Demi Stewart

Bridge tending from a viewfinder

The Delta is full of contradictions, timeless quiet sloughs, picturesque farms, historic towns, and shops blending seamlessly with up-to-the-minute styles of sleek late-model ski boats and sea kayaks, tiny houses, and high-tech ag machinery. Its history of both innovation and tradition have ebbed and flowed much like the tide, carried down over generations. The innovations of yesterday become the beloved traditions of today.

The nine movable bridges of the Delta are a great example because after almost 100 years for some of them, they still literally provide a bridge from the past to the present. Wonders of engineering in their time that connected the region and brought economic, social and cultural growth, they soldier on today, majestically pivoting or rising, alternately allowing cars and trucks to pass safely over the water, or boats on the water to pass safely up or down-river on the water highways.

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The bridges may seem to move mysteriously on their own at the hail, but up on the levee in the bridge house there is a bridge tender at every one of these movable bridges, operating the equipment that moves the bridge and ensuring public safety during the process.

And who are the bridge tenders? If you’re passing through Isleton heading home from work in Rio Vista, as you sit in your car waiting for the bridge to return to the closed position, open your window, wave toward the bridge house and you might meet Demi Stewart!

Demi came to bridge tending after many years farming in Solano county, and helping to run a family business producing California native grasses for large scale erosion control and habitat restoration. It’s not easy to get a job bridge tending – for one thing, there are only a handful of positions and the people who come to it stay. But her experience with heavy equipment as a farmer was a plus and she knew other bridge tenders, so had a good idea what it took to do the job. Demi landed the job about five years ago and is now full-time. It’s not for everyone – bridge tending is a solitary job, like night watchman, fire lookout, lighthouse keeper. But she says, “You can have more contact with people if you want to.”

With hours of enforced downtime at work, folks in these jobs take up a hobby – the old-timers carved wood duck decoys, for example. Demi recognized the unique perspective from the bridge – “there are beautiful things to see out here,” she observes. So she took up photography during the long stretches of time when there’s no need to operate the bridge, snapping photos with her cell phone. With time and practice she improved, attracting the notice of the late, much-beloved Delta photographer Michael Pieretti, who mentored and encouraged her after seeing her
work on Facebook. And about a year and a half ago her kids surprised her with a camera.

Demi sees herself as a sort of goodwill ambassador for the Delta and the bridges, ringing the bell for any kids onboard or sometimes snapping a photo for boaters as they pass. She’ll often step outside the bridge house while she’s operating the bridge, to make extra sure everything is safe. She’s known for her cheerful attitude, and gets lots of “honk hugs” from friendly - if often anonymous - truckers and an early morning black SUV.

When longtime family friend Don Wisdom started the Delta News Facebook page a few years ago, Demi, who is also a site administrator, began sharing her photos there. People are increasingly buying her images, which she appreciates. But she sees her photos as windows on the Delta that allow people to see what she sees - and come to feel what she feels about the region. “The more that you can draw people into the beauty of the place, the more they want to get to know it, love it, protect it,” she says. People who may have moved away from the Delta, or perhaps are confined in a care home and can’t see for themselves, love her steady stream of new photos, and she’s only too happy to share them. “I’m paid in sunrises and sunsets.”

The Delta’s Movable Bridges

The five oldest movable bridges in the Delta are:

- Old River (1915)
- Paintersville (1923)
- Isleton (1923)
- Steamboat Slough (1924)
- Miner Slough (1933)

For more about the history and future of California’s movable bridges, read Caltrans’ Mile Marker magazine: bit.ly/3fXQ1Gm
Summer is the perfect time to read a few good books while enjoying the warm weather. The Delta and Carquinez Strait are home to places that have inspired contemporary fiction and non-fiction. Why not read something that explores the early years of the Civil Rights era, not-so-tall-tales, stories of legendary Locke or migrant life, or a good murder mystery?

The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights
Steve Sheinkin

This book, intended for readers ages 9-13, chronicles the story of 50 Black sailors accused of mutiny during World War II when they refused to work in unsafe conditions. They had just experienced the war’s worst home front disaster – a massive explosion northwest of Bay Point at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine that killed 320 men – that disproportionately affected Blacks. Sheinken eloquently describes one of the first battles of the Civil Rights era, which ultimately helped desegregate the military. You can visit Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, which is still part of an active military base, by making a reservation at the National Park Service website: nps.gov/poch/index.htm

Delta Girls
Gayle Brandeis

A single mother working as a migrant farmworker settles at a pear orchard in the Delta along the Sacramento River. A competitive ice skater in Connecticut with an exciting new partner longs for the days when she skated for fun as a “Delta girl,” named for the introductory skating level. When the media spotlight comes to the Delta due to two wandering whales, the two stories come together.
Water Ghosts (Previously Published as Locke 1928)
Shawna Yang Ryan

The action in Ryan’s first novel, which takes place in the National Historic Landmark of Locke, is driven by the Chinese immigration laws that prevented Chinese women from coming to the United States. As a result, Locke during the 1920s was largely a town of single Chinese men and White prostitutes. When a boat of three Chinese women mysteriously appears, including the wife of a gambling hall manager, the story becomes a mix of early 20th century Delta life and ancient Chinese culture. You can visit historic Locke and see the town that inspired this novel.

True Tales of the Sacramento Delta
Philip Pezzaglia

Noted local historian Pezzaglia provides an overview of some of the more colorful tales of Delta history, including violence – shipwrecks, murders, robberies, and vigilante justice – and famous people – author Jack London, director Cecil B. DeMille, and bootlegger, hunter, and restaurateur Bill Foster.

In the Shadow Of Diablo:
Mystery of the Great Stone House
Death at the Healing Waters
Ghosts of Black Diamond
Dan Hanel

Hanel’s In the Shadow of Diablo trilogy weaves the past and present together in mysteries that take place at historic sites around northeast Contra Costa County – the John Marsh House, the Byron Hot Springs Resort, and Black Diamond Mines. The detectives are Brentwood high school teachers Harrison Barrett and Celeste Scott, a profession and place that Hanel knows well himself since he has been an educator for over thirty years and lives in Brentwood. While the John Marsh House and Byron Hot Springs Resort are currently not publicly accessible, you can visit Brentwood and the locations of the last book in the Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve. Learn more at East Bay Regional Parks: ebparks.org/parks/black_diamond
Delta’s Billion Dollar Bounty

The half-million acres of Delta farmland produce nearly $1 billion of farm value

Delta commercial agriculture has been around as long as the State of California, largely due to the reclamation of marshland encouraged by the Swamplands Act of 1850. Starting with higher elevation ground along the Sacramento River, Delta agriculture developed with the reclamation of Delta land and has been largely in its current island configuration for more than a century.

But Delta agriculture continues to evolve. In an analysis of Delta agriculture based on 2016 crop data from Delta county agricultural commissioners, the value of Delta agriculture increased to $965 million from just under $800 million in 2009. Of this 2016 total, more than 90% of the value was in crop production, with the remainder based on animal products. The related food and beverage manufacturing tied to this production produces over $1.4 billion of value.

Compared to the Commission’s analysis of Delta agriculture in 2009, there have been significant changes in the mix of Delta agriculture. Most significant has been the marked decline in corn and alfalfa production between 2009 and 2016. The 2009 period was a time of high corn prices, and this was reflected in the vast extent of the crop grown throughout the Delta. And alfalfa prices largely reflect the health of the dairy industry, which was also healthy in 2009. Although corn and alfalfa (both grown on approximately 80,000 acres of Delta farmland) are still the largest acreage crops in the region, acreage has decreased by nearly 20% from 2009.

At the same time, there has been an explosion of almond orchards (increasing nearly four-fold to more than 15,000 acres), and a continued steady increase in winegrape production. Winegrapes are the Delta’s most valuable crop, worth more than $212 million in 2016, and nearly double the value of processing tomatoes, the Delta’s second most valuable crop.

The move in the Delta toward higher value permanent crops (almonds and vineyards) is a trend that is mirrored throughout the Central Valley. Even so, Delta agriculture is still characterized by annual field crop production, and is often a necessity on low-land areas of the Delta where the water table lies close to the land surface.

In such conditions, deep-rooted crops such as orchards and vineyards cannot thrive. And the abundance of field crops, especially corn and alfalfa, provide food and ground cover for a variety of birds and terrestrial species. The iconic sandhill crane and the wide variety of migratory songbirds and waterfowl greatly benefit from this crop production.

Other high-value Delta crops include potatoes, pears, blueberries, turfgrass, and watermelons. What isn’t such a valuable crop anymore in the Delta? Asparagus. The once-representative Delta crop has dwindled in production to fewer than 2,000 acres in 2016, from a high of more than 70,000 acres just several decades prior. Both the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement that opened the U.S. market to plentiful Mexican imports and the increasing costs of labor to hand-pick the crop have been especially damaging to the California asparagus industry, and thus the Delta production.

Even as crops increase and decrease in importance, the one constant is the largely rural and agricultural nature of vast areas of the Delta.
Although they are not native to the Delta, striped bass (Morone saxatilis) has a long history since the initial release of 132 small fish near Martinez in the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta in 1879. By the early 1900’s the fish were doing so well in the Delta that thriving commercial and sportfishing industries emerged.

Striped bass are voracious feeders and are a fun and challenging fish to catch for both novices and professionals. The current California sport record for striped bass is a 67-1/2-pound fish caught in O’Neill Forebay, Merced County!

Striped bass are only about 4 millimeters long at hatching and grow to about 4 inches in the first year, 10 inches at two years, 16 inches at three, and 20 inches at four. A 20-year-old striper can be more than 48 inches long and weigh over 40 pounds!

In the early 1990s research indicated that California’s striped bass population was decreasing. To support burgeoning fishing and recreation industries, the State committed to sustain a population of about 1 million fish throughout the state, particularly in the Delta.

Given the extensive decline in the striped bass population, the CA Fish and Wildlife Commission decided that will no longer pursue their previous goal of maintaining a million stripers in the Delta. While they did not define the number of striped bass they would sustain, they expressed their support for keeping the striped bass fishery alive.

For those that want to try their hand at catching a 40-pound Delta striper, there is still some great fishing in the Delta around Suisun Bay and other nooks and crannies that are well known by your local Delta fisherman. Anyone that has enjoyed the festivities of the Annual Striped Bass Festival would not be surprised to learn that Stockton hosts California's oldest freshwater fishing club, the California Striped Bass Association. Contacting the Association would be a great start on your fishing journey.
Delta Agency Meetings

August

Aug 27 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting
deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings

Sep 24 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting
deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings

September

Sep 17 - Delta Protection Commission Meeting
delta.ca.gov/commission-meetings

2020 Best of the Delta

Congratulations to the winners of Visit CA Delta’s fourth annual Best of the Delta survey!

Best Small Town
1st Place:
Locke
Runner-up:
Walnut Grove

Best Restaurant Take-Out
1st Place:
Locke Garden Restaurant
Runner-up:
Manny’s Barzzeria

Best Bar
1st Place:
Mei Wah Beer Room
Runner-up:
Tony’s Place

Best Music & Dancing
1st Place:
Moore’s Riverboat Restaurant
Runner-up:
Tony’s Place

Best Winery
1st Place:
Bogle Vineyards
Runner-up:
Consumnes River Farm

Best Inn Or B&B
1st Place:
The Bartlett
Runner-up:
B & W Resort Marina

Best Fishing Spot
1st Place:
Owl Harbor Marina
Runners-up (Tied):
Rio Vista Pier / Willow Berm Marina

Best Marina
1st Place:
Willow Berm Marina
Runner-up:
Owl Harbor Marina

Best Souvenir & Gift Shop
1st Place:
Chinese Cultural Shop
Runner-up:
Seeker Locke

Best Marina/Visitor Center
1st Place:
Locke Boarding House Museum
Runner-up:
Rio Vista Museum

Best Art Gallery
1st Place:
Moon Cafe
Runner-up:
Ning Hou Fine Art

Best Nature Area Or Trail
1st Place:
Cosumnes River Preserve
Runner-up:
Delta Meadows State Park

Best Wedding Venue
1st Place:
Grand Island Mansion
Runner-up:
The Willow Ballroom

Best Annual Event
1st Place:
Locke Asian Spring Festival
Runner-up:
Courtland Pear Fair

Best RV Camping
1st Place:
Ko-Ket Resort
Runner-up:
Yogi Bear’s Jellystone Park

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