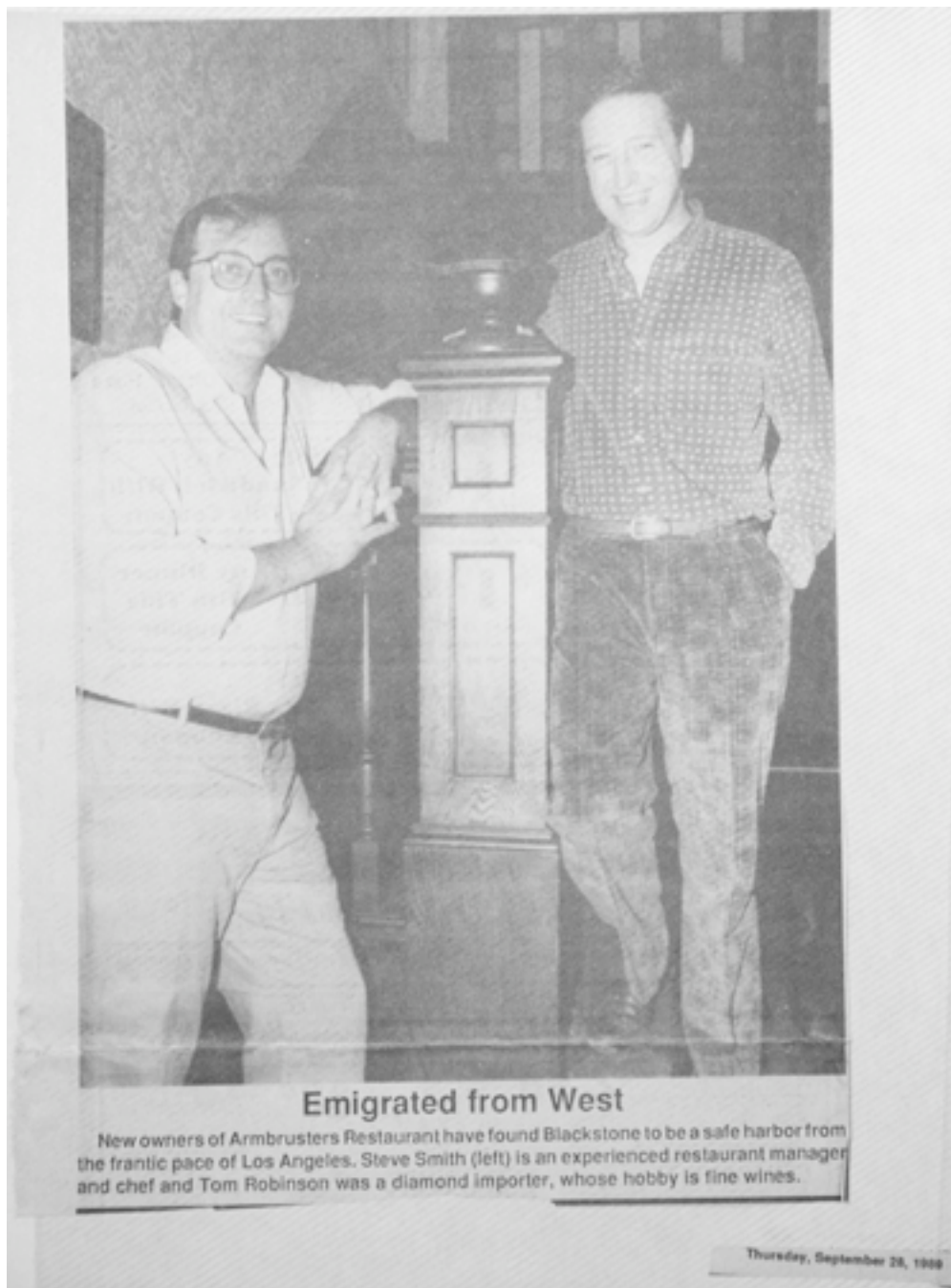


Land of Milk and Honey



“Go West, young man,” 19th century journalist Horace Freely said when the eastern cities swelled with emigrants from Europe. Tired of congestion? City smog and pollution? Houses too expensive and the land all taken? California beckoned like a mythic promise: a golden cornucopia overflowing with prosperity.

But the advice has changed directions in recent years.

1”Go East, North...anywhere,” native Californians are now saying. According to a recent L.A. Times poll, 48 percent of the people questioned said they would like to leave within

the next year. In the past 12 months, 282,686 left their Eden. It was not God who was casting them out, but the sheer weight of their own numbers.

“It was rush hour 24 hours a day,” said Tom Robinson, who with Steve Smith, had finally had enough. “One day I woke up and said this is it! I’ve had it!” and Robinson started looking for a land where tomatoes tasted like tomatoes, where you didn’t wake up each morning with smog burning your eyes and throat, and where the hum in the air came from birds and not the freeway.

Out of the ashes of their California dream a new one had risen: owning a country inn, a grand old mansion full of Southern charm, and living in a small town.

Because they both had grown up in mid-west small towns, they knew there was a place somewhere where you could still walk on the streets at night and smile and wave at people without their being suspicious of your motives.

“We started looking from Charleston north,” said Robinson, who had spent 18 years as a diamond importer in California, but he couldn’t find the gem he was looking for until they decided to try Virginia.

A lady at a Visitor Center said Armbrusters in Blackstone was for sale. “We made it no further than Blackstone” Robinson said. This was the place they had dreamed of.

“When we saw the restaurant and met the Armbrusters, the idea of a country inn went out the window. Everything about this community was like what we have fantasized. The condition of the homes and the town, the pride, and the willingness of the people to work together impressed me,” Robinson said. When he saw a lady stop to pick up a piece of trash on Main Street, put it in her pocket and walk on, he knew he had found the right town.

Smith, who has been a hotel and restaurant manager as well as a chef, said he immediately saw the potential here to build a business of his own instead of always working for other people.

He also recalled how intolerable L.A. had become for him. He and his wife, who is finishing some college courses in L.A. lived in a nice area near Hollywood where silent screen stars used to live. But it was silent no more.

“My mother came to visit only once. She swore she’d never come back because the helicopters, whose rotors shook the house, and the automatic rifle fire in adjacent neighbors kept her awake at night.

“People just don’t appreciate what they have here,” Smith said. In L.A. there are 600 gangs with about 100,000 members. “It’s no place to raise a family,” Smith said. He described schools where kids are padlocked in for safety and searched with metal detectors.

When it comes to real estate prices, there is no way to compare Blackstone with California, Robinson said.

“The only hope a first time home buyer has for a two bedroom house is 65 miles out in the desert where the average price is \$150,000. In L.A. the median cost of a house is \$300,000. But when you get your house in a development, you’ve got a two-hour drive to work each way—that is, if you don’t encounter a wreck, rain, or snow, which he said was now coming to the mountains which separate the city from its urban sprawl.

Robinson still marvels at the absence of gridlocked highways. And he laughed when he suddenly realized that he has only used his horn once since he’s been in Virginia.

Salaries were another example of how different Blackstone is from California. “If you make \$40,000 a year out there, you are broke. The poverty level is at \$50,000.” Robinson recalled a newspaper article that listed the school superintendent’s personal driver’s salary at \$90,000.

“But I suspect he’s a bodyguard,” Robinson said. “All the members of the school board have them because the kids shoot at them...honestly!”

These two emigrants feel they are just the beginning of a great exodus of equity rich Californians, who when they sell their houses on the inflated markets of San Francisco and L.A. can afford to move anywhere in the country. And because of lower mortgage payments, they can also afford to take pay cuts.

And as they leave, the sound and the face of California changes behind them. Last year two million people poured in.

“And most of these are from Asia and east Europe,” Robinson said. He laughed at a joke being passed around back there. “The people in the eastern European countries are just now getting the Gidget movies of the 60/s on their television.”

Smith said that he read that 80 percent of the children in California schools have English as a second language. Los Angeles has become the nation’s new Ellis Island as the world pours in through its gates.

Ironically, the new owners of Armbrusters Restaurants have come to the shore of this small town just as the Asians, Latins, and Europeans come to L.A. Their bags are packed with hope and a hunger to improve the quality of their lives.

But unlike those who come to California because of a lack of freedom in other countries, Robinson and Smith are fleeing the excess of freedom. “Too many choices can cause boredom and lethargy,” Robinson observed. And unrestrained freedom to grow eventually destroys freedom itself, Californians have found out.

The uncomplicated life offered by Blackstone has made Robinson feel like a boy at Christmas. Each day he takes delight in the clean air, the friendly people, the easy pace, and the birds that wake him in the morning.

“It would be a darn shame if more people found out about this,” Smith said as if he’d discovered a hidden valley where soft meadows and clear streams sparkle with gold nuggets waiting for the taking.

“We’d like to keep it to ourselves for awhile.”