



GUEST COLUMNIST | First Person

Fall

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By LAIRD DURHAM

I had the first sense of fall this afternoon at 5. I was playing the fifth hole at the Napa Valley Country Club, which tees off into the western sun. I often play this hole at this time of day from spring through fall, and today, the light was different. The temperature was 85 F. I was mildly sweating. There are still two months of warm weather ahead. Yet the sign is clear, summer is ending.

Light marks the change of seasons in California. As the sun lowers in the sky the colors of the hills change. The vibrant greens and golds of summer are muted. The tropical haze that hangs in the Napa Valley much of the summer seems to drop lower, hugging the ground as it begins to morph into winter's tulle fog.

Birds sense this change in light to tell them it is time to begin their seasonal migration; bears sense it as a signal to prepare for hibernation, long before the first frost and the change in leaf colors.

For humans it is time to think corduroys and sweaters instead of shorts and T-shirts. The mornings will be darker, the

evenings shorter. I have to order firewood, have the furnace checked.

When I was in the fifth-grade, we moved to Center Street in Mariemont, Ohio, just east of Cincinnati. The town planners' ambitious plan was for Center Street to be a grand esplanade in front of a city hall or court house. The street ran from the town square to a bluff overlooking the Little Miami river, ending in a circle bordered on the bluff side by a curving stone wall topped with a trellis of roses.

Half-way from the town center to the bluff, Center Street split and looped in one-way lanes around a raised island about 50 feet wide and 100 yards long. The margins of the esplanade were held back by carved granite blocks 12 inches high and two feet long. The esplanade was planted with grass and edged with stately American elms.

Our house was one of four on that part of Center Street each at a corner of, and across from, the esplanade. Three of the houses were Tudor, with dark, exposed beams; one was

Georgian. A total of 10 kids lived in the four houses. The esplanade was too small for baseball, but it was just right for football, which we began playing in late summer and continued through early winter.

The first sign of fall on Center Street was a single yellow elm leaf on the ground. It always put a lump in my throat. So unexpected, so tragic. The long summer I had expected turned out to be short. How could that be?

Summer on Center Street was marked by elm leaves, too. The first day of summer vacation those first years in Mariemont were filled with glorious joy. The last day of school ended at noon, we ran and danced all the way home screaming in exhilaration:

"No more papers, no more books, No more teachers' dirty looks."

The elm trees along Center Street were in full, lush green. We climbed up into them as high as we could, delighting in the dizziness of freedom and childish acrophobia. We broke off small branches and wove a tree house. We sat quietly there in the radiant green room reveling in the dense smell of leaves and the expectation of all the great adventures we would have.

One summer Dutch Elm disease came to Center Street, and the elms began to die. Some yellow leaves fell in July. That was too cruel. To be reminded of the start of school when it had been out only a few weeks was just too unfair.

So now it is almost fall in California some 65 years later, and I am reminded by light changes rather than elm leaves that summer ends here, too. Grapes are being harvested. The chill, dreary Tulle fog is just around the bend. And I am older, sadder, and perhaps less ready for Fall than I was on Center Street.