

# AN INTERVIEW WITH RONNIE GILBERT

Oral History by Bruce Levene

*Ronnie Gilbert lives in Caspar with her family, a cat and 14 chickens. Formidable yet charming, she modestly failed to mention during this interview the six films, 13 documentaries, numerous LPs and CDs, one-woman stage presentations, a book about Mother Jones and innumerable peace rallies and festivals that she has taken part in on that long dusty road from New York in 1926. She will be remembered most as a founder, together with Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman and Pete Seeger, of The Weavers, whose recordings of "Wimoweh," "Tzena Tzena," "Goodnight Irene," and "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" still warmly resonate with a sense of timelessness more than a half-century later. The group's 1955 Christmas concert and recording, "The Weavers at Carnegie Hall," highly impacted every future American folk singer, and The Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and countless others owe them a great debt of gratitude. (Unfortunately, the Weavers early on came under pressure because of their history of singing protest songs and folk songs favoring labor unions, and were placed under FBI surveillance and then blacklisted by the entertainment industry during the McCarthy era. But, as the saying goes, they bounced back!)*

The Weavers were the core element that pushed folk music in America into the mainstream. That's true. We were recorded by Decca Records, which was mainstream. Certainly we never expected any hit records out of that but suddenly it just went. In a way we were not really prepared for the life that came with that, which was on the road. In those days, when you were booked into a venue of some kind, you stayed there for a month, or at least a couple of weeks. So we were on the road a lot. It was hard on Pete and on his family. Then we were blacklisted. So no more songs on the radio, certainly no television. And everybody thought we were finished. But our manager and friend, Harold Leventhal, brought

us back into Carnegie Hall, of all places, and it turned out that literally thousands of people came, then came again. The management of Carnegie Hall had no idea who we were. Town Hall turned us down. In those days most of the so-called liberal elements were pretty scared of being tagged with a Communist label. And there we were, all of sudden, in this world that none of us knew about, or really cared about when we started out. What we consider today, and what we considered big time then, are two different things. Frank Sinatra was big time. Peter, Paul & Mary, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, the place that they attained, was probably where we would have been had the blacklisting not happened. That's common knowledge.

Our major concern was getting folk music into the mainstream. That's why we kept recording, that was our goal. That was why Pete and the rest of us put up with all the discomforts that life brought, because if it kept the recordings up, it meant that music was getting into the mainstream. The minute the recordings stopped, there wasn't any point to it anymore anyway. Then they stopped, when the blacklist was total.

After that I went out on my own for a couple of years. I moved out to the West Coast with my then husband, had my daughter Lisa, and never expected to go back to that again. But when Lisa was two years old Harold wrote to me and said, "There's an audience here. You owe it to your fans." And I'd say, "Harold, you're dreaming. Nobody is going to come to a concert now." Well, I was wrong. Everything re-started with that Carnegie Hall concert. That was the tail end of the blacklist. Various venues decided that if Carnegie Hall could make a fortune on that, they could try also. So before we knew it, we had offers from major concert halls all over the country and that's what we did, went on tour until we broke up in 1964.

The fact is, I got involved in theater toward the end



Ronnie Gilbert – photo by Donna A. Korones

of the time with The Weavers. I joined a group of people in New York City called the Open Theatre. And it pulled me away from everything else. I was so intrigued with what they were doing, with theatre, that I started to study and took classes from some well-known teachers in New York. Then I met this group and that was the beginning of a whole new life.

Harold Leventhal said at one point, “You have to stop playing around with this theater stuff and pay attention to your music.” And I said, “You’re absolutely right.” And then I thought to myself, “This is the best thing I’ve done in I don’t remember how long. Can I give it up?” And I said, “I have to give it up, because there is no money in this at all.” Literally, no money. We chipped in for our rehearsal space. Everybody lived on unemployment insurance, off and on. But what happened was that one piece that was developed in that group was produced commercially and I was cast in it. So, instead of it being gone, in a day, or a week, which is what everybody thought, because the closing notices had been posted, it became a smash hit. That was *America Hurrah*, in 1966, which ran for 640 performances off-Broadway. And that put me right smack into theatre. From then on, for many years, I worked in theater, in this collaborative play-building play. That was my life for a long time. I loved singing, loved the audiences, always felt very happy, comfortable, on stage. And I liked what I was singing; the songs said something. But intellectually the theater that I was doing was way more interesting. And I needed that, needed that part of my brain exercised, so that’s really what happened.

The kind of theatrical work we did was quite unusual. A lot of theaters learned from what we did and were able to take some of those ideas and put them into the mainstream theater. What we did was, of course, experimental; the pieces were collectively made into collages. They were plays, all right, but not in the usual sense. That was the marvelous thing about doing it. I was in the first

theater group for about three years, but then I began to do other kinds of theater. The director, Joseph Chaikin, the genius of that group, got an amazing grant to do some new work. That was in the 70’s and I agreed to come to New York for two to three months a year, for two years, to do pure theater research, without having to perform. With no obligation to entertain, just research. We had a vocabulary that was very specific for the work that we were doing. And in this new level, of not having to produce within a certain time, we could just explore all kinds of questions, things that always come up and you can never spend enough

time on them because you have to get the work done, get it out. It was marvelous. Then the third year we had to begin to show something. That group went on for seven years and we produced three marvelous plays, and did pieces of old plays. This is generating material that has to do, in many ways, with conditions, the condition of human beings, the condition of states of being. Dancers do this. They use the same body, arms, legs, but they’re exploring ways to use those in different ways. They don’t only do already choreographed material; they keep inventing, creating material. That’s what we did.

For about 20 years I didn’t sing publicly as a singer, although I sang in a couple of the plays that happened to be musicals. Only much later did I start singing again, with Holly Near; we had sung together at some peace rallies. Suddenly, that was a whole new musical life that I never expected. I worked on the Elizabeth Cady Stanton\* piece during that time. I came to live in Caspar in October, 2006, but had often visited my daughter, Lisa Weg, who has lived here for many years. I know the coast quite well and a lot of people know me, because of The Weavers. My daughter and granddaughter live upstairs and I’ve ended up with a new life, which was handed to me at 80 years of age. Not everybody can claim that. I moved in with my family.

Until recently, I was still performing, doing a kind of autobiographical presentation, which had songs in it, pieces of songs, but I don’t do that anymore either. I am very happy not to be traveling. I drive down to the Bay Area, that’s it. The days of performing are gone, and I don’t miss them, really. The idea that I would have to do that for some reason, or let myself get involved in that again—no way. This is my 83rd year and I think I deserve a rest!

\**Not for Ourselves Alone* – 1999-DVD. Ronnie Gilbert is the voice of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Julie Andrews is the voice of Susan B. Anthony.

# Hopland • Ukiah • Willits

## INLAND MENDOCINO COUNTY BACK ROAD MEANDERS

by Pete Halstad

Inland Mendocino County, from picturesque Hopland, on Hwy 101 and beautiful Anderson Valley along Hwy 128, in the south, to the tiny Eel River town of Piercy, at the county's northern end, offers a stunning variety of landscapes. As you drive north along the highway, sensuously rolling hills covered with oak and madrone, and flat valley lands neatly planted in wine grapes and pear trees give way to evergreen-crowned ridges and dense, dark redwood forests. The pastoral Russian River and the quiet, fog-shrouded Navarro yield to the mighty, roiling Eel. From one end of the county to the other, Inland Mendocino



County is a visual feast for the alert traveler's eyes. The best way to see and experience the area's natural wonders (short of hiking, bicycling or kayaking), however, is to say "good-bye" to the highway and "hello" to the county's meandering back roads.

So, let's take a drive, starting in Hopland, and heading south on Mountain House Road from its beginning just west of Hwy 101. This twisty, winding, up and down, eight mile stretch of paved county road was once the main high-

way between Cloverdale, in Sonoma County, and southern Mendocino County. Look sharply for old concrete state highway markers as you hug the tight curves. At the drive's start, cone-shaped

Duncan Peak, whose steep, wooded slope conceals the scattered remnants of a once lively hot springs resort, dominates the Sanel Valley skyline. In less than a mile, the road starts to climb and curl through gently rolling hills dotted with cattle and sheep.

About three and a half miles from Hwy 101 is the (private) driveway to Fountain Ranch, a sprawling old Victorian mansion which served for many years as a stagecoach stop. When the road reaches its apex and briefly levels, the vista expands dramatically. To the southeast you'll see the distant interstate and the grass-covered shoulder of Squaw Rock, before the lovely old road begins twisting and turning down from the high pasture country until it finally crosses over Cummisskey Creek, on the oldest existing vehicular bridge in Mendocino County. From here, it's a short stretch to Hwy 128, past rock outcrops and, to the south, a hillside of moss-covered deciduous oaks.

At Hwy 128 you can either retrace the nine and a half miles to Hopland, or turn right and head up to Boonville, and thence – after stopping for lunch at Lauren's Restaurant – to Ukiah via the aptly-named Ukiah-Boonville Road (also, incidentally, a scenic drive, but disqualified, for our purposes, since it's a state highway, Hwy 253). If you're starting the drive from the south, take Hwy 128 from the north end of Cloverdale about eight miles to the turn onto Mountain House Road and enjoy the above-described scenery

in reverse order. Either way, you'll need to return to Hopland for our next back road ramble, a thirteen mile jaunt up the east side of the Russian River Valley to Talmage.

To find Old River Road (formerly East Side Road), take Hwy 175 east over the Russian River, past the entrance to Valley Oaks farms (until recently, the home of Fetzer Winery's tasting room and Kate Frey's renowned Fetzer Gardens) and through the little town of Old Hopland until you come to Mendocino County's very first European-style traffic circle. Follow the signs around the circle to Old River Road. (Note: If you should somehow manage to stray off Old River Road onto University Road, don't fret; just relax and enjoy the drive up into the hills, where you'll eventually come to a dead end at the University of California's Hopland Field Station. Then, turn around and come back to Old River Road. This time, you can't miss it.)

Within a mile the road passes Fetzer Vineyards, which heralds the start of a seemingly endless swath of grape vines planted on both sides of the road, in rich valley bottom lands or on gently sloping hillsides. On the east side of the road, a mile past Fetzer's, are the remains of an old ice-house. At mile post 5.8 (measured from the junction of Hwy 101 and Hwy 175) you'll pass the long-ago Largo train stop. Around the next sweeping curve, towering Red Hill comes into view. Below the roadbed, to the left, a lone, stalwart pear orchard still stands its ground against the vineyards' steady march. Picturesque old farmhouses, weathered fences, grazing sheep and cattle form a pastoral setting as the road hugs the base of the east-side hills on its way north to Talmage. As



the valley widens, lush vineyards spread across the widening valley floor. A mile north of the wide, rocky bed of Morrison Creek, across from the sign for Dark Horse Farming Co., is a large parcel of land seemingly untouched by agriculture or grazing. This portion of the Pomo Indian-owned Yokayo Rancheria is perhaps the only “unsullied” bottom land in the entire Russian River Valley.

Old River Road ends at the impressive gateway to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. The Buddhist university’s extensive grounds and handsome old buildings were once a California

state mental hospital, until the hospital’s closure in the early 1970’s. Today, the series of small dams and reservoirs on nearby Mill Creek that supplied water to the mental facility belongs to the County parks system. The white-painted California Conservation Corps buildings across from Mill Creek Road formerly served as the facility’s dairy. At the entrance to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, turn left (west) onto Talmage Road, and within a few minutes you’ll find yourself back at Hwy 101, at the south end of the County seat, Ukiah. Between Old River Road and Ukiah’s State Street (former Hwy 101) you’ll have driven the entire length of the shortest separately-designated state highway in California.

In Ukiah you’ll find a number of fine lodging places, a fascinating museum (the City-operated Grace Hudson Museum), well-maintained parks and playgrounds, a challenging 18-hole municipal golf course, hiking and fitness trails, locally-made wine and beer dispensaries and an interesting array of fine locally-owned shops and restaurants. Downtown dining favorites include Schat’s Bakery, Ukiah

Brewing Company, OCO-Time and Patrona.

In future installments, we’ll explore other fabulous county back roads, including Orr Springs Road from Ukiah to Mendocino, Reynolds Highway near Willits, and Bell Springs Road north of Laytonville. While you’re in Ukiah, stop at Mendocino Book Co., on School Street, kitty-corner from the Courthouse and pick up a copy of the *DeLorme Northern California Atlas & Gazetteer*, an indispensable guide for avid back-roaders.

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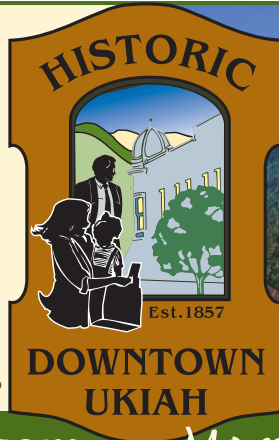


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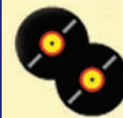
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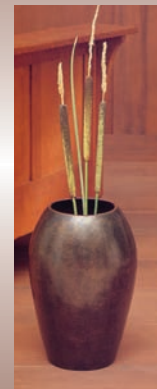
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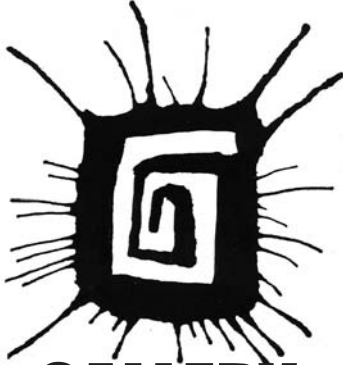
  
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# REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF

by Pete Halstad

The early history of inland Mendocino County, like virtually everywhere else on the American continent, is one of conquest. The white settlers who began moving into the area in the early 1850's had no use for the native people they encountered, and apparently little concern for their humanity. The rich bottom lands of the interior valleys – Anderson, Sanel (Hopland), Yokayo (Ukiah), Potter, Redwood, Little Lake (Willits), Long (Laytonville) and Round (Covelo) Valleys – as far as the whites were concerned, were there for the taking. And take it they did, often with unspeakable brutality. Natives who weren't simply slaughtered were herded onto federal reservations or kidnapped and forced or sold into slavery.

The Native Americans the whites so brutally displaced had inhabited the area for thousands of years, in balance and harmony with the natural world. Nature – in the form of creeks and rivers, deep, wide valleys strewn with oak trees, and covered with grasses too tall for a man to see over, cool, damp canyons shaded by gargantuan redwoods, and hillsides dense with tanoak, buckeye and sinewy, red-barked madrone – provided them a plenitude of acorns, reeds and grasses, salmon and steelhead, deer, antelope, quail and pheasant. The feathers of a multitude of colorful songbirds ornamented the natives' sturdy but beautiful basketry. Although separated by distance and language, the Pomo tribes of what was to become Mendocino County shared with their Clear Lake and lower Russian River Valley tribespeople a relatively peaceful and abundant way of life. Basketry became the Pomos' dis-

tinctive skill; today beautiful and richly varied Pomo artifacts are housed in arts and crafts collections all over the world. Examples are on display locally at the Grace Hudson Museum in Ukiah and the Mendocino County Museum in Willits.

The first intrusion of Europeans into this idyll was with the exploration (and exploitation, in the form of seal-hunting) of the coastal area by Russian seamen. Fort Ross, in Sonoma County, was built by the Russians as a supply post for support of their fur-trading and otter and seal hunting operations to the far north, in what is now Alaska. The Mexican government, which controlled most of coastal California to the south, was concerned about the Russians' encroachment on what they regarded as Mexican territory, and extended land grants into southern Mendocino County to encourage settlement in the area. Ultimately, when the Russians abandoned their west coast endeavors, Fort Ross and its contents were sold to Captain John Sutter, owner of a vast tract of land acquired from the Mexican Governor of California, on the banks of the Sacramento, American and Feather Rivers. Sanel and Yokayo ranchos, though never developed or inhabited by "Californios" (i.e. Californians of Spanish or Mexican descent) represented the first claim of whites to local Native Americans lands in inland Mendocino.

By the early 1850's at the height of the California gold rush, the first Americans began to appear in the area. Initially, they came along the

Russian River looking for a supply route between Bodega Bay and the mining operations in Trinity County. This first excursion set the tone for bloodshed between Americans and native people, and soon led to the federal government's establishment of the Nome Cult Farm, later named the Round Valley Indian Reservation, for the natives' "protection." Before long, Nome Cult was to become a dumping ground for Native Americans from all over northern California. The tragic story of the 100 mile forced march of Maidu families from Butte County over the Mendocino Pass, in 1863, during which more than half of the 465 men, women and children perished, is just one of many tales of outrage and horror surrounding the sad history of Round Valley. Today, visitors to Round Valley and Covelo can stop at a scenic viewpoint just off paved Highway 162 where a California Historical Landmark commemorates the valley's settlement.

A more uplifting story concerning Round Valley, one which took place in the early 1970's, is the heroic defeat, by local residents, of the Los Angeles Water & Power Company's plan to turn their picturesque and fertile valley into a reservoir supplying water to Southern California. LAWP's plan called for the Middle Fork of the Eel River to be dammed between Round Valley and Dos Rios, and the water to be stored in Round Valley before being pumped through a tunnel through the Yollo Bolly Mountains to the Central Valley, where it would then flow into the California Aqueduct on its way to Los Angeles. After a long, bitter struggle, led

# INLAND MENDOCINO COUNTY

by local cattle rancher Richard Wilson, the plan was miraculously defeated. The valley's unlikely savior was then Governor Ronald Reagan, who finally determined that the project was too great a burden for California taxpayers. Round Valley Reservation members, and the long-overdue sympathy their history engendered, played an important part in defeating the LAWP's plan. (For a full and interesting account of this episode, read Ted Simon's book, *The River Stops Here*.)

"Stopping progress," or, at least, being appreciative of the beauty that surrounds us – has been a theme in inland Mendocino County for quite some time, even, in a few cases, in the era of "grab and take." Among Potter Valley's early settlers was the noted photographer A.O. Carpenter. A.O. and Helen Carpenter's daughter, Grace Hudson, gained an international reputation for her sympathetic, skillful portraits of local Indians. Her husband, John, was an avid and informed appreciator of Native American culture. Their early craftsman-style home and the adjacent Grace Hudson Museum on South Main Street in Ukiah display a number of Grace's paintings and sketches, as well as a fascinating array of Pomo artifacts from John Hudson's collection. The home and museum are well worth a visit.

After many decades of exploiting, and despoiling, the natural environment, through indiscriminate logging practices, reducing and restricting the flow of rivers, poisoning the soil and water with pesticides and herbicides, and paving over much of the rich val-

ley lands for freeways, shopping centers and housing tracts, beginning in the 1960's, environmentally-conscious newcomers (so-called "back-to-the-landers") joined forces with those local people concerned about what was happening to their beautiful environment, to try to stop, and in some cases reverse, the pattern of environmental degradation. An early example of such activism took place in the early 1970's, when a small group of Anderson Valley residents, locals and new-comers alike, joined forces to oppose, and eventually thwart, a proposal by Masonite Corporation, one of the County's largest landowners, to build a residential development along the Navarro River, close to magnificent Hendy Woods.

Now, thirty-five years later, in a similar battle of local environmentalist/preservationists vs. carpet-bagging capitalists/developers, a debate is being waged over the future development of the former Masonite manufacturing site along Hwy 101 just north of Ukiah. Despite the organized and vociferous objections of many Ukiah Valley residents, who are concerned about the traffic, noise and air-quality impacts, the potential harm to locally-owned businesses, and the growth-inducing consequences of the proposed development, the industrially-zoned property's Ohio-based owners are attempting to have the acreage re-zoned to allow construction of a large-scale retail shopping mall and multi-family housing units. Ironically, no doubt, a good many of the developer's adversaries, who want the property to retain its industrial zoning, were among those who com-

plained regularly about Masonite's logging practices and the plant's effect on local air quality. Life, and politics, it seems are ever more complex.

The current debate over the future of the Masonite property in Ukiah is a reflection of the emphasis, among today's inland Mendocino County residents, on creating a viable, sustainable, eco-friendly, local economy, and preserving what is left of the natural environment. A number of local enterprises and initiatives point to this principled course. Vintners such as the Frey family in Redwood Valley are leading the way in organic grape-growing and wine-making, setting an encouraging trend throughout the region and helping to make Mendocino County a leader in the production of excellent quality organically produced wines. The Magruder family of Potter Valley uses sustainable practices to raise organic livestock. Real Goods in Hopland and Dripworks in Willits are leaders in the supply of energy- and water-efficient products for homes and businesses. The Mendocino Environmental Center and the Smart Growth Coalition, both based in Ukiah, are organized and effective advocates for protecting and preserving inland Mendocino's natural environment, locally-based economy, and rural, small-town character.

*At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, inland Mendocino County continues to make history. With a little luck, effort and love, the new history will be better for everyone.*



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