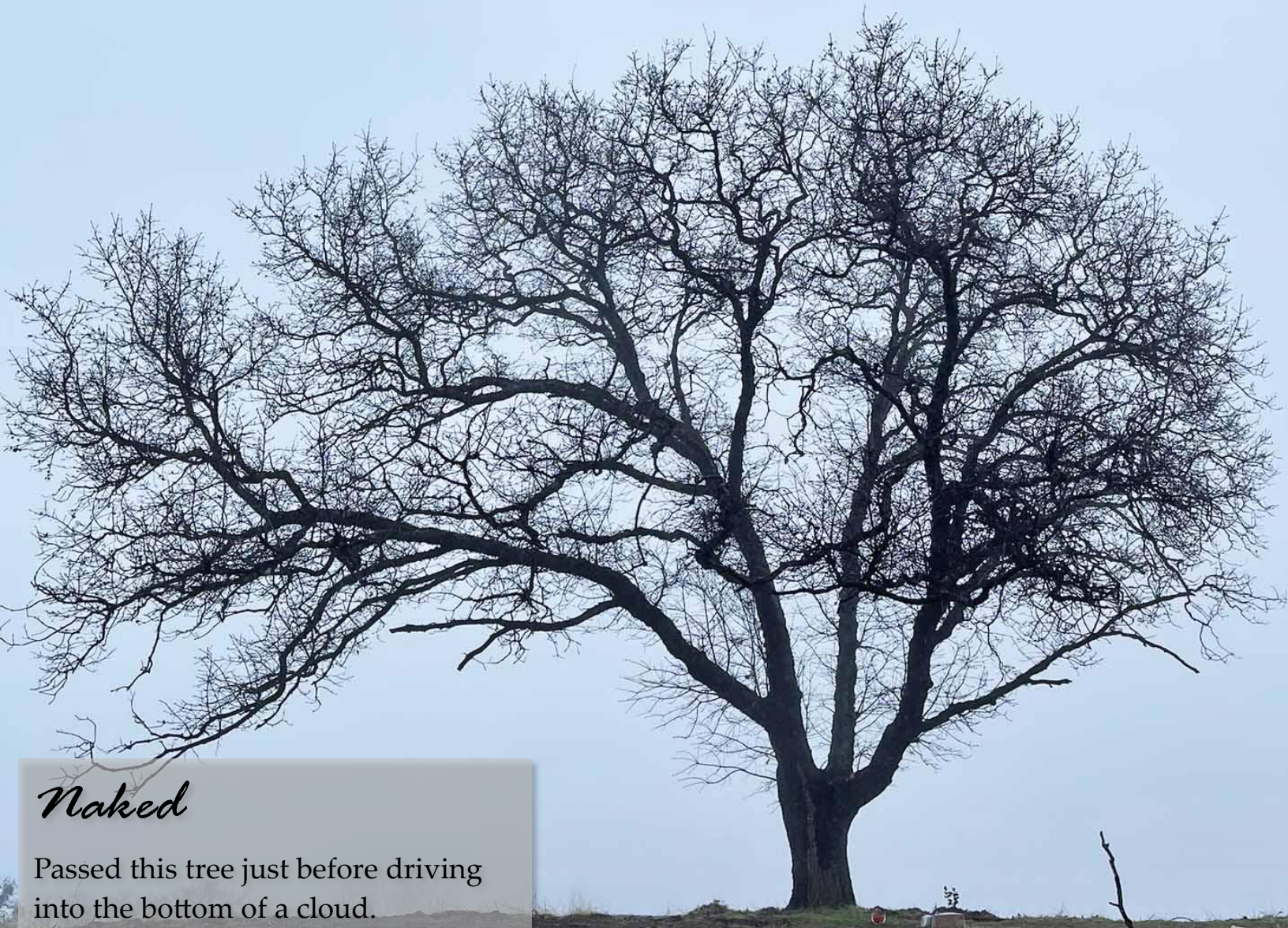


The New Year News

7 January 2025

Joseph D. Grant County Park, San Jose, California

*All the leaves are brown
and the sky is gray*



Naked

Passed this tree just before driving
into the bottom of a cloud.

All the leaves are brown, and the sky is gray

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them

There's barely enough winter in the Bay Area to write about, but what little there is can be subtly spectacular.

It's usually here by mid-December, when the brown leaves the Mamas & the Papas sang about in the 1965 song "California Dreamin'" have finally fallen. In drought years — many of our years — the occasionally gray skies will finally yield to daily blue not long after Washington and Lincoln get their birthday cards.

The subtly spectacular aspect of our winter is that the gray skies bring green life to the arid brown — romantics say it's "gold" — of spring, summer and fall.

Not in the valleys, where irrigation systems support year-round urban color in non-native lawns and flower beds. But on the ranges of hills and mountains that drain winter's clouds and fog of enough moisture to invigorate the natural landscape for a couple of months.

That has begun to happen in the Diablo Range, which forms the eastern wall of the Santa Clara Valley.

I recently took a two-hour drive there above the city as the clouds began to lift after an overnight rain. It was 18 miles / 30 kilometers from sea level to the Lick Observatory atop Mount Hamilton at 4,265 feet / 1,300 meters, the highest point in the county and still enshrouded by cloud when I arrived (next page). Most of that drive was within the Joseph D. Grant County Park.

The twisting road is a more tedious drive than if it had been built today. But in 1875, when Santa Clara County coughed up \$70,000 to build it, it wasn't designed for motorists. It was to enable horses to drag wagons loaded with materials for the world's largest — at the time — telescope to the mountaintop.

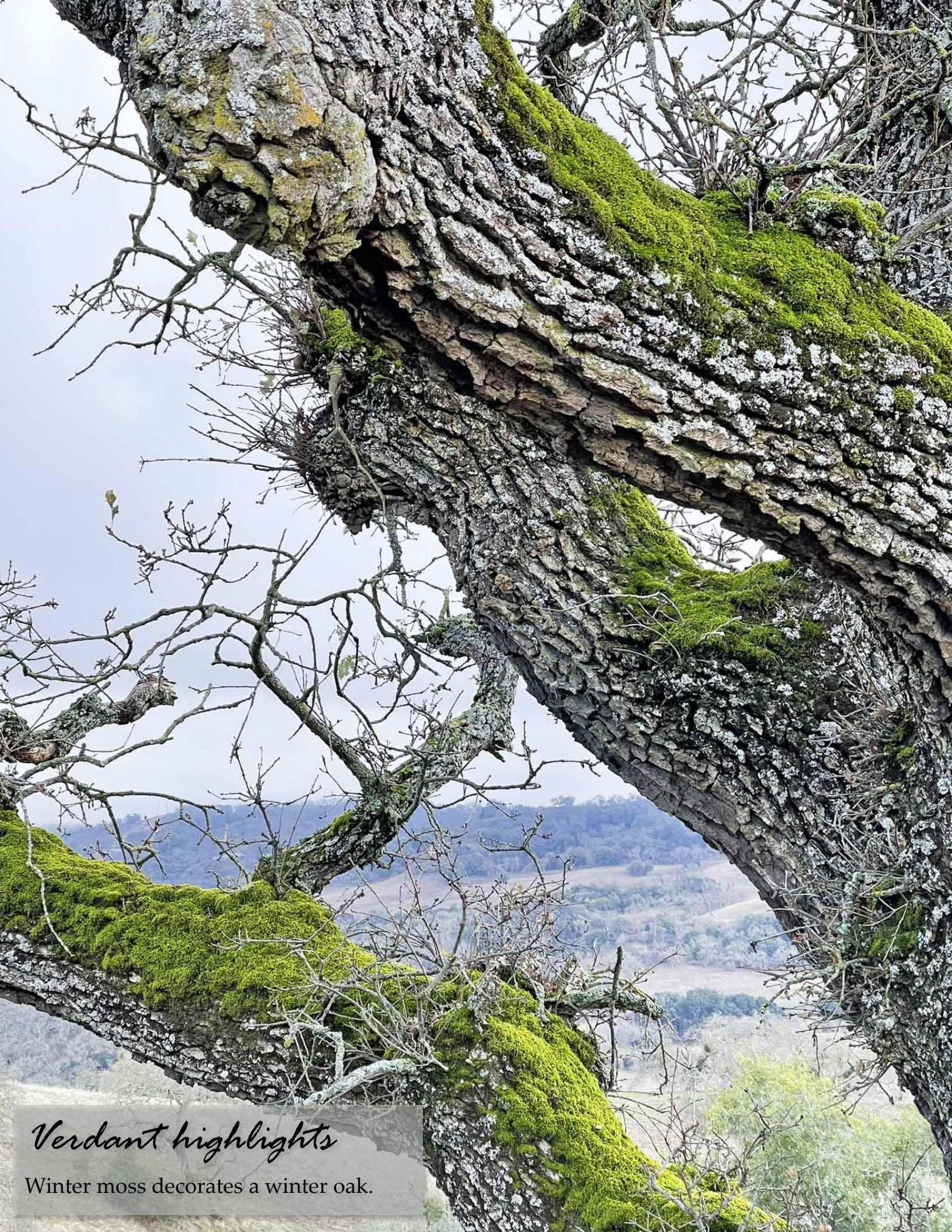
The barrel of the telescope was 57 feet / 17.4 meters long and weighed 25,000 pounds / 11,340 kilograms. Each of the two glass lenses was 3 feet (about a meter) in diameter. They were cast in France, transported to Boston by ship, where they were ground and polished, and then shipped to California by rail. One lens broke somewhere along the way, and it took the French factory 18 attempts over eight years to craft a replacement.

Although the original telescope and the others later installed at the observatory have made significant scientific discoveries (more about that in the "Notes on photos" on Page 9), the historic significance is the county's initiative in supporting the world's first mountaintop observatory. It was the first step toward turning the Santa Clara Valley into what it is today: Silicon Valley.



Nothing to observe

It's hard to see the domed building housing the original telescope at the Lick Observatory through the fog.



Verdant highlights

Winter moss decorates a winter oak.



Luncheon salad

Grazing cattle feast on a
Diablo Range hillside.



Halls Valley

Clouds hover above the largest valley in Joseph D. Grant County Park.



Santa Clara Valley

The view west from Mount Hamilton Road across San Jose neighborhoods in Evergreen Valley, Willow Glen and Blossom Valley to the Santa Cruz Mountains.



Clouds and mistletoe

Looking southwest across Halls Valley.

Notes on photos

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them

NAKED and VERDANT HIGHLIGHTS — Four species of oak trees live in Joseph D. Grant County Park: live oak, blue oak, valley oak and California black oak. I do not know what kind of oak either of the trees in these two pictures are. But each, in its way, illustrates what winters in our wild natural world are like. One is a tree stripped of its foliage by changing seasons and the other a spot of living color on a tree awaiting its own renewal.

NOTHING TO OBSERVE — There are larger telescopes today at the Lick Observatory than its original refractor, and they use better technology — mirrors instead of lenses. The Shane instrument, the largest, is a 10-foot / 3-meter reflecting telescope built in 1959. But in 1892, the original telescope found Almalthea, the fifth of Jupiter's 95 recognized moons and the first discovered since Galileo saw the first four in 1610 through a telescope made with spectacle lenses. The original telescope is no longer used for research but for teaching astronomy students from nine University of California campuses. There are nine active research telescopes at the observatory with about 100 astronomers who apply for telescope time using the equipment. That includes the Automated Planet Finder, called the RPF for “rocky planet finder.” It has found 115 planets beyond our solar system — “exoplanets” — since 1995.

LUNCHEON SALAD — This land was once inhabited by Tule elk, a species of small elk once widespread in California but now mostly in the Point Reyes National Seashore in Marin County. The elk migrated away from this area after a 15,000-acre / 6,070-hectare Mexican land grant awarded in 1839 to Jose de Jesus Bernal, who called it Rancho Cañada de Pala. He brought in cattle. Cattle grazing today is subject to a park resource management plan, but hikers frequently encounter them on park trails.

HALLS VALLEY — The largest valley in the park and the one in which Joseph Grant built his ranch house is named for lawyer Frederic Hall. He is the lawyer to whom Bernal gave some of the rancho in payment for registering the property as required by U.S. law after California joined the Union.

SANTA CLARA VALLEY — This shot covers the widest part of the valley, at about 15 miles, to the Santa Cruz Mountains in the distance. Once covered with orchards that spawned canneries like Del Monte and Sunsweet, two forces combined to erase fields and cover them with suburban houses. One force was political, led by San Jose City Manager Dutch Hamman and backed by San Jose Mercury publisher Joe Ridder, that promoted municipal sprawl between 1950 and 1969. The city expanded from 17 square miles / 44 square kilometers to 137 mi² / 355 km² by adding land through 1,377 annexations and more than quadrupling its population to a half-million by 1970. The other force was technological. The houses were filled by employees of high-tech industries in the new silicon-based semiconductor industry fed by engineers from Stanford and the University of California.

CLOUDS AND MISTLETOE — This view looks in another direction from the same vantage point as the **HALLS VALLEY** photo.

WASHBURN BARN — The barn sits at the upper end of Halls Valley, which is the end visitors from San Jose first enter. The Washburn trail, steepest of the park's 51 miles / 82 kilometers of trails, begins here and climbs over the cloud-shrouded ridge behind to enter Deer Valley and intersect with the Cañada de Pala trail.



Washburn Barn

Clouds begin to lift from the
Halls Valley floor.