



The Heart of California: Exploring the San Joaquin Valley

Aaron Gilbreath

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Aaron Gilbreath knows that you cannot understand California without understanding its interior. Thus, his travelogue *The Heart of California* explores the misunderstood, troubled, and lovely San Joaquin Valley in search of illumination.

Gilbreath road tripped through the Valley at a time when wells were producing salty water that left its farmers worried. His path followed that of early California historian Frank Latta, who, in 1938 (one of the valley's wet years), boat tripped from Bakersfield to the San Francisco Bay.

In Latta's day, the San Joaquin Valley, now the "most productive unnatural environment on Earth," was marked by hydrological features that no longer exist. Their intermittent flooding imperiled settlers; Latta and others hoped that damming would make the Valley a rich, consistent farmland. But changing the Valley waterways had consequences—seen during Gilbreath's trip in the form of towns dried up, the memories of once vast lakes erased, and animal life curtailed.

"California is a state of emergency," Gilbreath notes, but is also "resplendent with fields of poppies." His text holds these realities in tension. He records tule fog mornings and hot afternoons spent surveying arid landscapes. He talks to Valley dwellers to gauge their opinions on big city pollution, California's proposed high speed railway, and the quality of life that can be had in land that's temperamental.

Gilbreath also addresses California's history of Native erasure, land absorption, and colonization. And he places the San Joaquin Valley at the heart of the state's tenuous future, noting that its productivity and daily challenges exemplify the state's economy and troubles. *The Heart of California*, as it wanders through land that has been shaped and changed by human contact, produces an intriguing picture of the California interior—a place of subdued beauty that feeds a nation.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November / December 2020)

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