

Willys Peck,
A Tribute

On behalf of my family thank you for coming. Over the years my father has been fortunate enough to receive recognition and honor for his many contributions and now our family would like to have our turn. As his chauffeur in recent years whenever we would drive into town he would remark how lucky he was to live in Saratoga. He wrote extensively and lovingly about the orchards of his youth and the eternal beauty of the hills. My father is a classic example of how the land- our hills and passing orchards- and our environment- both family and community- can deeply and artistically create our lives and our imaginations. His biography of place provided a life-long view into how he related to and served his community. What he experienced in his childhood in this small agricultural town grew with him into adulthood and flourished.

He was the second son of Llewellyn Peck, and Lida O'Bannon Peck. Born in China the son of a doctor missionary, my grandfather was the local town newspaper editor, an active community member (they called him an "institution"), a poet and, of course, he wore a green eye shade. When we were little my grandmother told us stories about being a student at Mills and watching San Francisco burn during the quake and fire of 1906. She graduated in 1908 and also from Cal in 1909. In Saratoga she taught creative writing and gave book reviews. She also read to her sons inspiring my father to declare he had learned to read by the Pooh Method.

This love of words developed into a career as a journalist and into his everyday signature wit. When he left for work in the late afternoon to the San Jose Mercury, he would recite, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." When his son-in-law, Don Rainville, left for work at the crack of dawn in the wee morning hours, he called that time, "Don's early light." In the morning our family would scan the paper for evidence of his headline skill. Some favorites are I'll Take Cajun if It's Ok Bayou, or Nature Sends her Egrets or a photo caption on an auto accident, That's the Way the Mercedes Benz. His family's longstanding tradition of reading aloud Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol on Christmas Eve became our family's tradition, too. What I learned from my father is that words count. His delight and deftness with language enabled him to craft a sentence, a letter, an article, a speech in such a way as to elevate and illuminate the subject. Once when I was living in Italy, he sent some money with a note that here was something to keep the wolves from the door. He added, but if the she-wolf has twin boys in tow, think twice.

As a child, my father's whole family participated and acted in the neighborhood theater productions behind the Saratoga Inn in the Theatre in the Glade. Later with marriage and a new house down the creek from the Inn, the first thing my dad built was his own amphitheatre, the Theatre on the Ground. In late summer with the sound of the crickets and the frogs in the creek below as background, I remember watching from the edge of the stage as my father and his beloved colleagues from the Merc rehearsed and performed- Histrionics as he called them. He gave us a love for theater, especially Shakespeare, and quoted the bard often, even at the dinner table with the soy sauce: "Tamari and tamari and tamari Creeps in this petty pace from day to day."

As a child my father became known for his imitation of bird calls and made the ladies' Club circuit until his voice changed. He loved to sing. At Cal he joined the Glee Club and made life long friends there who still gather the Saturday before Christmas to carol to shelters, our elders and convalescing friends. Our families have grown up together and cherish this tradition. The repertoire includes stunning four part harmony of familiar carols and Bach's "Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light." The evening also ends in a circle and intertwined hands singing Cal Songs. One of the second generation admitted it took a while to realize that "All Hail Blue and Gold" wasn't a Christmas carol.

What I learned from my father is how an artistic life deepens, enlivens and sustains and in that respect, he never grew old. His creativity served him to the very end, dashing off a birthday poem the week before he died. I think one of the secrets of his childhood was that he played. There are stories about the creek and the orchards, about constructing and inventing. As a dad he built an airplane for us to climb on and the ever evolving train. And we played and played and played. He was always creating- a new script, a poem, a building project. He found the perfect partner in my mother, who was a kindergarten teacher and a true believer in the power of play. Together they created a home and garden that continues to nourish the creative spirit in all of us.

My father lived a life of gratitude. In his later years he and my mother would walk slowly around the garden three times before tea and enjoy the beautiful fruits of their many years together. They rested halfway in a rocker for two overlooking the creek. They would sit there admiring the view. When I asked what they were doing, the answer was, "Counting our blessings." I am grateful for the many gifts my father gave me and to my family. It is truly remarkable to hear about the place he held in your lives. We are all so fortunate. My father had quiet integrity and an eloquence that was revealed in his every word. Stories can create community or they can divide one. In my father's case, he put the *story* into history. His stories about growing up in Saratoga are now your stories, part of the town's history. He has given us a sense of place. As he wrote: little is left of the atmosphere he experienced as a boy, "but the hills are eternal and memory is a potent force."

Thank you.

Anna Rainville

For my father's memorial service on April 25, 2013