

California's Rural Jurors: The Red State Region Demystified

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*"And no less happy he who knows the rural gods"
Virgil, 70-19 B.C. Eclogues, I, 16*

California's Central Valley and central North State jurors from two counties, Stanislaus and Tehama, agreed to answer a written questionnaire before participating in some *Truman & Associates* mock trials recently. Their concerns sound similar, their hardships varied. The following provides counsel with some insight into California's Valley jurors -- their thoughts and their approach to life. Some of the parallel concerns and noted characteristics of the two regions may mirror the sentimentality of other rural areas of California.

To the coastal communities of California, the more rural interior counties seem distant, even remote. The Blue State/Red State dichotomy illustrative of the state's political election map shows further divide economically, socially, and culturally as relayed by the Valley residents.

Stanislaus County, Pop. 492,233 (2003 est.)

Jurors sense their county's growing pains as they witness the effects of rapid growth and expansion. "Lifestyle in the Valley is country mixed with commuters," lamented one juror. Indeed, the "bedroom community" label affixed by some jurors describes the area in which "the valuable farmland is slowly fading away." Those people who are paid rural wages dramatically feel the economic disparity.

"You have the professionals working for the big money in the Bay Area and buying homes here for less money causing our house prices to 'skyrocket' leaving you, the middle of society, with nowhere to live. This used to be a large agricultural area, but now they are taking the land to build homes and stores. We are being priced out!"

In fact, the 2000 U.S. Census reports that there was a 10% growth in population in Stanislaus County from April 2000 to July 2003, wherein statewide the change was 4.8%.

Along with the rapid development, jurors note that Modesto cannot keep up with water production. Thus, they acknowledge the need for construction of additional water treatment centers.

Those who are long-time county residents seem to sense the most loss: "I have lived in Modesto my entire life and I can hardly afford to live here. We need better paying jobs and more affordable housing." Low wages means economic hardship, and those who are less educated complain bitterly about feeling pinched as their "wages do not keep up with the cost of living." They sense that unemployment has hit their county with greater impact than elsewhere.

The 2000 U.S. Census reported that in 1999 the median household income for Stanislaus County totaled \$40,101 by comparison to the \$47,493 statewide median income.

Some jurors seem wistful about what used to be. "Most other areas seem to grow but stay the same. This area has changed a lot." Indeed, change has brought too much traffic, diminished air quality, rising violent crime and gang activity.

Jurors who have emigrated from regions outside of the Valley note differences in cultural, political and social attitudes. "It seems people are less educated and more redneck types." Others mention that the slower pace, in comparison to other areas of California, provides the "more down-home family feel" characteristic of the county -- "a little friendlier and more compassionate." Conversely, the perception of rampant illegal immigration prompts negative opinion that the influx stretches the county welfare system "to the max."

Notably, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 2000, 70% of residents had a high school diploma whereas 14% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Statewide the figures are 77% and 27%, respectively.

One juror summed up the Valley as being "busy" yet "unique" due to its location within a day trip to San Francisco, the foothills, a national park, Reno, Lake Tahoe and other surrounding recreational areas. It offers comfortable living and a slower paced life. It does not resemble their common perceptions of the "rat race of the San Francisco Bay Area or Los Angeles." In the end, jurors hope that their uniqueness may not be put at risk by developers. "As long as ALL the surrounding agriculture doesn't get sold to developers, we have wonderful produce and a very agricultural community."

In the courtroom, the rural outlook seems evident with jurors making statements indicative of heightened sensitivity about the corporate lawyer picking on the "little guy." Jurors warned in post trial interviews that the attacks on the little guy's character can "set off" a jury. In the end, the David v. Goliath personification remains alive and well in Stanislaus County, and most likely throughout rural California and elsewhere.

Tehama County, Pop. 58,582 (2003 est.)

This county is nestled under the recreation-rich Shasta County, and next door to Butte and Colusa counties. Whereas Stanislaus is positioned to become more cosmopolitan with development, Tehama appears to be more insular. In fact, some of the residents seem to feel stifled. The smaller community has benefits such as less traffic and friendlier people, however, "has a lack of social activities and places to go" within the county. They routinely travel to the big city of Redding in Shasta County to shop for necessities and other items.

The main concern expressed by residents of Stanislaus also prevails here: A low wage scale due to "jobs with no future" colliding with a rising cost of living. Residents bemoan the limited opportunities for gainful employment. Hence, crime has increased, especially with gang activity. Drugs are becoming more prevalent, thus, diminishing the promise of a safe and less stressful family life.

Indeed, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that the 2000 census found that the median income for Tehama County in 1999 was \$31,206. Within the county, 76% of residents have a high school diploma, and 11% have a bachelor's degree or higher education.

Tehama residents seek to protect their environment while trying to progress economically. They question how they can improve the area economy "without too much impact on the natural resources." They express concern about the amount of pesticides used by area farmers on their health and the health of their children.

Demographically, jurors note that there is a growing population of Latinos, due to the agricultural needs of the county. Along with the expanding population, the poverty level of the county seems to be rising, and with it a demand for more government services. As one elementary school teacher remarked, "More than 50% of the students at my school are on free lunches. For some of our 'below poverty level' families, this is the only meal they get. Health care is totally forgotten."

Politically, some jurors proudly acknowledge that the climate is decidedly more conservative than the Bay Area. "We are more Republican and right wing than most of California, and for that matter, the country." Another juror, notably a rancher from a long family tradition of ranching, stated that, "The world is too liberal. We are slower, old fashioned and trusting."

To the transplanted resident from another county, some "culture shock" may be felt. "The mentality is often very 'back woods' and many would prefer it to stay that way. It is not a community that welcomes change or growth." Accordingly, the U.S. Census Bureau reported a mere 4.5% growth in population between April 2000 and July 2003.

There exists an underlying alienation towards Sacramento. "Our area is working towards being more of a part of California. We are trying to bring industry in that it will help us economically. We are building (slowly) an educational infrastructure so we can better compete. These are our biggest differences with much of California. Most of the state has already accomplished what we're working towards." Accordingly, they mention their frustrations at trying to participate in what they perceive to be a rosier California economy elsewhere when they are "often forgotten in Sacramento politics while Southern California is more influential." There exists the deep-seeded belief that, "The California government does not understand the needs of our more rural regions. We have many concerns as far as jobs, the economy, and ecology."

Housing prices are "extremely high" and "skyrocketing" for the residents. But what keeps the residents staying in Tehama county is twofold: An area where people are "not so concerned with images and 'things'... Work is not 'everything.'" Secondly, its long lasting appeal lies in that "it is small enough for most people to know each other. There is a closeness." In fact, at a recent jury selection, many of the prospective jurors knew each other, with one alternate having been a self-described "second mom" to the defendant.

Overall, jurors seem happy with the slow paced, rural lifestyle. As for jury service? It is unconfirmed how jury assembly room attendance is bolstered in Tehama County. But just up the road in Redding (Shasta County), a person can be snatched out of the post office line in the late morning, with instructions to "report for duty in two hours." The source in Redding, a businesswoman, explained that's how she was summoned. She "had heard" of similar methods used in Tehama County since the post office is only two blocks from the county courthouse in Red Bluff. For those who angle to avoid jury duty, an escape to a slower paced, more rural county may cause one to avoid standing in a U.S. Postal Office line, especially one located near a courthouse.

Conclusion

Each county in California carries with it a unique set of characteristics, concerns, and influences. A jury selection in an unfamiliar rural county should prompt counsel to research the county's most recent demographic profile, read the local and regional newspapers for editorial opinions and citizen comments in response thereto, and learn about the area from the Chamber of Commerce. At a jury selection, counsel might be wise to seek out a local layperson to sit in the courtroom during this phase of trial. Said local can be helpful in revealing local spin while providing underlying facts and regional biases.

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