

Road 27 and Yolo County's Rural Landscapes By Dennis Dingemans

This article examines what can be seen when traveling along County Road 27 and provides historical perspectives on rural landscapes along the route. The road extends 20 miles from its western beginning in the rolling foothills (1/2 mile west of Road 88) to its eastern end at the Yolo Bypass levee where Road 27 would be. I selected this slice of Yolo's rural/agricultural scene to write about because, since it is half way between Woodland (Road 25) and Davis (Road 29), it is likely to stay agricultural forever as part of any separation buffer created to prevent the two towns from sprawling into each other. During mid-April I re-familiarized myself with the area by driving three round trips along Road 27, stopping to consult with residents and enterprises along the way. Historical maps from the UCD library and the Heidrick Agricultural History Museum were also helpful.

The terrain along this transect is flat and steadily slopes eastward/downward from a high of 185' (feet above sea level) at Road 87 down to 20 feet of elevation at the base of the Yolo Bypass levee. The road's slope parallels the terrain descent taken by Cache Creek (six miles north), by Putah Creek (six miles south), and by Willow Slough (located half way between Cache and Putah). Indeed, Willow Slough – the waterway few Yoloans know about—follows along Road 27's central 10-mile section. A corridor of stream-bank trees and bushes makes it easy to see Willow Slough as it meanders eastward from the foothills. Visible from the road are other watercourses that sometimes provide dense vegetation. The most important of these are the Yolo Central Canal, a 100-year-old irrigation system built right next to Road 27, and Moore's Ditch, a 150 year old canal that moves irrigation water a dozen miles southeastward from Cache Creek to near Road 98 where it meets both Road 27 and Willow Slough.

A most interesting roadside scene is at the west end of Road 27 where it begins as a curving unpaved track that then crosses a one-lane bridge over Union School Slough; nearby are derelict orchards, groves, and a complicated hydrological construction from about 1910 which allows the Union School streambed to cross under the Winters Canal as it supplies irrigation water into the start of the Central Canal. Some 200 beehives there this month add to the bird-filled sound-scape. By contrast, Road 27's eastern-most five miles have little roadside vegetation to delight the eye. From Road 102 to the by-pass levee the plowed agricultural fields come right up to the edge of the pavement and not a roadside tree or bush can be seen.

Land subdivision and settlement happened fast after 1849 and then stabilized in a pattern of mostly large land holdings. In 1879 (as shown on maps in the DePue Atlas) there were already 39 landowners in the 2-mile wide corridor (including all properties within a mile of Road 27 that touch the road). Their 19,000 acres of land had only one owner with less than 100 acres. The 15 small owners holding 101-to-310 acres had 14% of the total. The 19 owners holding 320-to-1000 acres had 52% of the total. The four bigs (Chapman, 2040; Harlan, 2040; Fredericks, 1120; and Scott, 1120) each owned 1001+ acres along Road 27 in 1879 together had 34% of the land.

Little had changed – except for the actual owners – by 2008 when the Agri-Lands map showed a similar pattern of 44 landowners in mostly large holdings. In 2008 the 3 bigs (Connaway, 3200; Heidrick, 2100; and Kasbergen, 2100) owning 1000+ acres each

had 41% of all land in the 2 mile corridor width. The 14 who own between 320 and 1000 acres each had together 41% of the land. The 13 who own between 100 and 310 acres each had together 14% of the land. The 14 who hold less than 100 acres today all have at least 23 acres, so the County is not permitting Road 27 to be developed as ranchette exurban housing.

With only about 40 landowners along the corridor at any time, it is no surprise that few homes have ever been built here. The 1908 and 1915 maps show just two-dozen farmsteads along the road and in 2009 there are just 35 dwelling units adjoining Road 27. And these houses are not a very impressive lot. This isn't and never was an area of agricultural mansions. Today only 2 of the 35 would be called grand or impressive, and one of them – the porticoed Beeman/Bullard house at Road 99 – is on the county's inventory of historic homes. Much more common are the 9 mobile or modular houses and the 11 ramshackle or derelict housing units. There are another 13 modest homes that would be described as “middle class” in their size and maintenance.

Few of the 45 houses/yards today look like thriving farmsteads from the era of a hundred years ago when Yolo County's typical farming unit included clustered farm buildings and produced a mix of field crops, orchard products, and animals. Only two places on Road 27 today seem to have cattle, and one is an odd herd of about 40 Holstein steers and bulls. Four places seem to have horses along Road 27, and these appear to total less than a score. Three farmyards have sheep and the only place with visible poultry has a small flock of Emu. I didn't see a pig yard. Five barns survive, none in good condition, and all seeming to be used as equipment storage sheds. Three tank-houses can be seen, but one is truncated, one is attached to a garage, and the most beautiful (a white “Yolo Style” with tall, tapering base) is NW of Road 27/89.

Field crops predominate and only half a dozen (new) orchards are to be found, most in the western half. Grapes haven't appeared yet in any numbers. Barley, wheat, and oats are seen from the road's one end to the other, with oats being cut now for green forage. Alfalfa and other hay crops are about as prominent as are grains. Just two fields each have been already planted with corn or with tomatoes this early in the season. Ridged paddy fields for rice abound both at the road's east and west ends, but none are the dramatic curvilinear form and none yet have rice planted in them.

One very large eucalyptus grove, planted as a fuel crop in 1985, stands out in the tree-scape. It is on the Wilkendorf Place side-road between #94 and #95, where a member of the family pointed out that decades ago his grandmother had planted the adjacent roadside corridor of 200 eucalypts. There are about 4 miles of roadside “avenues of trees” on Road 27, the most impressive being the olives and the mixed-hardwoods ruderal plantings between Road 100 and Road 93.

The most dynamic parts of the agricultural landscape along Road 27 are a half dozen of enterprises that deserve particular mention for their economic contributions or for their appearance. Various of these six support the county's emerging emphasis on organic ag and sustainability, remind us of a near-century of seed and seedling production, and show us the regional and interstate connections of our farmers (and farm-related entrepreneurs).

First, is Hedgerow Farms with offices 150' north of #27 and #89. Owner John Anderson developed his 30-year interest in habitat restoration into a thriving business selling native grass seeds. The roadsides adjacent to his 600 acres of land are verdant

with shrubs and bushes and young trees as well as the grasses and flowering plants that are his core business. This month he is growing a large field of lavender and a field of poppies that are a delight to the eye. Hedgerow Farms gives tours of their fields and their delightfully crowded five-acre farmyard. Their current price list contains 105 grasses, sedges, rushes, and forbs.

Second, is the large cluster of new greenhouses between #88 and #89. Westside Transplant, headquartered in Firebaugh, started constructing their branch operation here two years ago and opened for business in March of 2008. They sell young tomato, melon, broccoli, and other vegetable seedlings to commercial growers, with many organic applications and some direct marketing of eating tomatoes etc.

Third, is the “Winters Dryer Plant” of Sunsweet Growers (of Yuba City). Just west of I-505, this complex of 8 big sheds and warehouses has been expanding since 1959. Fruit and nut boxes are stacked high in the yards and various sorting machines must be fun to watch during the harvest season.

Fourth, is the two-year-old headquarters office and high-tech research facilities complex build by Cal/West Seeds at the se corner of Roads 27 and 98. This attractive new physical plant replaced previous scattered facilities in Woodland. From this site the thriving company controls branch plants in Wisconsin, Washington, and California. Cal/West Seeds sells a great variety of seeds, but alfalfa varieties (another valuable county crop) are their best sellers.

Fifth, is the headquarters of the J. H. Meek and Sons farming enterprises located at the se corner of Roads 27 and 99. The family has farmed in various locations in the county for over a hundred years, but this site is now their control-point for thousands of owned and rented acres in three counties. The modest original residential cottage is dwarfed amidst huge indoor and outdoor equipment storage areas. Three massive, distinctive structures (all over 60x150’) were built in parallel: a 70-year-old wooden barn, a 40 year old corrugated metal barn, and a contemporary brightly-painted metal shed. Their office staff is happy to arrange a conversation with the 90+ years old senior Meek and they display their pride in newly adopted high-yield tomato varieties developed by research here in Yolo County.

Sixth, is the Medlock Field operation of Growers Air Service located between Willow Slough and Road 100. Started in 1964 by a Davis-area pilot with international experience, the field’s hangars house 6 planes for aerial applications to agriculture fields. One of their bi-planes, a design based on local innovations, just got donated to the Smithsonian. They are the biggest ag air service in the Sacramento Valley and their work area is displayed cleverly by the office wall’s 8’ by 12’ assemblage of 100+ topographic maps (expertly fit together, of course, as you would expect in a business where precision is required). Servicing the Yolo rice industry was Medlock airfield’s main original business. Road 27’s other past contributions to the rice industry are still visible in the now-derelict Rice Growers Association of California mill (best seen from highway 113) and the abandoned rice warehouse at appropriately named “Arroz” (Spanish for rice) at Road 89.