

The Heart on the Hill, revealed



Photo by Dan Richards

The story behind a beloved Highway 46 landmark

by DAN RICHARDS

Heading down Highway 46 West toward Cambria and Cayucos, just a little past Grey Wolf Cellars, look sharply to the right. You can see a large stand of trees formed in the shape of a heart.

On the hillside, nestled in a steep cleft, this heart of live oaks clustered together looks like it must have always been there in that shape: evergreens loom out of the hill as if some immense Valentine memento, surprising and beautiful.

How did it get there? Surely such a thing

could not be an accident, as one of the neighbors in the area seemed to think.

What is the story? Is this a love message written large—a romantic tale like that of the famous Taj Mahal in India built by a Mughal emperor for his beloved wife known as Mumtaz Mahal? I set out to explore the mystery of the "Heart on the Hill." But first, I read up on background of the history of valentine messages.

The calendar was a bit different back in the days of the Romans and what we now call Valentine's Day was on Feb. 15 and

called Lupercalia. The Romans are not so much remembered for their romantic ways as for their vicious cruelty. Human rights had not yet been invented. There was a name-drawing on the eve of Lupercalia with the names of young women written and placed in jars. Young men would draw the names and the girl whose name was drawn became his "girlfriend" for that year. (I use "girlfriend" rather loosely in order to keep this story rated PG.)

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Photo by Dan Richards

Edgar Wiebe (above) and his friend Dick Booker painstakingly made the Heart on the Hill with a tractor.

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During the reign of Emperor Claudius II, in approximately the Third Century, lived a bishop by the name of Valentine. Christianity was still a new religion at that time. The emperor made a very unpopular decision that his soldiers couldn't get married, thinking that, without having any families to worry about, his troops would be stronger.

However, Valentine secretly conducted marriage rites for the soldiers and their sweethearts. When word got back to the Imperial Palace, Valentine found himself on the proverbial carpet facing an angry emperor and was beheaded shortly thereafter. Subsequently, he was canonized by the Christian church and became known as the patron saint of lovers. (Most people don't know a little odd fact: there were two St. Valentines in the Third Century.)

However Valentine's Day as we know it came about, one thing is for sure: the heart symbol has been around for a long time and it is fairly hard to trace it to its origin.

Even though the Victorians had popularized the symbol as an icon of love and the human soul, they did not invent it. Scholars have been able to trace this loved artistic device at least back to the Seventh Century BC (which does not mean Before Computers) in connection with a plant, Silphium. This species of fennel was highly prized and its connection to erotic love made a lot of people rich in the city of Cyrene, North Africa. The seedpod was shaped like our stylized hearts and the plant seems to have been harvested to extinction.

When we think of great love, our minds drift to such famous pairs as Romeo and Juliet, Napoleon and Josephine and even Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. One isn't certain, of course, if it was love or lust at work in the case of some of these affairs but, with famous or ordinary people, love rules the world. The heart has always been considered the seat of human emotion; the throne of every decision, desire, longing or ambition. To capture the heart of another

person is to conquer the universe—or at least the little world in which each of us lives. As Emanuel Swedenborg said, "Love is the life of every man."

So we get back to the 'Heart on the Hill.' I did some digging to find its origin but not nearly as much digging, tugging, pushing and pulling as Edgar Wiebe did approximately 46 years ago with his bulldozer on the Booker Ranch, along with Dick Booker, the younger of the two Booker brothers. Ed, who is now 83, couldn't pinpoint the exact date but said it was "approximately April or May of 1956 or '58."

Ed did various jobs for Dick and Claude Booker off and on for many years, using his "Cat" in a lot of tree removal. They were all good neighbors. The two brothers were adopted sons of the Bookers, well-known folks in San Luis Obispo County. These were decent people, the kind one talks about when spinning tales of the pio-

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neers and their bright, happy spirits and their extraordinarily hard-working ways.

Sitting in the front room with Ed and Carol Wiebe, I like what I see, a solid couple married for 62 years, Ed living still in the house where he was born. His hands speak volumes of endless days spent running huge machinery, repairing, cleaning, digging, climbing hills and descending into valleys, day in and day out to snatch a living from the earth all around him. He's an easy man to like, a straight talking gentleman who has obviously never shied away from hard work.

One day, more than four decades ago, Ed and Dick decided on a whim to create their own unique legacy. Ed told Dick that, with just the right amount of tree removal from a large stand of trees, they could shape a heart on the side of the hill on the Booker property.

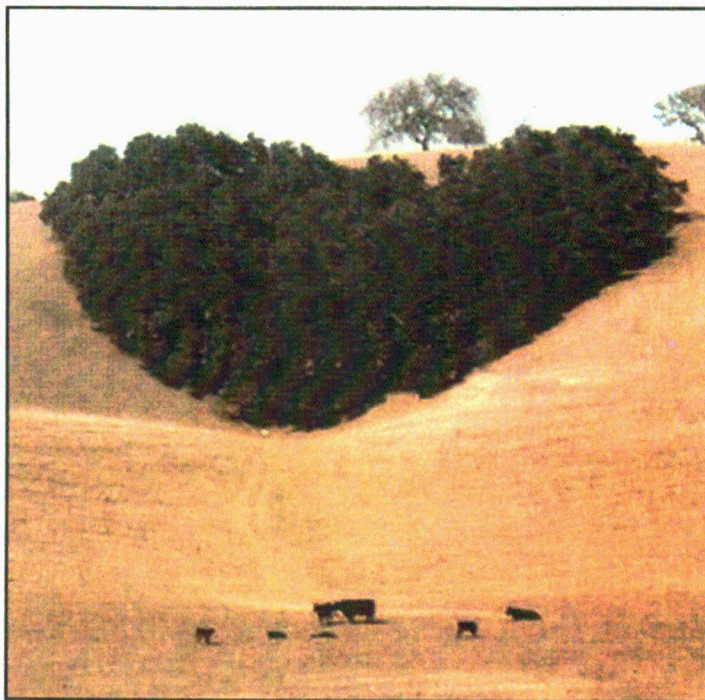
A lot of trees were being removed but this one large clump would make such a pretty heart, Ed thought.

Dick agreed.

Dick headed south across Highway 46 to scope out which trees had to go. He would return to tell Ed which one to remove, and then head back across in his jeep to plot the next move.

Back and forth he drove, surveying the site for approximately a half a day while Ed removed the trees.

Before long, Ed and Dick carved the trees on the steep, 60-percent grade hillside



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into the shape of a marvelous, everlastingly green heart that has since stood for almost a half-century, a living monument to the whim and the fun of two hardy young men.

Both of the Booker brothers have long gone to their reward but the Heart on the Hill beats on.

I asked Ed, "What was the reason you wanted a heart up on the hill?"

Ed replied in his matter-of-fact-way, "The reason was, Dick and I talked it over and I said, 'If a guy did that just right, you could make a heart out of it and leave the trees there.' Dick said, 'Let's do it.' It was as easy to do it as not!"

The mystery was just that simple—no big romance or great love story and no symbol of eternal love and adoration. It was just two gung-ho young men out having a good time forming a mammoth heart by pushing and pulling a lot of trees out of the way, leaving the rest to stand for all passersby to see and smile.

But, in a way, there is a love angle to this tale. Ed clearly loves the land, the place where he has lived for well more than three-quarters of a century. He loves the people of his neighborhood and the people in Paso Robles. You can see it in his eyes that he loves and adores his wife, Carol, the woman he gave his heart to more than 62 years ago.

Symbolically, one could say that's really Ed's heart up there on that hill, proof that love can literally be forever green.

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