

SNAPSHOTS IN QUARTZ

A rock-bottom view

WE WERE DRIVING, AS I RECALL, somewhere east of Redding on the Tuscan formation, that assemblage of Genozoic andesites, dacites, volcanic mudflows, sandstone, and tuff near Lassen Peak. I was on California 44 with a friend who points out mountains that are not there—or, at least, haven't been for millions of years.

The man of whom I speak is a geologist, and he makes a good living pointing at and talking about things the rest of us don't see. Looking back, I think it was on that day that I picked up the habit that ultimately cost me my self-respect, my sense of belonging, and my friends.

I refer here to my interest in geology. A free-lance writer, if he is careful, can tailor his work to fit his interests. Ever since taking some geology in college, I've had a hankering to get back to the fundamental business of anticlines and synclines. So, a year or so ago, I began soliciting magazine assignments that involved geology, or better yet, time spent with geologists in the field.

I learned a lot of geology—and something else. I learned that among the general populace there is no great enthusiasm for the subject. I learned that the topic, if vigorously pursued in polite society, will chase away long-standing friends quicker than a discussion of Herman Melville. And I learned this: There are people walking this green earth who do not give a damn about how Point Reyes got there—or even where it will be two million years from now.

Sensing me warming to the subjects of batholiths and sills, cratons and orogenies, people would slink away even as I spoke. And in the end I was alone, in the bar—just me, a bottle of Anchor Steam, and *Scientific American's*

San Francisco writer Tom Chaffin lives on the Franciscan complex, an assemblage of Mesozoic cherts, basalts, and muddy sandstone, that lies on the western edge of the North American plate.

special issue on plate tectonics.

Six months later, I am a recovered man—a whole man, master of my own destiny. Sure, there's the occasional outcrop of basalt and ribboned chert in west Marin—and I'm still a sucker for a good steaming fumarole. But my days as shirt-sleeve geologist are over. Today, I can stand in front of a mirror, look myself in the eye, and say: You are a man who does not need a rock hammer to get through the day.

Call it the cult of nature if you want, but there is something different about how Californians relate to the landscape. You find it in the writings of early explorers like Thomas Jefferson Farnham and John Muir. It is also manifest in the immense power enjoyed by the environmentalist movement here.

California lies in the realm of the sublime: Nature here refuses to be merely a backdrop, an incidental curtain against which we play out our dramas of love, hate, and commerce. Nature here shouts, refusing to be ignored. Waves crash Malibu, spring floods swell Central Valley sloughs. Teeming magmas far beneath the earth play hell with both patience and real estate values in the Sierra town of Mammoth Lakes. The San Andreas Fault stretches north, south, and our nerves, and serves as a foreboding reminder that ours is a new land still being made.

Ancient redwoods, saline deserts, alpine mountains, and valleys that were once prehistoric oceans crowd California dreams. Here you see whales spout, the earth smoke, mountains collapse. There is, I think, something about the landforms and natural communities of California that makes you want to pick at them in the way a child dismantles a clock to see how it works. Except that here the moving parts—rocks, whales, birds—are on open and majestic display. California reminds me of one of those small motors encased in transparent plastic that are used to teach grade school kids the principles of motion.

In the wetter East, abundant rainfall has worn away much of the continent's capacity to tell us its history. Geologically, California's mountains let it all hang out. While the hoary Appalachians have buried their history, the Sierra are without reticence: In their cirques, unconformities, and sediments they give away past, present, and future.

Of course, there are plants and animals in the East—but not in such disparate variety. And to see them, it is often necessary to drive for hours. Here, within 50 miles of one another, are the highest and lowest points in the coterminous states. California is a Whitman's Sampler of ecologies—coastal, chaparral, marsh, alpine, and desert, to name a few. And wild nature knows no boundaries; it also intrudes robustly into the lives of cities: Coyotes roam the Hollywood hills, soaring patches of raccoon-infested wildness cramp the ambitions of San Francisco realtors, in Los Angeles the La Brea tar pits gurgle through cracks on Wilshire Boulevard.

My bout with geology woke me up to something else—the fact that this state teems with people who have made errors similar to mine, who have succumbed to a preoccupation with California nature. Their opiates are fresh air and a slanting western sun. Their boweries range from the Mojave Desert to Mount Whitney. For some it might be simple geology. For others, waiting for the California condor. And for others—worse, much worse—a preoccupation with the migratory patterns of certain marine mammals.

It might have started as an innocent Sunday outing to Point Lobos, a simple respite from the vicissitudes of the city. But in the end, they were left squinting for hours through the windshield of a dusty Saab parked on the shoulder of Highway 1—just sandals, fingers clamped to binoculars, Sierra Club books, the stench of organic fruit juice.

An ugly scene to ponder—but one far worse to live through. ■