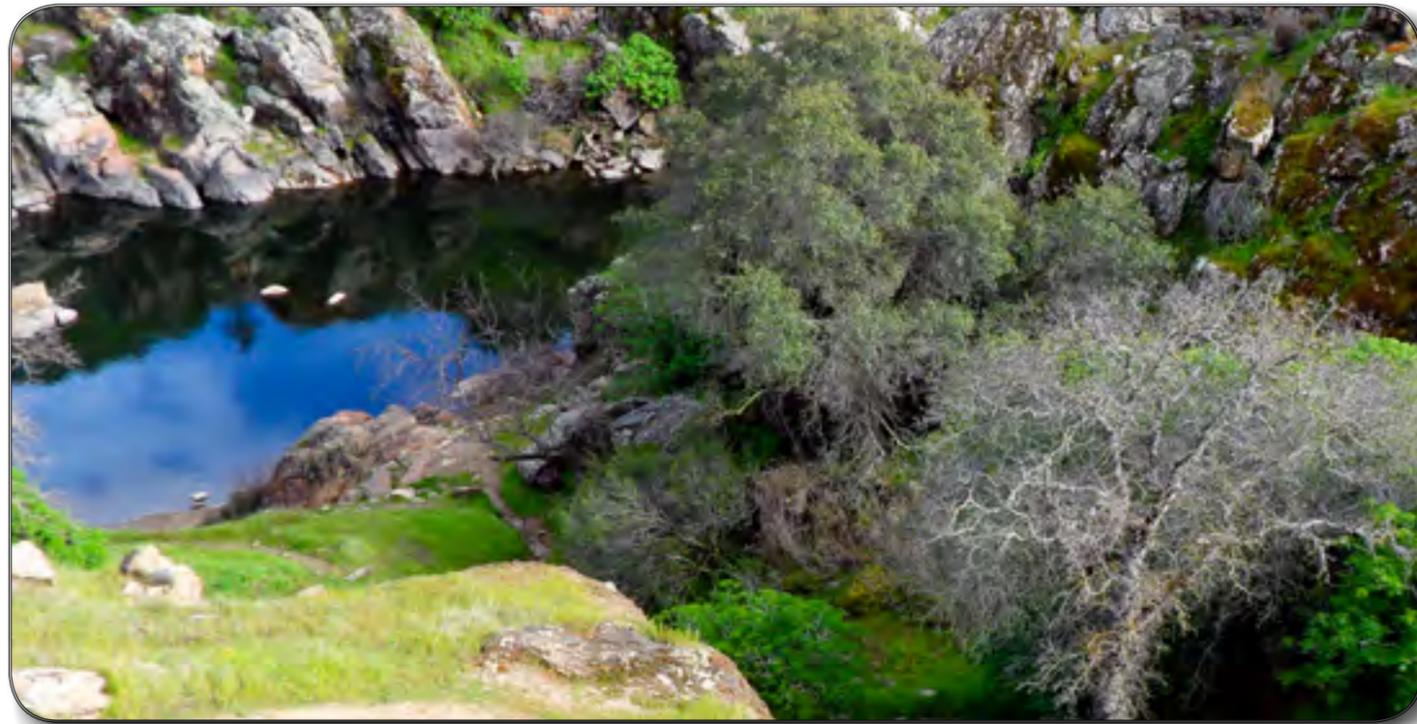


California's longest covered bridge at Knight's Ferry, CA, rebuilt in 1864

that I first visit the information center to learn as much as possible about the plants, animals, and history of this area. This is the part of me that carries four-pound binoculars, a field guide for iden-

tifying birds—which I never once consult during this journey—and a small notebook. I give in to the analytical side and stroll through the information center. I peruse interesting exhibits describing the history of Knight’s Ferry, the 1862 flood that devastated the tiny riverfront town, and how the event led to the building of California’s longest covered bridge. I jot down notes about the flora and fauna, but I recoil from the displays of stuffed mallard, owl, red-tailed hawk, raccoon, and an enormous mountain lion. I’m morbidly

with trees, to lounge on warm rocks, to bathe in tufts of wildflowers, to nap alongside murmuring waters? If I spend my time on these joys, will I have time to identify the area birds, plants, and insects? Deveron, just be here now. I remind myself that today’s journey has no goal or destination other than to connect with this place, to be fully aware, to experience the aliveness that this location shares with me—all in complete gratitude and appreciation. This I can do with every ounce of my being.



Knight’s Ferry, CA River

interested and would like to stare at every detail, yet the thought of their demise and how they ended up here makes me queasy.

I return outside to the river canyon robed in emerald green and walk toward the remains of the old mill and the covered bridge. Textures and patterns come alive in a curious display of opposing forces—delicate white blossoms against jagged stone; furred rocks and tangled brush. Why does this beauty ache within my chest? Is it the inner knowing that six hours will not be enough time to meander along entwined pathways, to commune

Feeling much relieved, I abandon the analyst at the edge of the covered bridge (she thinks we should examine this colorful artifact of Gold Rush history first) and head for the gurgling rapids in the distance. I am commandeered off course dozens of times, beckoned by natural spirits: Two twisted oaks whose branches entwine in an eternal embrace; patches of dancing poppies; an unrelenting oak growing from the crevice of a granite chunk; the lacey lime canopy of the California Buckeye tree; the rhythmic geometric patterns of a baby gopher snake (coiled right in the middle of my

path!); the geologic scars left by the once raging Stanislaus River; chunky granite boulders clad in orange and green lichens; pale green and brown rosettes of chalk lettuce (which local hunters mistakenly call deer cabbage); the atmospheric ballet of five turkey vultures overhead (they are exquisitely beautiful—from a distance); the silent grief of downed trees; thickets of cattails waiting patiently for some inner signal to burst their downy fuzz. All these were the reason I was standing in this place.

By early evening my physical body can no longer endure my spirit’s ecstatic journey. My feet balk at the pressure points of poorly selected footwear and refuse to go further. I limp to the edge of the high rim trail. One hundred feet below me the river canyon yawns its beauty. This is the place where all intersect—cliff, meadow, jagged rock, meandering path, smooth stone pool, naked oak, lacey buckeye. Here I free my body from the backpack, remove my shoes, and untether myself from the confines of the four-pound binoculars. In reverent ritual I cross my legs and meditate on the edge of this perfect world.

This time I do not close my eyes, for I choose not to separate myself from this sacred space. I breathe in warm golden sun; I exhale cool green earth energy. Dark river waters course through my veins; birdsong, wind, and trees dance about my head; birds of prey glide and twirl over the canyon so close I believe I can touch them with outstretched fingertips. The earth cradles me gently, and I ground myself securely to her. I am embodied. I am fully human. This is my purpose.

All photos by Deveron Long
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