

## Not every phoenix deserves resurrection

Two items.

First: The Star's editorial on Nov. 2 declared that "a resurgent tourist economy is in all of our best interests." However, that assertion is indefensible. Residents of quiet rural lanes harried by tourist vehicles; locals who appreciate the aesthetics of an uncrowded landscape; workers trapped in traffic on 29 — these are just some Napers who might disagree. That's because the economy is not the only measure of our well-being. With good reason do exasperated locals in many so-called world-class destinations (e.g. Venice, Barcelona) object vehemently to excessive tourism.

The editorial breezily dismissed deep reservations about

tourism, though they have been expressed eloquently and repeatedly in recent years by, as the editorial acknowledged, "many locals" at public meetings and in the press. Writing about "shuttered shops ... and eerily vacant streets" the editorial challenged — actually, rather disrespectfully, it taunted — many locals to change their mind about tourism. It referred to St. Helena without tourists as a ghost town. But that dismal characterization will surprise us ghosts who have lived here more than a few years and thought that we were reasonably content in a less-visited valley. Were we just unenlightened?

At any rate — now, rather than rush to recapture the old normal as the editorial urges, we've an opportunity to ponder the unexpected. What meaning can we find in this unfamiliar quiet? How can we be enlarged by this change? What positive transformation can we find here? What does nature ask of us?

Economic hardship is a great misfortune. But the Star wants a rapid return to aggressive tourism though ironically the transformation it has wrought on the valley exceeds even the fire's

Please see **LETTERS**, Page A5 <sup>M</sup> 1

S H Star 11/16/17

11/16/17

THE WEEKLY CALISTOGAN

## Letters

From A4

tragic effects. Answering objections to changes due to tourism (itself destructive, in a different way), advocates for "progress" proclaim "you can't turn back the clock." Yet when the change affects tourism, the Star's editorial urges speedy restoration of the status quo. Not every phoenix, however, deserves resurrection.

Second item: My compliments on Mr. Stockwell's fine review of "Doubt." I appreciate that he leaps from the particular play to a broader generalization in his last paragraph, pointing out the theme's relevance to a contemporary and even larger audience.

**Donald Williams**  
**Calistoga**

## Napa Valley has been degraded from ag to tourism

The re-orientation of Napa Valley from agriculture towards tourism is a well-known secret. Traffic congestion, protests at supervisors' meetings, and endless letters-to-editors notwithstanding, county government has mostly ignored the discontent among locals who treasure Napa's semi-rural qualities.

But the transformation has been too great for careful observers to overlook. Both the Sacramento Bee and the San Francisco Chronicle ran recent articles describing Napa's travails. And last week James

The Weekly Calistogan

3/22/18

Conaway's third book about the county, "Napa at Last Light: America's Eden in an Age of Calamity", was released. Unlike accounts of Napa penned by starry-eyed travel or wine business reporters, Conaway writes from the community's, not tourism's, point of view. His reports are not welcome reading to an industry trading on lifestyle.

As if to confirm Conaway's grim observations about Napa's degradation from agriculture to tourism, NV 2050 coincidentally received this anecdote, a true story, from Donald Williams last week:

"My wife and I visited Sacramento for a few days last week. We had strolled to a museum about a mile from our motel in clement weather, but when we stepped out of the museum the rain was torrential, and we lacked umbrellas. We were the only visitors at that time and the museum director was just leaving for the day, so he offered us a ride back to the motel. In the car, he inquired, 'Where are you visiting from?'

"We live in Calistoga."

"Calistoga! I've been there many times. I used to love it. But now it's so 'done.' It's not the small town it used to be. Too much tourism. Too bad."

**Donald Williams**  
**NapaVision 2050**

## Don't drink the tourist Kool-Aid

Recently the Star published editorials by Pam Simpson and Bill Ryan advocating increased tourism to enhance St. Helena's finances, referring to neighboring cities to buttress their argument. In particular Simpson asserted that Calistogans "solved their issues, as they will admit, by adding hotels. The residents protested but," Simpson claims, "later understood the financial gain that would be afforded the community by accepting the future." Calistoga's budget indeed depends even more heavily on visitors than St. Helena's does.

However: Be not envious. Financial solvency does not imply good health. Calistoga has put over half its eggs in the one tourist basket.

More importantly, its two big recently approved resorts were both subject to widespread grassroots uprisings. The consequent divisive referendums were defeated by margins surprisingly close, considering the stunning disparity in campaign funding. The regrettable result, besides the financial gain that impresses Simpson and Ryan, was a sadly fractured community.

So along with the satisfaction of a balanced budget we now have an increasingly urbanized town desperate to sell itself; beholden to visitors vexed by valley traffic; and littered with Calistogans wondering what happened to the small town they thought they lived in, and frustrated with the council unresponsive to their concerns about the magnitude of the resorts. It may not even be clear at city hall, the newspapers, or the chamber of commerce (all acolytes of the development god) that their budget-balanced community is also bifurcated. It conjures the painful image of a wealthy family's clueless dad throwing money to his kids and wondering why they're not happy when to make his millions he had to ravage their beloved homestead.

So if it's all about the money, then build on. But if you value the authentic small-town quality that historically defined our Upvalley communities; if you're tired of traffic on 29 and the Trail, too; if you believe in Napa County as primarily rural not suburban — then I respectfully suggest you don't drink the tourist Kool-Aid like we have in Calistoga.

**Donald Williams**  
Calistoga

## Calistoga's 'Disneyfication'

EDITOR: Undeveloped, without capitulation to the tourist siren, Calistoga might have remained special — rustic, unpretentious, real. Instead it joins the common ranks of North Bay cities that for money and prestige are drinking the tourist Kool-Aid.

Enamored of Calistoga's Disneyfication, your article ("Calistoga evolves into food-and-wine epicenter," [pressdemocrat.com](http://pressdemocrat.com)) quotes tourism's happy beneficiaries: restaurateurs, hoteliers, city hall. Unmentioned is the sadness and confusion felt by residents who hoped to live in a small, quiet town and find instead traffic clogging the streets of a city more than half of whose budget depends on transients.

And still to come are two relatively huge high-end resorts. Both were subject to widespread grassroots uprisings and, after divisive referendums, approved by margins surprisingly close considering the stunning disparity in campaign funding. Calistogans are far from unanimous in their appreciation of tourism.

So now with the satisfaction of a balanced budget we have an increasingly urbanized municipality desperate to sell itself, beholden to visitors vexed by valley traffic and littered with Calistogans wondering what happened to the small

town they thought they lived in.

It's sad to see the soul of a community sold for a tsunami of tourists.

**DONALD WILLIAMS**  
Calistoga

8/2/15  
Santa Rosa  
Press Democrat

## How can you lose something you never had?

At least two interesting articles in the Star last week were concerned with the growth of business.

Mr. Loubet in his letter lamented what he calls since 1999 "the anti-development mindset which has so impacted St. Helena." He challenged readers to question the status quo in favor of "something new." That's a good idea. No one who has been here since 1999 can think St. Helena is unchanged. Indeed, so much is St. Helena changing that now the norm, the new true "status quo" is — change! Consequently, the most progressive way to "challenge that status quo" is, ironically, to advocate for preservation. I am indebted to Mr. Loubet for this insight.

The second article was by Ms. Simpson, chamber CEO. She is a good writer. She discussed the

relationship between the Chamber of Commerce and City Hall. She noted that "St. Helena has lost market share of TOT and sales tax to Calistoga and Yountville," so she approves the council's additional funding of the chamber in order to competitively keep pace with other towns' funding. As a Calistogan — witness to relentless marketing that has so altered our character that over half our budget now depends on tourism — I greatly appreciate her efforts to gain more market share and sincerely hope it comes from my town.

Lastly, both commentators referred to tax revenue collected by other communities as "lost" to St. Helena. I have to be intrigued by a rhetoric that refers to something one never had as lost. And (mindful of the cup half-full/half-empty concept), I confess to being puzzled by that earnest emphasis on "loss" — from commentators in one of the area's indisputably most affluent towns.

**Donald Williams**  
Calistoga

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12/17/15

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7/9/15

**GUEST COMMENTARY**

# The soul of Napa Valley suffers

**DON WILLIAMS**

The unfortunate Blakeley Construction situation may be understood as a logical consequence of the heightened emphasis on tourism that has gripped Napa County.

Blakeley Construction, located just outside Calistoga for more than half a century, family-operated, is well-respected for both its work ethic and its community involvement. It's a company deeply connected to this land and its people. However, upon a complaint from a recent neighbor about their operation and zoning rules, the county fined Blakeley and stipulated they eventually cease operations there.

Meanwhile, Reverie Winery, also just outside Calistoga, admitted violating its permits and then appealed to the county to expand them. The request was granted.

Locals, startled at the Blakeley case and the county's caprices, have eloquently expressed outrage.

Defenders of the rulings might argue that their particulars prohibit linking them, but the details are less important than the ironic trend they exemplify. The growing wine industry and its votaries, exploiting the county's professed commitment to agriculture and a semi-rural lifestyle, are displacing the very tradition that made the valley attractive.

Long reputed for farming and fine grapes, Napa Valley today is increasingly known as a tourist destination. There are more wineries every year. Challenged to score shelf space in a crowded market, they rely increasingly on visitors to buy their products and on special events to promote them. So, attracted by a superior product, rural loveliness, and relentless marketing, visitors throng the valley.

Local housing, otherwise available for the growing wine industry's lower-paid hospitality and field workers, goes increasingly to part-time occupants attracted to the tony wine world; so real estate prices rise and the workers must commute (witness traffic on 29). Meanwhile, new settlers love the glamour, but not necessarily the grit; hence, the Blakeley case. Either by economics — or by fiat — the soul of Napa Valley suffers.

Soul, a respect for the essence of things, refers to connection, depth, history and beauty; less to money. Napa County's professed primary activity, agriculture, is literally and soulfully connected to its landscape: Farming and related services like Blakeley actually work the dirt. Tourism by contrast is a derivative industry, sparkling, meretricious. It generates loads of money, so municipalities and chambers of commerce love it. I do, too, until it smothers soul. We are at that critical point now.

Napa is losing its soul when it:

— Refers relentlessly to economics but not to aesthetics;

— Promotes development and a tourism that degrades its semi-rural experience;

— Can't find a way to protect an Upvalley tradition like Blakeley Construction but has no problem approving a wayward winery's requests for more visitors. Tourist revenue may console a county losing its heritage, but extreme tourism confounds residents who believed in Napa's commitment to its semi-rural character. It's sad to see the soul of a community sold for a tsunami of tourists. And even tourists, in clogged traffic and perfect tasting rooms, will recognize soulless inauthenticity and eventually disparage "Napafication."

If soul were strictly a local issue I wouldn't offer my poor scribbling here: Calistoga, with hundreds of new resort rooms recently approved, has already rolled its dice.

But the soul of the county may still be salvaged if applications for even more visitors and events are denied. We can appreciate the wine industry — and simultaneously cap its expansion, arrest Napa Valley's urbanization.

The Blakeley case shows that the exploitation of our county has unexpected consequences. Where will it happen next?

**Don Williams is a Calistoga resident.**

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St Helena Star 8/15/17  
Weekly Calistoga 8/15/17

[http://napavalleyregister.com/calistoga/news/opinion/mailbag/star-editorial-didn-t-mention-this-lesson/article\\_7fc91679-c1d4-561e-9614-7897d28be925.html](http://napavalleyregister.com/calistoga/news/opinion/mailbag/star-editorial-didn-t-mention-this-lesson/article_7fc91679-c1d4-561e-9614-7897d28be925.html)

## Star editorial didn't mention this lesson

Donald Williams Aug 15, 2017 Updated Aug 16, 2017

Calistoga's mayor Canning clearly impresses your board. Your editorial last year was rather embarrassing in its excitement about his plan to transport workers into Calistoga (the project ended unsuccessfully). After interviewing him again, your editorial last week (about lessons to learn from Calistoga) was similarly breathless. But it's unclear what are the lessons you think St. Helena should learn.

I understand you've lectured repeatedly about St. Helena's budget. Meanwhile you see two big (probably money-making) resorts being built in Calistoga. Perhaps Calistoga sounded like a land of milk and honey to your board. (If only St. Helena had a resort to save us!)

Calistoga indeed has \$7.5 million in reserves. Some of that is from impact fees from the two big resorts. But your editorial did not make clear that the greater benefit to Calistoga's budget has been the increase in transient occupancy taxes. In the last six years Calistoga has collected \$11 million more than it would have at 2011 recession-era rates. In other words, \$11 million became available not from the two new resorts but simply by an improving economy\*. The lesson: Economies cycle; so save when it's good, watch your spending when it's not.

Your editorial's connection, consequently --- of Calistoga housing plans and money from the resorts --- is probably gratuitous. City hall cannot

satisfy even the existing demand (let alone the additional demand anticipated from workers from new resorts). You also referred to the problem of a shortage of labor. Actually, that's the resorts' problem. Our problem --- and yours, St. Helena --- will be traffic, as workers commute through your town to Calistoga. The lesson: using resorts to address housing is counterproductive.

I agree with you that citizens' town halls are a good idea. Unfortunately the issue of resorts was so divisive in Calistoga that many residents withdrew from participation in civic affairs. It became just too frustrating trying to counter a city hall, chamber of commerce, civic club, and local newspaper, all with overlapping membership and a unified voice for development. The obvious symbol is Mr. Canning as the head of both city hall and the chamber. The lesson: a diversity of views, especially on city council, is healthy. I envy St. Helena that way.

In its unblinking admiration of Mr. Canning your editorial implied a budget surplus is the apex value: lucky special Calistoga. But in capitulating to the siren of tourism, Calistoga's "uniqueness" becomes more a shibboleth than a reality. Calistoga is trading its small-town authenticity for a manufactured charm, like so many other wine-country towns vying gracelessly for visitors' bucks.

Now there's a lesson you didn't mention.

**Donald Williams**

**Calistoga**

# CURBING EXCESSIVE TOURISM

Dear Editor,

Last week three more letters essentially mourned the end of historical Calistoga. "It's a sad time for Calistoga," wrote Ms. Turner. "The whole idea of a small community is gone. . . . Now we are a giant tourist trap. . . . The mess with the Blakeley's is just the tip of the iceberg."

This is historic. We've succumbed to the blandishments of the tourist industry. Witness the county's double standard on violations: tourist businesses (wineries) are forgiven, but a non-tourist business (Blakeley) is shut down. Locally, developers massively lobby our small town, and their huge tourist resorts are marginally approved. But that milk is already spilt.

What can we do---now---to curb excessive tourism? Here's my action list.

\*Communicate your feelings. (Thank you, Ms. Turner and others, for sharing.)

\*Tell the city council to stop subsidizing the tourist-centric chamber of commerce. (The world won't end.) (But get ready for a barrage of statistics.)

\*Resist the allure of numbers (I advise this as a long-time college math instructor). Front-page articles filled with data (and labeling more tourists "good results") are seductive and can eclipse deeper ideas in letters in the heart of your publication.

\*Vote into office candidates who do not favor more tourism.

\*Rise above celebration of silly rankings that place Calistoga on some useless top-ten list of "desirable" or "world-class" small towns. It's narcissistic and feeds the beast.

\*Understand that success has more to do with soulfulness than with money. Our soulful Upvalley identity depends on our small-town and rural character, not on the colonizing pressure of well-heeled tourists and developers.

\*Consider proposals critically. For example, bussing workers from miles away will reveal (1) an imbalance between jobs and housing and (2) a tourist industry in Calistoga too big for its britches. Also note careful reports like Yvonne Henry's article on tourism in last week's *Tribune*.

\*At a city council meeting, ask for a moment of silence---for the small-town Calistoga whose loss these letters poignantly lament.

For these letters are a dirge, an historical record of a community's grief at its passing. Disparage them if you will. Proceed with the trendy tourist projects. Blakeley is moving. Calistoga is losing. As at a funeral, people weep.

Sincerely,

Donald Williams

*Calistoga Tribune*

*May 13, 2016*

**Tourism in Napa County claims another casualty.** One more couple of solid citizen departs our valley.

What good are "world-class" wineries and wealth when the soul of the community is gutted by the loss of loved ones?

It's not just St. Helena. I know three Calistoga families who have left in the last year. They are dismayed at the development scarring our town. They are disappointed at planning commissions', councils', and supervisors' cavalier attitude toward tourism and development.

These friends were active, engaged, involved Calistogans: the kind of people who volunteer; make a difference; constitute the very fabric of a community.

Gone.

In this new Napa valley, economics always trumps aesthetics. Elected officials acknowledge traffic, tourism, and diminution of small-town sensibilities; then they approve them. Over and over. A few more visitors allowed here. Another event permitted there.

Can the valley absorb events and visitors infinitely?

No. Yet the flood encroaches day by day. Right before our eyes.

And we permit it: we elect these public officials. Who among them will respect the county enough to finally say, that's enough!

Looking around this still-beautiful valley, I know it seems hard to believe, but---the rising tide of tourism will swamp this ship. Not too many people will want to visit the flooded wreck that used to be the lovely Napa Valley, after the ship has sunk.

S H. Star  
3/16/17