

# REDWOOD CLASSROOM

Eureka, California, came of age at the peak of our national infatuation with architectural ornament, when money and timber seemed certain to last forever

I told myself I was going for the trees. Humboldt County, in the northwestern corner of California, is part of a narrow five-hundred-mile stretch that is the only place in the world where coast redwoods grow. Nourished by the region's damp, foggy climate, *Sequoia sempervirens* live for a thousand years, slowly gaining in girth and stature until they reach more than three hundred feet tall. "Ambassadors of another time," John

picnic tables, gutters, sewers, and wine casks. Situated on Humboldt Bay, the second-largest harbor on California's famously inhospitable coast, Eureka became a port for lumber schooners picking up cargoes for San Francisco and the rest of the world.

Today the downtown historic district is an appealing mix of residential and commercial buildings built between the 1860s and 1920s. Renovated storefronts are interspersed with

the occasional dilapidated one and with practical places like the Humboldt County Correctional Facility and establishments offering TIRES and TOWING. This is a real place, not too cute or too quaint. Capt. Ulysses S. Grant spent six unhappy months in Eureka beginning in October 1853. There was little action at Fort Humboldt, where he was stationed, and he often rode a mule

rains, what you get are banana slugs. I parked in the lot, walked a quarter-mile or so, stepping over the mustard-colored creatures, and slunk back to the car. Another few miles to the north is Prairie Creek Redwood State Park, a mixed forest so dense that signs posted at the entrance urge drivers to turn on their headlights. A hundred inches of rain fall here each year, and thick moss clings to low-lying branches, as alluring as seaweed. A herd of elk grazes in a meadow, the guidebook promises, and just a few miles ahead is a steep canyon wall covered with ferns. I found the elk, but I turned back before the ferns, less interested in nature, finally, than in exploring the town the redwoods had built.

I told myself I had come to see the trees, but in truth I probably came to see the houses, particularly the William Carson mansion, a resplendent building emblazoned with columns and cornices. I had seen a picture of it years ago and was curious about the California town with the Greek name that had spawned such exuberant woodwork. Now the proud new owner of a modest old house, I was eager to look at the mansion up close.

A native of New Brunswick, Canada, William Carson was one of the first men in California to tackle cutting the huge redwoods. In his day, felling a single tree might take a crew a week. Loggers would first lay a bed of branches or dirt to cushion its fall and then build a scaffolding from which to make their cut. Next they sawed into the massive trunk, hammered in wedges to lean the tree, and let gravity bring it down. Finally the crew would carve it up into sections for teams of oxen to haul to the mills. In 1882 Carson's partner, John Dolbeer, invented the donkey engine, a portable steam-powered winch that could haul



Second Street, in Old Town, leads right to the Carson mansion.

Steinbeck called them. Of the two million acres of redwoods covering northern California when the first settlers came, less than 10 percent remains, and Humboldt County has some of the last surviving groves, protected in a string of state and national parks.

I flew into Eureka, the county seat, named for what a settler shouted on finding a town site to serve the nearby mines. As it turned out, mining didn't make Eureka rich, but the redwoods did. Since it splits easily, takes paint, and doesn't warp or rot, redwood turned out to be good for making practically anything—shingles, barns, piers,

into town to visit the bars. The future hero is "not to be blamed for this," writes D. L. Thornbury, author of a lively 1923 local history, *California's Redwood Wonderland*, "because they were practically the only places to go."

My first morning in town, in fog and rain, I drove forty miles up Highway 101 to Lady Bird Johnson Grove, a preserve of old-growth redwoods near the town of Orick. An hourlong trail leads hikers deep into the forest. When the sun shines, you get shafts of light slanting through the high branches, putting you in mind of the great cathedrals of Europe. When it

trees out of the forest far more efficiently than oxen.

Dolbeer & Carson prospered, and in 1884 William Carson decided to spend some of his earnings on a new house. "If I build poorly, they'll say I am a damn miser," he said. "If I build expensively, they say I'm just trying to show off; so, I guess I'll build it to suit myself." He hired the San Francisco architects Samuel and Joseph C. Newsum, brothers who advocated adapting current styles to California's temperate climate. One way to achieve this, they explained to clients, was with balconies, porches, and verandas "thrown in where least expected, thereby adding to the uniqueness of the design."

Eurekans liked Carson so much they took pride in his house as if it belonged to all of them. Half a century later the WPA guide to California pronounced it "startling. . . Its jagged roof line, visible from almost any quarter of the city, the tortured ornamentation, and the trim paint give it the air of a prop for a Silly Symphony." In our own time the pendulum has swung back: In 1976 the architect G. E. Kidder Smith called it "probably the finest late Victorian exterior in the country, a culmination of profligate fancies haughtily but gloriously dispensed."

**T**he only trouble with the Carson mansion is that you can't go inside (it's a private social club now). But in books available around town you can find color photographs of its rooms. With its Oriental archways and its elaborate door and window moldings, each one turned, carved, and incised within an inch of its life, the interior seems to have been put together with the same abandon as the outside.

The Eureka! Humboldt County Convention & Visitors Bureau on Second Street has a list of addresses of other noteworthy houses in Eureka. You can search them out one by one or simply drive around at random; there's one on practically every block. To get a sense of the workmanship that went into these houses—or your own—visit the Blue Ox Millworks on X Street.

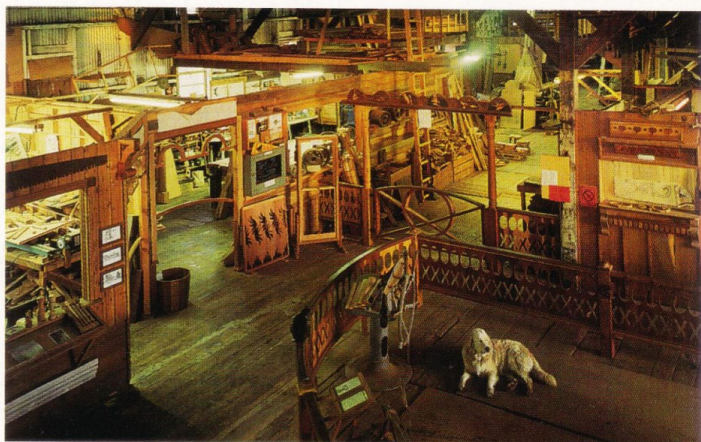
A ramshackle compound at the north edge of town, the place merits just a few lines in the evenhanded guide published locally: "Working Victorian sawmill features antique machinery and self-guided tour." I stopped by for a few minutes and stayed two hours.

"We're a Victorian job shop," Eric Hollenbeck said, meaning that he'll do whatever custom woodwork you need done, like replacing the balustrade for your porch or the gutter for your roof. "There are about eight left in the United States, and we're the only ones that go from log to finished product. I tell the apprentices who work with me, if a guy comes in and shows you something he wants copied, tell him, 'Sure, we've done that hundreds of times.' Then we'll figure out how to do it."

"All this equipment you see I found in the woods around this county," Hollenbeck continued, gesturing in the direction of an 1868 treadle-powered shaper. It had a seat like a tractor, and when he sat down and pedaled, a contoured edge appeared on what had been a straight-edged board.

The X Street site began life in 1904 as a powerhouse for Eureka's trolleys. Hollenbeck bought the property in 1973 after it had been condemned by the city, and he has been slowly improving it ever since. Over the years he has collected a 1903 Heath sander, which can smooth a full-size door, and a 1948 thirty-six-foot bandsaw, which he acquired, he says, "to show the world I'm up-to-date." He has three thousand molding knives for his turn-of-the-century molding machines, so that he can reproduce any profile. Holding up a section of banister for a staircase, Hollenbeck said, "This has to be shaped the same on both sides or your hand feels the difference. So we run the handrail through the machine twice." When I asked him how he could compete with operations like Home

Depot, Hollenbeck said, "A craftsman has to be good and affordable. There has to be a difference between the craftsman's arts and the fine arts." Hollenbeck and his two daughters are designing a molding to go over a picture window that looks out on Humboldt Bay. The molding will be a frieze of hand-carved squares representing local wildlife, and they have agreed on a rule: Each square can take no more than an hour to make.



**A craftsman's paradise: the Blue Ox Millworks on X Street.**

Leading the way to his gypo sawmill (*gypo* is a slang term for "small operator"), Hollenbeck said, "You can tell a new Victorian three blocks away, because it doesn't look as solid. The corbels don't cast the same shadows. You need your own sawmill to reproduce the old dimensions exactly, because these houses were built when a two-by-four really measured two-by-four."

Hollenbeck describes Eureka as a classroom of Victorian architecture, "probably the best classroom in a small area in the world. We had timber, money, craftsmen, architects, and we were building at just the right time." About six thousand visitors a year pass through the Blue Ox Millworks, and Hollenbeck and his wife, Viviana, expect even more will come when they finish assembling what they're calling a historic park. They have optioned sixteen acres next to their mill, where they plan to create a craftsman's village, teaching skills like blacksmithing, silkscreening wallpaper, making brooms and brushes,

and firing tiles and bricks. Visitors can already tour a logging camp on skids, with a bunkhouse, a cookhouse, and a small theater. I admired the theater's seats, which were thin wood veneer with comfortable-looking curved backs. "The state of California gave me those for a dollar apiece," Hollenbeck said cheerfully. "They were upgrading to some orange plastic ones."

**E**ureka offers other old-time diversions. You can take a carriage ride along the waterfront or a sunset cruise around the bay in the 1910 ferry *Madaket*. You can visit the Clarke Memorial Museum, a local history museum housed in an elegant former bank. You can eat like a lumberjack in the Samoa Cookhouse, a place that opened in 1892 to serve meals to employees of the Hammond Lumber Company. Jagged saw blades decorate the walls, and you sit family-style at wooden tables. Six dollars and ninety-five cents bought a breakfast of juice, coffee, eggs, sausage, French toast, biscuits, and gravy; the Cookhouse also serves lunch and dinner.

There are a cluster of antiques stores downtown, as well as the difficult to categorize Restoration Hardware, on Second Street. A local resident started the store in 1979, when he was renovating an old house and couldn't find the right faucets and hinges. Now it has evolved into a nationwide chain selling high-end housewares rather than nuts and bolts. Swing music plays in the background, and you can buy a Mission scone or a retro electric fan. Eric Hollenbeck, who could make twenty dollars last five years, has probably never set foot in the place.

Eureka makes a good base for visiting other Humboldt County attractions, like Arcata, an arty college town built around a central plaza, and Ferndale, a Victorian village in dairy country. There the stores on Main Street stick to the theme: There's a blacksmith shop where you can buy just the right wrought-iron hook for your fern and a clothing store selling picturesque hats and flowing dresses.

Not far from Ferndale is the start of the thirty-three-mile scenic drive through redwood forest known as the Avenue of the Giants. The trees are so straight and tall, the road so romantically curving that I kept pulling over to take a picture. The Avenue of the Giants ends at Phillippsville, near Garberville, where you can have dinner or stay overnight at the Benbow Inn, a resort built in 1926 overlooking the Eel River. The antiques for the lobby have been chosen with flair, and the elegant

dining room looks out on the moss-covered limbs of a venerable black oak tree. With its many fireplaces the Benbow Inn would make a fine place to spend New Year's Eve or Christmas.

"Don't turn back after Garberville," advised Ken Josephs, the bell captain at the Eureka Inn. "The drive is spectacular all the way to Santa Rosa." Next time. Until then, back home in Brooklyn, I think of the Blue Ox Millworks every time my hand runs down the banister.

—Jane Colihan

#### TO PLAN A TRIP

**C**all the Eureka! Humboldt County Convention & Visitors Bureau (1-800-346-3482) for a copy of its guide for visitors and a list of local events, including the Trucker's Christmas Lighted Convoy in early December, when logging trucks parade through downtown Eureka, the Dolbeer Steam Donkey days in April, and the banana slug derby in August. The summer months are the most rain-free.

Eureka seems to have hundreds of places to stay, from inexpensive motels to the opulent and gourmet Carter House Inns (1-800-404-1390). I stayed at the comfortable Tudor-revival Eureka Inn (1-800-862-4906), which has redwood beams in the lobby's ceiling and timeless, universal hotel comforts like a Rib Room and a Palm Lounge. "Are you a baseball fan?" Mr. Josephs asked as I was checking out. "Ted Williams slept in your room."



Trinidad's wild, rocky shore.

Among the many bed-and-breakfasts is one called An Elegant Victorian Mansion (707-444-3144), a handsome 1888 Eastlake-style house built for one of Eureka's mayors. I rang the front bell late one morning and was permitted a fleeting glimpse of the elaborately furnished interior. Ted Williams would not have been comfortable there.

Drive north up the coast to Trinidad and have a meal in a waterfront restaurant overlooking the bay where Spanish explorers and Russian, British, and American traders landed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Eureka's waterfront, protected by sandbars, is calm and undramatic; in Trinidad steep cliffs plunge down to a picturesque rocky cove. Continuing north, the scenic highway 101A takes you right by the ocean.

Drive south to Scotia, a company town established in the late 1880s by the Pacific Lumber company. Pacific Lumber offers tours of its sawmill operation; after reading *The Last Stand* by David Harris, the story of the company's hostile takeover by a profit-hungry Wall Street arbitrageur, I couldn't bring myself to take it.

Finally, consider joining the Save-the-Redwoods League. Conservationists founded the organization in 1918 to try to stop the overcutting of ancient forests by buying back land from the lumber companies. Since then the league has purchased more than 125,000 acres for state and national parks. The league's address is 114 Sansome Street, Room 605, San Francisco, CA 94104.