

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### Christo's 1976 Running Fence



The hamlet of Valley Ford hasn't changed much in the last four decades. There's more traffic, of course: It's located on scenic Highway 1, and Bodega Bay is just 8 miles to the west. But Dinucci's Italian Dinners is still there, serving the family-style meals that made its initial reputation more than a century ago. Local ranchers still come to the Valley Ford Market for coffee and the latest talk on lamb prices and government regulation. And the land itself seems immutable: The rolling pastures broken by eucalyptus windbreaks — speckled with fat sheep and sleek cattle — present a prospect as timeless as the nearby Pacific Ocean.

But something happened here over 40 years ago that changed everything. A discreet monument marking that event stands at the Valley Ford post office, a single, corroded metal pole 18 feet high, with a small commemorative plaque at its base. It was at this spot that "Running Fence" came through, completed on Sept. 10, 1976.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude ultimately enlisted 59 families whose properties fell within the proposed route of the fence. The ranchers and farmers weren't merely acquiescent, however; they had become committed partisans for the project. At the same time, news of the fence generated fierce push-back, primarily from environmentalists concerned about impacts on the land, and also from locals who were offended by promotion of the project as "art." They formed the Committee to Stop the Running Fence, and vowed to send Christo fleeing from Sonoma.

The upshot of the discord was a seemingly endless series of meetings convened by the California Coastal Commission, the Marin County Planning Commission and the Sonoma County Planning Commission. The process was rancorous and dragged on for more than three years. "I remember at one point somebody declaring that the fence was 'fascist art,'" said Brian Kahn, then a freshman Sonoma County Supervisor who had been newly appointed to fill a vacancy. "I didn't physically roll my eyes, but I rolled them internally. I was perplexed by the furor. The fence drew all these incredibly intense emotions that — from my perspective, at least — it didn't warrant. Politics and art don't mix well, and my bias has always been to let artists do what they want."

"But the fence came along just at a point when land-use policy was the primary matter of concern in the county, and it seemed to galvanize emotions on all sides of the issue. In a way I didn't realize at the time, it focused people on the landscape and the impact our land-use policies would have on the future of the county." But if opponents inveighed furiously against the project at the meetings, supporters — mainly ranchers and dairy farmers — spoke passionately in its favor. Christo seemed utterly serene. He spoke in defense of his art, and his disposition was always sunny; he never seemed worried, or even slightly anxious.

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“He said on more than one occasion that the process, all the meetings, the environmental impact studies, were part of his art,” said Barbara Gonnella, owner of the Union Hotel in Occidental. “And that was the absolute truth. If he hadn’t been able to build the fence in the end, I’m sure he would still have considered the project a success.” Gonnella hosted a screening of a film about “Running Fence” that was funded by the Smithsonian Museum of Modern Art. For Gonnella, the documentary had special resonance because it featured one of the last interviews with Jeanne-Claude before her death from a brain aneurysm in 2009.

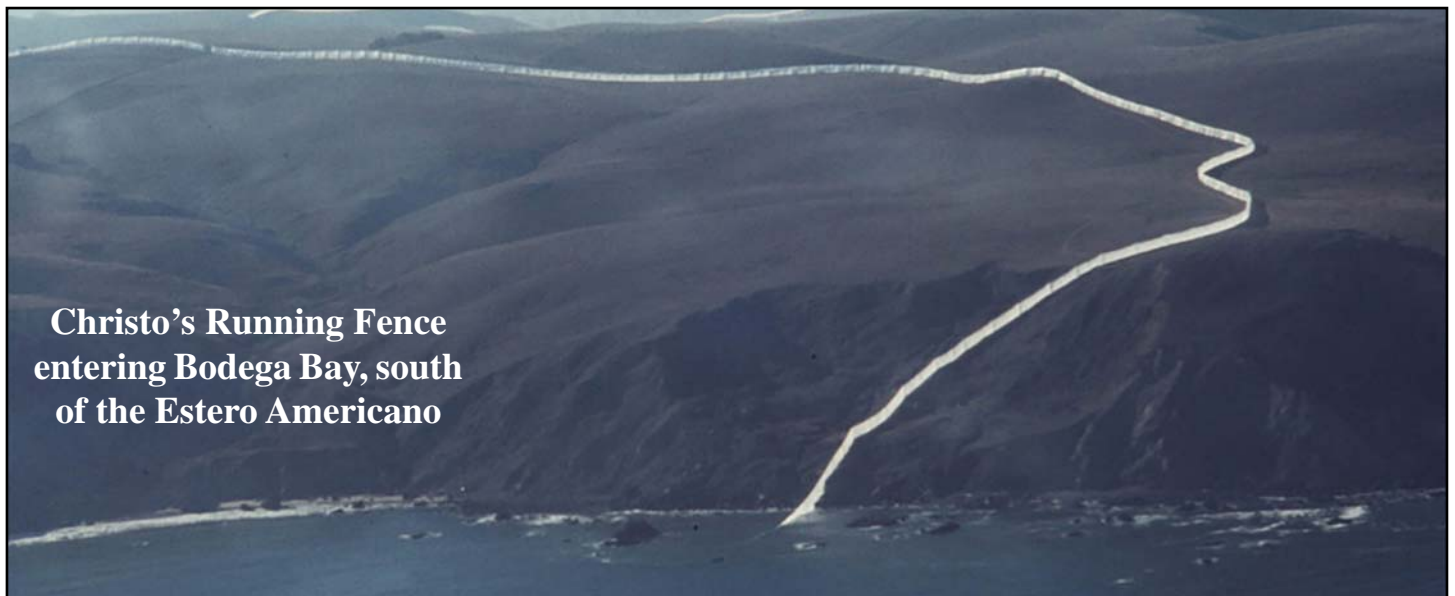
“By the 1990s, their work was a complete collaboration,” Gonnella said. “It was never just ‘Christo.’ It was always ‘Christo and Jeanne-Claude,’ and to me, that emphasized their connection with each other and humanity at large. Christo’s art incorporates the landscape and the people on it, and the relationships he builds with those people. “Our family is still in close contact with him. When our mother died, he was the first person to send flowers. When he’s in the area, he eats at the Union Hotel. He’s still part of our lives. His work still affects us. He still affects us.”

Ultimately, of course, the fence went up. Scores of volunteers laid out the route, sank the posts, strung the cables, hung the fabric. Christo was right there among them, wearing an OSHA-required hard hat, blissfully shouldering his share of the grunt labor.

The path the fence took across the gentle hills south of Valley Ford, now empty save for grass undulating in the wind and myriad grazing sheep. “I think I was the youngest volunteer on the installation”, said Barbara’s brother, Joe Pozzi. “It was an incredible experience, and then, two weeks after it went up (in 1976), we took it down. Two months later, you couldn’t tell it had been there. It changed people’s lives, and for the better.”

The Running Fence project not only brought Sonoma County to the attention of the world, it also, somehow, brought the people of Sonoma County together. “It was strange,” said Gonnella, “Once the fence started going up, once people could drive out and see this miraculous thing unfolding across the land, all the bitterness, all the protests, just kind of — stopped.” She paused, looking out a window. Her eyes were moist, and when she spoke again, her voice was charged with emotion. “I was only 17 then,” she said. “I loved living out in the west county. Everybody knew each other, most of the families were from the same region in northern Italy. But when the fence came, I got a sense of something bigger. The way it looked running across the hills, shimmering, changing colors in the light and the wind. I was so young, and it was so — so romantic. So incredibly romantic. I felt like my heart was going to burst.” -- *Glen Martin Sonoma Magazine 2020*

(<https://www.sonomamag.com/40-years-later-christos-running-fence-in-sonoma-marin/>)



**Christo’s Running Fence  
entering Bodega Bay, south  
of the Estero Americano**