

North fork – Hidden gem, heart of the sierras

When first driving through the town of North fork visions of the old west come to mind. This small frontier town in the hills of the Sierra Nevada seems little changed by time. Other than the gas station and market usually frequented by passers through in a rush to get up the hill to Bass lake and Yosemite what treasures lay hidden in this small town.

Yet it has much to offer in its unique businesses and organizations. Many offering their own take on country living in the modern era. Many would say the heart and soul of a country, state or region lays in the countryside and small town and not the big eclectic cities where its unique characteristics is drowned in the cultural conversion of so many different origins. A city is just another city but every small town has its own charm, so too North Fork. Although uniformly branded bland chain brands permeate almost all of modern America there are still many small personal operations here that have stood the test of time, and interestingly some modern ideas. Concept stores that give a new interpretation as the younger generation keep alive the spirit of small country business with modern ideas like green living.

To get to north fork you would turn of California Highway 41 at road 200. A sign shows to turn there for the "Sierra Scenic Byway". North for was historically known as the gateway to the Sierras but the development of a more direct route for the main highway left it simply as a gateway for the scenic route and the back country. About 50 miles from Fresno and 30 miles from Yosemite Nasional Park the town is said to be located at the exact Centre of California. The location of 37° 9' 58.23" N 119° 26' 58.29" W is marked by a plaque commemorating this. Ironically though not in the exact center of town and somewhat of a side trip. The town was originally known as Brown's but later came to be known by its current name due to its location on the north fork of the Willow Creek and association with the North Fork Lumber Company. A local describes the weather as "nearly ideal. At 2,600 feet, the town is above the fog which affects the San Joaquin Valley during the winter, but just below the snowline. Residents who prefer some snow in their winter live at the higher elevations." [1]

The residents of north fork vary greatly including, artists, former loggers, retirees, commuters to Fresno, Oakhurst and Madera. [1] The town is also home to North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians and the Mono Indian museum. The Mono tribe originally lived scattered all over the San Joaquin Valley but as settlers ever encroached on their territory they become concentrated in the north fork area. Ancestors of the tribe also include the Yokut and Miwok linguistic groups. [2]

The business center of the town consists of only one street where Road 200 runs through. Authentic Mexican food can be found at La Cabaña, a quaint little restaurant with some lovely outdoor seating. Although some might choose the regular chain pizza store as their favorite hangout the towns local bar, The Buckhorn also doubles as a restaurant with allot more character and history to offer. The Gnarly carrot is an interesting find for a small town. This juice bar and organic outlet offers a healthy living alternative. Really refreshing to see the concept of organic sustainable living find an interpretation as a small operation as opposed to the big corporation that have taken to turning it into some kind of marketing gimmick.

In this center of town is North Fork hardware, oddly coupled by a hole in the wall with a Gift store next door. A really interesting mom and pops establishment where you can find the basic hardware you need but also some nice gifts, local crafts and art or maybe a postcard to send to someone.

Even in the seemingly abandoned mill site things are happening. The North Fork Community Development Council was incorporated as a non-profit organization in (1994) with the primary goal “to redevelop the North Fork Mill Site, helping to create jobs, green

space and community serving facilities for the town of North Fork". [3] The Council managed to attain the donation of the former South Fork Sawmill through the Madera County Redevelopment Agency in 1997, and have since succeeded in turning it into a productive center. They have also cleaned up asbestos and lead paint contaminated buildings with EPA grants. The site, that is still littered with some immovable large steel and concrete relics from the golden era of clear cut lumber, is starting to clean up nicely as a new economic hub based on a more sustainable type of business.

Crossroads Recycled Lumber is housed in some of the old mill's buildings. Collecting, cleaning and sorting lumber from demolished structures for resale. Giving these bones of old buildings new life as reclaimed lumber. Some would even argue that the nature of this lumber, being sourced mainly from old growth trees and being well dried, make it even better than newly milled lumber. Further they also produce dead tree lumber, or rescued lumber, continuing further with their green approach. Milling wood of a dead or fallen pine tree leaves characteristic blue streaks that has become sought after by decorators. Truly a service to nature. [4].

A biomass power plant was constructed in 2016 with the aid of a California Energy Commission grant. This plant runs on waste wood products normally disposed of by burning it in brush piles or chipping, contributing to California's renewable energy.[5]

On second consideration, North Fork seem anything but a forgotten town on the back road. But a vibrant and interesting community. An economy that overcame the challenges of the collapse of the lumber industry to become a place that embraces a greener way of doing business and living. Yet it has not lost the charm that made the old

west legendary. *Francois Botha –Transfer Student at Arizona State University and South African immigrant making a new home in North Fork.*

References

1. North fork CDC. http://northforkcdc.org/?page_id=7. 2/4/2018

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3. https://northforkcdc.org/?page_id=262) . 2/4/2018

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5. https://northforkcdc.org/?cat=19. 2/4/2018