

Rollin interviewed p. 17

Fires, Floods and Farms. Sunsets, Subdivisions and Silicon. Bakersfield and Berkeley. What Is California, Anyway? **BY PETER H. KING**

# WELCOME TO THE ELUSIVE STATE

*California was his dream  
A paradise  
He had seen  
Pictures in magazines  
That told him so.*

—Merle Haggard, “California Cottonfields”

CALIFORNIA IS A WONDERFUL FRAUD, AND I WOULD NOT LIVE ANYWHERE ELSE. IT IS A FICKLE land, capable of serving up displays of great natural beauty one day and scenes of brutal ugliness the next. California is barbecue smoke swirling through downtown San Luis Obispo on Thursday night, farmers market night, and the oddly beautiful way late summer sunsets filter fiery red through the smog band above Los Angeles.

California is October light splashing over the pastel apartments of San Francisco’s North Beach. It is the voice of Neil Young warbling from a pickup truck speaker on a Saturday morning in the fall, California’s most delicious season: *I’ve been to Hollywood, I’ve been to Redwood, I’d crossed the ocean for a heart of gold.* . . . And it is flies swarming over a slick spot of curbside lawn, on the day after a deadly ambush of trick-or-treaters, in a district of Pasadena where I lived for a while, a neighborhood known as Bungalow Heaven.

“Look at the blood on the grass,” a morbidly fascinated passer-by kept saying to me on that November morning in 1993.

“I look at the flies.”

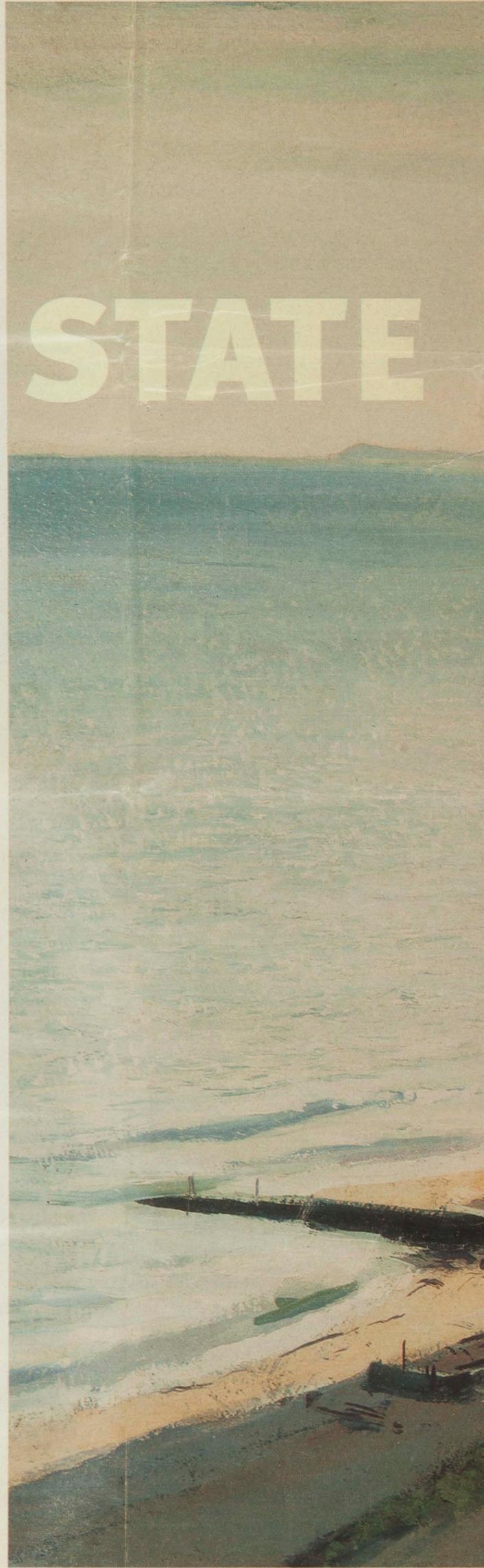
California could well be the most written-about state in the land. In the past decade alone, the California Historical Society’s quarterly magazine has listed nearly 1,000 titles of new or reissued books that address California topics and themes, titles such as “Contested Eden” and “Paradise Lost” and “The Dream Endures” and so on down the line to “Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hard Bodies Began.”

Yet for all this literary exploration, California refuses to be nailed down. “California is elusive,” writer Gerald W. Haslam has noted. “That’s true largely because so many who look for it think they already know where and what it is. Outsiders are often more certain of their versions than are natives.”

I know something about this elusiveness. In 1991 I was assigned by the Los Angeles Times to write a twice-weekly column to be called, simply enough, “On California.” My mission, as one editor described it, was to “explain California to Californians.” I was foolish enough to believe this would be easy.

For nearly a decade, I obsessed on my native state as never before, thinking about the place, traveling through it, reading about it, listening to it, writing about it. Along the way, I’d alternately love it, loathe it and fall back in love with it, over and over again. One thing about California: It can for long stretches be both a boring and boorish place, too full of itself and its many gilded wonders. And then the ground starts to shake.

“Puerto del Mar,” by Emil Kosa Sr., Malibu, circa 1918



to begin with, right on the edge of the cliff," he said. "I can almost hear them saying, 'Those crazy nuts. Didn't they know this was going to happen?'"

Ah, he said, but let them snicker. They had not taken in his back-porch view. They had not sat there day after day and watched—his blue eyes were sparkling now as he spoke—"the ocean come to life out there. Big fish chasing the smaller fish to the shallows. And the seabirds chasing the fish, with the pelicans diving into the water and the sea gulls trying to see what's going on and steal a fish from pelicans. And the fishermen running down along the beach with their poles, trying to get in on the action, too. Oh, and the sunsets. . . ."

He stopped and smiled serenely. "I'm not going anywhere," he said.

And that, too, is California.

ON THE WALL OF THE OFFICE where I am writing, I've tacked up a few artifacts collected on my California rounds, trinkets that remind me of certain moments, stories. There is a memorial card from the funeral of Harriet Nelson and a pamphlet titled "A Sassy Sampler of Mining Camp Place Names." There is a bright yellow card from the Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce that cheerily suggests: "Say No to Panhandling."

This was from a campaign to crack down on transients and street beggars in the mid-1990s. Several California cities were engaged in similar crusades, a trend that developed, not coincidentally, in the trough of a recession. While in Santa Barbara, I met a panhandler who introduced himself as "Fish"

Pickford, a Fresno artist of note.

The 86-year-old painter had taken me on a tour of the town one afternoon, directing me toward favorite agrarian haunts that had appeared in his paintings—orchards, farmhouses, irrigation canals. More often than not, though, these places had been changed, buried beneath the

"Stockton Harbor," by Paul Sample, Stockton, 1935



## do connect. The timber cut in the far north frames the houses in the San from the coast move to escape prices inflated by the computer economy.

and asked me for a quarter.

"I'm saving up for swimming lessons," he said, "so I can get out of here and go to Hawaii."

He told a complicated story about losing his house and fishing boat in a divorce and landing on the streets, homeless and, eventually, toothless. He said, however, that there had been a court reversal in his favor, that he was expecting to receive a "big piece of change" any day now. I didn't believe a word of it.

About a year or so later, I received a letter from a downtown merchant who had known the panhandler. He said Fish had disappeared from the streets for a while, and then one day drove back into town in a new car, all cleaned up and wearing new clothes. He had bought a new fishing boat, he announced, and was back in business. The check, it seems, had come in.

There is also on the wall a newspaper clipping with the dateline of Weed, a town at the base of Mt. Shasta: "Dying California Town Sees Future in a Prison." There is a replica of the original May 1898 cover of *Sunset* magazine, illustrated with a picture of a sunset over the Golden Gate, before it was spanned with a bridge. And there is a hand-painted card from Rollin

suburban housing tracts that have marched out from Fresno at double-time, headed toward the Sierra foothills. It was the speed of it all that amazed Rollin the most.

"Everything is just faster and faster and faster," he said. "When I was young, it was like a paradise here. You could always see the Sierra, nice blue mountains in the distance. Things were sort of stable. We had a downtown, and that was it. As it started to change, it just rolled faster and faster. Now I ride out to streets I painted on and I can't believe it.

"Rows and rows of houses.

"I get lost.

"I have to look at the street signs to tell me where I am—in my own native country!"

On the back of the card, he'd written a kind note, quoting an unidentified author: "A boy leaves home because everything is too familiar. He returns for the same reason."

In fact, by the time of our visit, I had returned to Fresno, or more accurately, to the valley. In 1998 I left *The Times* and started writing a

*Continued on Page 34*