

S BLS

Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine

September/October 2021



LEAVE IT TO US

VICTORIAN FERNDALE PROVIDES A VINTAGE
FAIRYTALE ESCAPE ON THE LOST COAST

pleasant VILLE



by ROSIE PETERSON

Before Ferndale, my idea of “Victorian Village” was vague with turrets and gables, ruffled lampshades, florid wallpaper, and doilies.

Travel literature on the giant redwoods of Humboldt will inevitably work in wild praise of Ferndale and its intact Victorian delights. To me, this could only mean a Disneyland in miniature, trinket shops hawking gewgaws and fudge emporiums catering to fat American women on holiday with their screaming kids and bald husbands. No doubt we do not use such vernacular in our politically correct world, and what could be more Victorian? I’ve seen Downton Abbey.

I never imagined Ferndale could possibly come off so genuine and pleasant to a rare degree. But when every lodge and motel was crammed overfull with the vacationing Covid-weary, I found myself asking a hotel clerk in Rio Dell if she knew where we might find a room. She suggested the Victorian Inn in Ferndale. I was dialing before we got back in the car. They had three rooms left.

Off we drove through lush dairy pasture lands in the still vibrant

dinnertime light of a glamorous Northern California summer afternoon. Siri gave out some bum directions and we stopped by the side of the road to check our paper map, an article we came to love and admire; a young calf approached the barbed wire with big inquisitive eyes to inspect us.

Ocean Street had no ocean in sight, but we easily found a parking spot right in front of the hotel. The town looked like a Hollywood set, which of course it has been, consisting of two blocks of perfectly preserved old buildings. Very little in the way of tacky souvenirs. Shops were closing—five thirty. We walked around, marveling at the window fronts. Old butcher shop with antique slicer in the window, beautiful counters. Old grocery. The oldest pharmacy in California. Old church around the corner. Old houses. Brilliant gardens, roses and lobelia and hollyhocks proclaiming the good life beyond measure. Eccentric names apparently have a special place in the town lexicon: the No-Brand Burger Stand; Barkery & Bath pet groomer; Red Front Store, Fat Anne’s Bakery & Bistro. For housing, Wuss Camp or The Barndominium. We’d shortly learn that if you stay in town past closing time, and you head for the only restaurant open til 9, you’ll be told stories. Your food may be getting cold while you listen, but you’re part of the town now and you’re going to hear some tales. Some you will never forget.



Back to the three rooms on offer at the Victorian Inn. Up the staircase with its polished wood banisters, past a common room with fridge and coffeemaker, halls lined with old photos, the first one would nearly be considered a suite, a game table and chairs in the round turret with windows overlooking the main intersection. It had, of course, plenty of floral wallpaper to go around, and rather thin walls revealing something of a happy hen party in progress on the other side. We didn’t mind, since we’re a pair of old hens ourselves, really. But we needed to check the other two rooms, for ambiance. They had their charm, certainly, but nothing to outdo being front and center in the very cradle of the town. Seriously surprising it would be, then, the next morning, to be awakened only by birdsong, not a car passing in the street, not a delivery, nothing but birds. But I’m ahead of myself. There was dinner to be had at Tuya’s Authentic Mexican Food, owned by two women who may or may not have been present, but everyone else in town was.

There was the old cowboy sitting at the bar that we both needed to take secret pix of with our cell phones. Our waitress was heavily tattooed in a manner to suggest that some Victorianisms had given way to modernity, but so far we’d seen no tattoo parlor. No trash, no graffiti, no homeless. No slatternly anything, really, adding to the impression that we’d rolled back 130 years to pioneer days of prosperity, cows, creameries, and the new trend in architecture named after the then-reigning monarch in Britain, Queen Victoria. Butterfat Palaces built for butter kings and cream princesses. Engrossed as we were in our delicious chicken mole, we became fully alert when the cowboy left his post and shuffled out, clearly in bedroom slippers. We speculated he must live upstairs. Exhausted and happy, we too shuffled a block home, tucked ourselves in, and were happy the hens next door observed a decent bedtime.

The Victorian Inn did offer something Covid-y in a bag for breakfast, but we opted to check out Poppa Joe’s diner, and you would have, too, had you seen it. Cooks grilled behind the counter. Memorabilia was everywhere, decades and decades of it. Old black & white photos, and not just of dairymen, but a female runner headed for the Olympics back in the 20s, pictures from

the Canary Islands where the owner’s forebears had lived. Still on the menu, several owners later, Portuguese sausage. Habitues sat playing cards at nine in the morning in what had once been the saloon, converted to a game room during Prohibition. We ordered monstrous breakfasts intended for cattle herders or dairy folk, and our waiter had more to talk about than just the food.

“I’d never worked more than six months anyplace before I came here,” he said. “But the food’s good, the people are nice, and I live upstairs. I don’t go more than 75 feet in any direction, just to the post office across the street. I’m so busy I go to bed exhausted. But these are real nice people.”

He got to telling us a little bit about the place, who’d opened it, who’d bought it; the departing card players broke up his monologue. The last of the departing players lingered at our table, after inquiring if we were from out of town, and whether we were enjoying ourselves. Again we put the Portuguese sausage and eggs on hold while he told his tale. He’d been one of a foursome who stepped up to buy Poppa Joes, but something had happened and they bought it, without him. This was clearly a central theme with him, and he omitted a few details that he imagined we already knew. While he spoke another elderly couple hobbled in, the man wearing a neck brace. Everyone seemed slightly broken but not out. It began to feel very homey. We recognized the cowboy from the night before, now having breakfast. We ate thoughtfully.

We visited the old graveyard on the hill, sitting in the shade of old redwoods. We realized you could potentially see the ocean on a clear day. We passed The Shaw House Inn, with its beautiful garden, and I wistfully thought of staying another night. There was more to explore. Architectural nuances to decipher: Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, Italianate, Second Empire, Carpenter Victorian, Shingle Style...

We chose the old Ferndale-Petrolia Road to connect up to the 101, a leisurely homage to The Lost Coast. Utterly magnificent vistas of mountainside dairy farming gave way to the endless blue Pacific. Everywhere you turned it was a dream, another yearning satisfied. We stopped every five minutes to take pictures of something. Cowboys herding the cows. Waves crashing on the rocks. Golden hillsides. All of it—California’s finest. *

