

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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TRAVEL

Redwoods

Walk among giants of Northern California

A&E

New face

Exhibit shows art of Wifredo Lam, world-famous but little known in U.S.

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COLUMBUS AND THE VALLEY'S HOME PAGE

Redwood highway

Ancient groves along Northern California's U.S. 101 offer a respite from the buzz saw of urban life.

Story by GARY A. WARNER
Photos by MARK RIGHTMIRE
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

If you want perspective to smack you up the side of the head, go to the redwoods.

No, smack isn't the right word. The trees that seem to rocket out of sight don't offer a rude awakening, but a gentle, beautiful reminder. Life is shorter than you imagine. Mountains may be forever. But redwoods are alive. They grow, they live, they die — it just might take a thousand years or so.

All the books of Zen meditation bring me less peace than I feel while sitting among the redwoods at Richardson Grove State Park on a quiet afternoon, with nothing but the sound of the wind through the branches.

There are the young redwoods rising from the ferns; the mature kings of the stand scarred with black swaths where lightning struck; the toppled old giant gathering moss on the forest floor. Many years ago, my then-preschooler son, surveying the scene, turned to me with a comment worthy of a wise man.

"Big trees fall down."



SOFT LANDING: A carpet of needles, bark and decomposed plant material provides a springy walking surface for a family in Humboldt Redwoods State Park.

SEE REDWOODS • PAGE 6

REDWOODS: Where lives are measured in millenniums

FROM PAGE 1

1 IN 20 LEFT

Driving up Highway 101, I pass through Willits, the "Gateway to the Redwoods." What a small empire it has become.

Once, more than 2 million acres of old-growth redwoods grew on the north coast between San Francisco and the Oregon border. The gold rush brought legions of loggers beginning in 1850.

By the time of the creation of the Save-the-Redwoods League in 1918, just over a hundred thousand acres were left. Philanthropists bought up pockets of redwoods, which were named after them - like the Rockefeller Forest. State parks were set aside after World War I, followed by the creation of Redwood National Park in 1968. The park was expanded in 1977, and in 1994, the national and state parks were recognized as a World Heritage Site.

Though 95 percent of the north coast redwoods are gone, there is still big money to be made from old giant trees, and the cutting of old-growth stands in private hands remains controversial.

One of the most recent battles was over my childhood haunt, Hartsook Inn. The lodge smack on the El River, just south of Richardson Grove, is where my family stayed throughout the 1960s. Playing shuffleboard with Dad. Swimming with Mom in the El River. Hiking up to the redwood groves on the hill behind our cabin.

After years of struggling, the owners shut down and talked about logging the huge trees on the property.

The Save-the-Redwoods League bought them out in 1998 and plans to sell the property to the Heartwood Institute, a new-age-style bodywork and massage school. The redwoods - including the 13-foot-diameter Hartsook Giant - will be protected. An apparent happy ending for the old place.

In the early days, Highway 101 was still mostly a two-lane - hard to believe it was at one time the main link between San Francisco and Seattle. My brother and I would have to hold hands to dash across the highway to the river, making sure that one of the many lumber trucks wasn't rumbling around the curve.

Timber was part of life then. Most trips, we would go to the Pacific Lumber Co. mill in Scotia to watch a high-powered hose strip the bark off massive logs before they were put through the spinning saws. The gift shop sold furniture, toys - even redwood toothpicks.

The sale of the mill in 1986 to a Houston-based investment group backed by notorious "junk" bond financiers Ivan Boesky and Michael Milken accelerated local logging, changing the equilibrium in the area. Critics charged the company with the equivalent of strip mining. The company countered that the state and environmentalists were improperly undermining their business. The lumber company went bankrupt. The whole operation - including the town itself - is up for sale. I have fond memories of Scotia, but I don't go there anymore.

BENBOW INN

When Hartsook fell on hard times, my family started staying at the swankier Benbow Inn. It's a 1920s-era, Tudor-style inn that had been a favorite of Clark Gable, Charlie Chaplin and others who motored north on vacation. There's always a roaring fire in the lobby and

sherry on the nightstand. It's where I took my Boston-born wife for a romantic trip when I was trying to lure her to live on the West Coast.

It's where my kids learned to skip rocks on the lake next door. We'd ramble over to the old stone arch bridge, which acted like an echo chamber for our hoots. My parents just celebrated my father's 80th birthday with a trip there. Despite the increase in noise over the years from the widening of Highway 101, the lodge remains a cozy, friendly place that exudes the peace I prize in the redwoods.

To liven things up, we usually visit Garberville, with its funky cafes and earth-mother-type shops, fueled in part by the "entrepreneurs" who were said to have bought their new four-wheel-drive vehicles on profits from illicit things that go up in smoke. I remember one Thanksgiving night when the Garberville

radio station played an extraordinarily long tape of a Grateful Dead concert, so that its staff could go home for dinner and get back before it finished.

AVENUE OF THE GIANTS

No trip, be it in 1965 or 2008, would be complete without the 32-mile drive up the Avenue of the Giants. This is the oldest of old Highway 101, back when engineers didn't lightly uproot the giants, but instead swung the road around them, more blacktop path than highway.

The route starts near the Chimney Tree in Phillipsville and winds into Humboldt Redwoods State Park, where the best groves are found between the hamlets of Miranda and Pepperwood. My kids love Myers Flat, where they are able to climb around the Two-Story Tree House, then jump back in the car to watch as Dad gingerly guides the station wagon through the

near Klamath to the north. The Riverwood Inn in Phillipsville is a classic 1937 roadhouse along the Avenue of the Giants that is the best spot for lunch (or a beer) along the way.

The attractions and inns are fun, but my favorite thing to do along the drive is to pick an empty turnout (there are dozens along the way) and walk one of the groves. On my last visit, I was alone. It was spring and few cars were on the highway. It was wet, muddy, empty and silent except for the occasional woodpecker or roar of a SUV speeding by. But most of the time, the peacefulness was there amid the ancient trees. From childhood to middle age to whatever later years bring, I know the places are there. I can return again and again. The redwoods will be waiting.

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Shrine Drive-Thru Tree. This tree has a natural cleave in its base that was widened in pre-environmental movement days so that a small-to-medium-size car can squeeze through. There are two other drive-through trees - both created by cutting: the Chandelier Drive-Thru Tree, to the south near Leggett, and Tour Thru Tree

More than trees

Here are a few places on the way to – and beyond – the heart of southern Humboldt County's redwood country.

BY GARY A. WARNER
REGISTER TRAVEL EDITOR

My personal redwood country runs roughly from Leggett to Scotia on and around Highway 101. But sometimes I drive up from Oakland or even head all the way up to Crescent City. Here are a few of my favorite stops along the way.

TO THE SOUTH

Oakland: I usually fly into Oakland, where fares are cheaper. Unless you want to go into San Francisco, Oakland is just as easy a route north, with Interstate 880 to Interstate 580 taking you across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge to link up with Highway 101 in Marin County. Of course you can take the Bay Bridge through San Francisco and across the Golden Gate Bridge. It's a more picturesque route, but the traffic can be a killer.

Sebastopol: Wine country is usually a completely different trip for me, so if I get a late start out of the Bay Area, I usually spend the night in Petaluma or, more frequently, Sebastopol. It's 50 miles north of San Francisco and a bit off Highway 101, but the funky town of 7,800 is worth a short detour (www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us).

Willits: The gateway to the redwoods, I'll often stop here for the night on my drive up. It has plenty of motels and markets to fill up with supplies before heading into the redwoods (www.willits.org) or 707-459-7910). It's also one of the spots where you can pick up the Skunk Train, the former lumber line that runs down the coast to Fort Bragg (www.skunktrain.com or 800-866-1690).

Shelter Cove: A winding side trip takes you down to an isolated resort communi-

ty that's also famous as the northernmost point where the San Andreas fault touches dry land. The relocated Cape Mendocino lighthouse is here. This is a great "end of the road" town whose planners once envisioned many residents using the tiny airstrip as the main way of getting in and out of town. (www.sheltercove-lostcoast.com).

TO THE NORTH

Ferndale: I am a big fan of the redwoods in southern Humboldt County. But if you are heading north, this pretty, Victorian-era town with a downtown on the National Register of Historic Places is a great place to stop for the night. (www.victorianferndale.org/chamber). There's an outstanding B&B in the gingerbread Mansion (www.gingerbread-mansion.com) or 707-786-4000), and quirky sights like trees trimmed to look like gumdrops on Ocean Street.

Eureka: The metropolis of the redwoods, it once had nine sawmills. The lumber barons' homes are still around, including some that are B&Bs. Have lunch at Samoa Cookhouse (707-442-1659), one of the last logging camp restaurants still in business. I'll pick up a few things at the original Restoration Hardware on Second Street (417 Second St., www.restorationhardware.com or 707-443-3152), which unfortunately has become much like all the other Restoration Hardware (oh, to have another shot at that windup Soviet submariners clock that I almost bought circa 1991). Most of all, I spend hours in Eureka Books (426 Second St., www.eurekabooksellers.com or 707-444-9593). On my last visit, I dove into a trove of

books, including a trove of 8300).

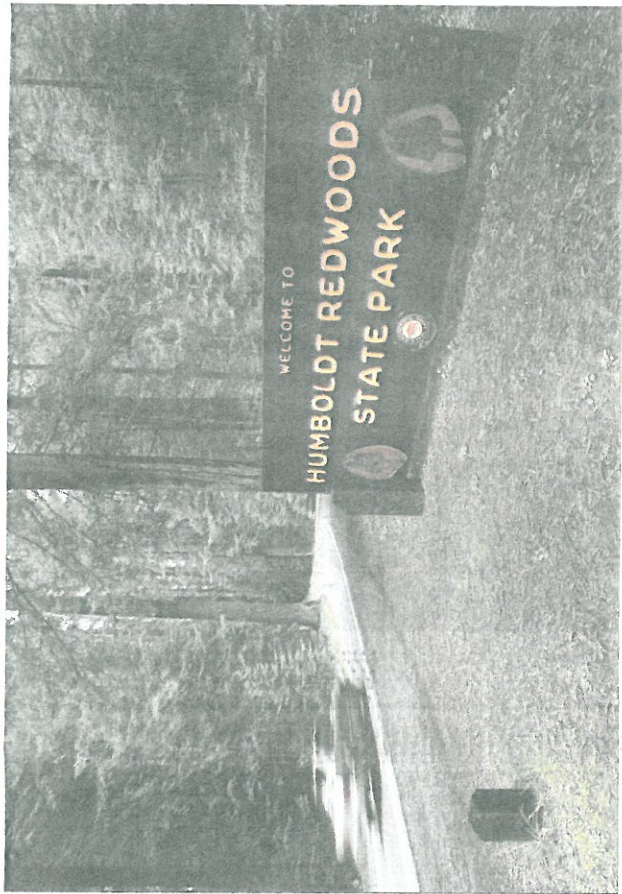
Baedeker tour books from the early 1900s.

Arcata: I like to stroll around downtown, whose old, neon-lit bars and circa-1915 **Hotel Arcata** (G and Ninth streets, www.hotelarcata.com or 800-344-1221) make the place look like a character out of central casting for a movie on 1950s small-town life. The only thing spoiling the effect is the legion of panhandlers, who add an uncomfortable if not especially dangerous slice of urban life to the otherwise laid-back atmosphere (www.arcatamainstreet.com or 707-822-4500).

Klamath: I have great affection for **Trees of Mystery** (www.treesofmystery.net or 800-638-3389), a classic tourist trap I've visited since I was a kid. I can still remember the first time I saw the 49-foot statue of Paul Bunyan with Babe the Blue Ox out front. There's a short trail through some mildly offbeat attractions. In the

days of steel bumpers, you would return to your car to find that workers had attached a bumper placard with cables. We didn't mind – it was part of the experience.

Crescent City: Most of Redwood National and State Parks is actually north of Eureka, and for many people, this is the true redwood area – with the largest groupings of redwood stands (sometimes accessible only through steep hikes). Humboldt, Lagooms State Park and Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park are results of some of the earliest efforts to save the redwoods. Crescent City is an often-foggy former lumber town that in many ways is more connected to nearby Oregon than California (www.northcalifornia.net or 800-343-8300).



PROTECTION: Most of the remaining large trees are in public reserves like Humboldt Redwoods State Park. Decades of logging mowed down around 95 percent of old-growth stands.

CHECKLIST

GETTING THERE: The nearest airport is Eureka/Arcata Airport, which is served by United Express and Horizon Air. It's also possible to start further north than the section of the redwoods I favor, by flying into Crescent City Airport, served by United Express. Most visitors fly into the Bay Area and drive north.

HIKING: The national and state parks have over 200 miles of walking and hiking trails. The Little Bald Hills Trail, Mill Creek Horse Trails and Orick Trail allow horses. Bicycle access is limited. The shuttle bus that once operated in the parks has been discontinued, so make arrangements to get around before you arrive.

CAMPING: Camping is available throughout the state parks. Many of the more popular spots can be reserved by calling 800-444-7275 or going online at

www.reserveamerica.com. **LODGING:** Benbow Inn, Yenable Tudor-style inn that's been a stop for travelers since 1926. 445 Lake Benbow Drive, Garberville, 800-355-3301 or www.benbowinn.com. Rates range from \$90 to \$405 per night, depending on the time of year (summer is high season). room size and location. The hotel operates a nearby nine-hole, par-35 golf course.

• Benbow Valley RV Park & Cottages. Affiliated with Benbow Inn, the site offers 100 pull-through and back-in recreational vehicle sites, along with some cottages. Summer RV rates start at \$47 per night (more for premium sites and during holidays). Cottages from \$210 per night. 7000 Benbow Drive, Garberville. 866-236-2697 or www.benbowinn.com.

• Best Western Humboldt House Inn, Nice motel with great map of the old inn south of Garberville.

the redwoods painted on the side of one building. Large, clean rooms. Easy walking to shops and restaurants. 701 Redwood Drive, Garberville, www.humboldt.houseinn.com or 707-923-2771. Rates from \$129, but much higher during peak times.

• Miranda Gardens Resort. Family tradition always takes me to Benbow, but I've inspected this nice little collection of cottages in Miranda, just north of Garberville near the southern end of the Avenue of the Giants. It's charming and low-key. Rates range from \$105 to \$265. Many units have kitchens, and there is a market on the property. 6766 Avenue of the Giants, www.mirandagardens.com or 707-943-3011.

DINING: Benbow Inn Dining Room. Even if you stay elsewhere, consider having dinner at the old inn south of Garberville.

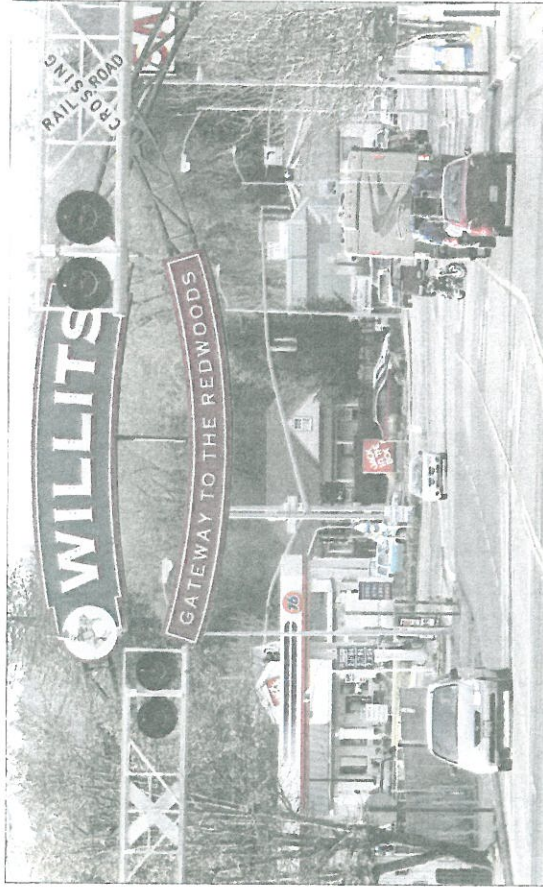
www.benbowinn.com or 800-355-3301.

- Woodrose Cafe. Simple coffee shop with odd hours. Call ahead. No credit cards. 911 Redwood Drive, Garberville, 707-923-3191.
- Riverwood Inn, 2828 Avenue of the Giants, 707-943-1930 or www.riverwoodinn.com.

MORE READING: "Best Short Hikes in Redwood National and State Parks," by Jerry and Gisela Ronde (Mountaineer Books, \$15.95), lists everything from gentle strolls to rigorous hillside hikes along the rugged coast.

MORE INFO: Redwood Coast visitors center: 800-346-3482 or www.redwoodvisitor.org.

- Redwood National and State Parks: 707-464-6101 or www.nps.gov/redw.
- Richardson Grove State Park: 707-247-3318 or www.parks.ca.gov.



"GATEWAY TO THE REDWOODS": Willits is among the towns along U.S. 101 that offer shops, lodging and meals for tree tourists. Plus you can catch a ride here on the Skunk Train.

PHOTOS BY: MARK RIGHTMIRE, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



A HIKE AND A SWIM: The Eel River isn't far from these specimens in Richardson Grove State Park.



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE TREES: A set of road signs offers a plethora of choices to redwood seekers along U.S. 101.