

Sonoma

PALMY DAYS FOR SONOMA COUNTY

by Martin Levy

Luther Burbank christened Santa Rosa Valley "the chosen spot of all the earth" more than a century ago, when it was a sleepy farming community. Since then, thousands of people have become similarly enamored with Santa Rosa and have taken up residence there.

Many of them traveled the world in search of the perfect place to call home and settled on Sonoma County. That's perhaps the greatest tribute to the area's charms.

A COVETED LIFESTYLE

Santa Rosa and the surrounding towns have come of age gracefully — and with so much style that Sonoma County was the subject of a recent feature article in the posh magazine *Town and Country*.

And yet, the area's casual demeanor had remained intact. So many rural attributes have been preserved that one of its towns, Healdsburg, recently was singled out by *Newsweek* as California's last refuge, a place "where the living is easy." This lifestyle is the driving force behind the rapidly appreciating property values throughout Sonoma County.



Photo by Ed Brown

Anxious to enjoy a better quality of life, people, especially from southern California, are flocking to the Santa Rosa area. Many from the Los Angeles area became millionaires just by owning land there. After three or four years of home ownership, they cashed out and relocated to areas with less crime, congestion, traffic and smog.

Sonoma County fits the bill and its desirability has made it the second fastest-growing county in the Bay Area, behind only the Napa-Solano region.

Nine times out of 10, it's the lifestyle that attracts home buyers to Sonoma County, not the lower property values. When they realize they can get a lot more house for their money, southern California buyers are often amazed to find that after selling their L.A. home for \$500,000 they can purchase a comparable home, plus a few acres in Sonoma county, for \$400,000.

These buyers generally want large homes, like those in southern California, built on a one- to 10-acre parcel, and are willing to pay top dollar. Hence, the value of upper-end Sonoma County homes is fast approaching that of homes in the traditionally more expensive parts of the Bay Area, such as Marin and the Peninsula.

A fair share of Marin residents are crossing the county line to become Sonoma County dwellers. California Department of Finance figures released in September