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Anne T. Kent California History Room

Original tape recording available at the Anne T. Kent California History Room.

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Vera Schultz

VERA LUCILLE SCHULTZ

Interviewed by Carla Ehat, March 28, 1983

Edited by Catherine Ramberg

You may also enjoy reading the complete [transcript](#) of this oral history interview.

Vera Schultz is best known as the person whose vision, tenacity and courage were chiefly responsible for the Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center and for the advance of county government in Marin from the disarray of cracker barrel politics to democratic government and systematic public administration. Vera Schultz has well earned the title of Marin's First Lady. Her background in the League of Women Voters and her brilliant leadership qualities combine to make her political career one of outstanding service as Mill Valley's first City Councilwoman and later the first woman to serve on the Marin County Board of Supervisors.

Vera: I was born on a cattle ranch named Dutch Flat in Nevada on August 31, 1902. My lifelong idealism came from the time that Aurelia Henry Rhinehart, president of Mills College, came to speak to my senior class in Reno in the Spring of 1918. She told us the importance of what was about to happen when women got the vote after all those years. I was very much impressed with her as a person. She was tall and regal with that gorgeous braid of hair around her head. She inspired me with telling us how significant it was that we were coming into our maturity at a time when victory finally was ahead for this effort to give women the vote.

So, I started as a freshman at the University of Nevada just filled with the idealism. Here we got the vote and we're going to make it clean. We're going to clean up government. I was very naive. I originally enrolled in the University to major in English, but while I was there the university opened its first class in journalism. I was one of the twenty four who signed up for that first class in journal-

ism and my life took quite a turn because I became very much interested in newspaper writing. One summer when I was still a student there, I went down to Oakland and got a summer job on the *Oakland Post Inquirer*, which was a Hearst Newspaper.

After I was graduated from the University of Nevada in 1924, I won a teaching fellowship to Berkeley in the English Department. I continued to keep up my association with Hearst Newspapers while I worked on my Masters Degree in English for two years. At the conclusion of the two years, I went to work for the paper again as the successor of Elsie Robinson who had started a Saturday children's page for the *Inquirer* called "Aunt Elsie." So, I became "Aunt Elsie," but I also had a daily column on women's affairs and women's club activities; I also did general reporting besides.

My husband, whom I had met in Reno, through a sorority sister, and I had moved to Berkeley. We were invited to a party in Mill Valley. It was spring and the forget-me-nots and the wild iris and fruit trees were in blossom and it was like paradise. We were hooked. I said to my husband, when we went back to Berkeley that night, "Why don't we rent some little place in Mill Valley and just move over for the summer?" I took a two-month leave from my job at the paper. We found a little cottage on Hueters Lane, above Molino Avenue to rent. We packed up our things to come to Mill Valley. I intended to write that summer, as all of us on the newspaper had been dabbling in short stories and submitting them. I had submitted one to *Harper's Magazine* and had gotten back a letter along with a rejection slip in which the editor said he would like to see something else I'd done. So, all I brought with us to Mill Valley was boxes of copy paper, my typewriter, our bedding and a few pots and pans.

When we got to Mill Valley, we found the cottage we had rented occupied. There had been a change in the owners' needs and they hadn't been able to reach us. So, we arrived and no place to sleep. This was the spring of 1928 and there was no hotel in Mill Valley. We cruised around and as it began to grow dusk, we found a lot on Ethel Avenue that had a "For Sale" sign on it. We made our bed on that lot. It was so dark that we couldn't see very well and my husband made our camp on top of a mole. The mole kept me awake; the activity underneath was very distracting.

Long before daylight, I was awake and saw the sun come up on this lot through the oak trees and the madrones and the toyon and I said to my husband, "As soon as we can, let's go and see the people who own the lot." We went down to the old swiss chalet-type station that was in Mill Valley, cleaned up and went to the bakery across the street and had some breakfast. It was about ten a.m. and we called the number from the "For Sale" sign. We had no place to stay and we had to do something that day. As it turned out, the owner, a woman, was a reporter on the *Chronicle* in San Francisco and we immediately hit it off. We had a delightful visit and ended by paying her \$250 for the lot right then and there.

We wanted to build a weekend cabin on it. We subsequently bought four lots that were behind the Ethel Avenue lot and built three houses up there. I got involved in the actual construction of the house, doing the sub-flooring all by myself. We had hired a contractor and builder, Nick Klinessharel of Berkeley to design the house. Every night around the table after dinner, we revised the plan for our one room house and it ended as a five-room house. But it was a dollhouse. It was one of the most gratifying periods in my life because I had never done anything in the way of being a lady carpenter. My husband, Ray, dug out all the rock, which we used in our construction process. We built a great big corner fireplace out of the rock that came out of that site. It is still there.

At the end of my two months leave, the house was not finished and I had to make a hard decision, whether to go back to my job or finish the house. I chose the house, that's permanent. My husband was working in San Francisco and he continued to commute from Mill Valley. After the house was completed, I looked around for something to do, an activity. My neighbor, Mrs. Brown, was the school nurse at Old Mill School. She said to me, "You should go down and see the superintendent because he needs some help in the office." I went down to see the superintendent, A.W. Ray, the superintendent shared by the Mill Valley School and the Sausalito School Districts. I became his secretary, working two days a week in Sausalito and three days in Mill Valley, doing bookkeeping and taking minutes of the school trustees. I also became involved in the school newspaper, *The Old Mill Wheel*. The PTA came to me and asked me if I would go to the Mill Valley City Council on their behalf and urge they put water in a wading pool that the American Legion had built for the children in Old Mill Park. Somehow the city government had never gotten around to putting any water in it. I made the request and it didn't happen. I wondered why.



Vera Schultz

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I had joined the League of Women Voters, which was just getting organized, meeting at the Outdoor Art Club. Women were still learning to be citizens, having only relatively recently gotten the right to vote. So we started a "Know your Town" study group to find out why it took so long to get a decision to put water in the pool. There were about forty women who met at the Outdoor Art Club to learn about it. We brought in each member of the City Council to address us and tell us his perspective on city government and city problems. We had the clerk come, we had the treasurer we had every city employee come in and tell us their functions. We compiled it into a little publication called "Your City and its Government." What we found was that Mill Valley had five city councilmen all of whom were busy men involved in their own businesses. There was no city manager. There was a city clerk who was also the health officer, but it wasn't his job to go and put water in the pool. And it certainly wasn't the City Treasurer's job to fill the pool. It wasn't anybody's responsibility. The city councilmen were policy makers. They were not the ones who went out and did the work.

The women in the study group decided to ask the city council to call for the election of a Board of Freeholders. The law provides that if you don't like the kind of government you have, you can change it. The board of freeholders consisted of fifteen people who had a year to study local government and make recommendations. I was elected as a freeholder. The result of a year's study, which we presented to the City Council, was an ordinance proposing the creation of Council-Manager government for Mill Valley. The Council acceded to this request; there was an election and the people of Mill Valley voted in this form of government.

The first man to fill the position of City Manager was an engineer, as the Council thought the city's bad streets needed an engineer. However, after two years I did not think the City Manager system was working, as the Council was using him as an office boy. Someone that they told to do this and to do that instead of saying, "Here's our problem, what do you recommend?" At that time, 1946, we were having some really serious problems of sewage disposal. The Southern Marin Sanitation District had been set up by the voters to solve the problem of sewage disposal for all the communities around



Mill Valley City Hall, 1950's

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Richardson Bay. The City Manager had something to contribute if they'd given him a chance, but they were not asking him.

I decided to throw my hat into the ring to be elected to the City Council. By that time I had lived in Mill Valley for thirteen years, and yet I was still thought of as a newcomer! My experience on the Board of Freeholders and the League of Women Voters was such that I felt I could make a contribution. I sat down and wrote a letter to the voters and told them why I was a candidate. I told them about my experience on the freeholders, what we had discovered about our town, what its needs were, what our problems were and what I felt I could contribute towards

solving those problems. I mailed it to the several thousand registered voters in the city. At that time you could send two cents worth of mail to a great many people.

I won in every precinct and got eighty-six percent of all votes cast. My welcome onto the City Council was a change in the rules before the first meeting. Under the existing tradition, the person who got the highest votes got to be mayor and I got the highest vote but they couldn't go that far. The other Council members decided among themselves that they would have a holdover member of the board be the mayor, not a brand new member. So, one of the first challenges to me was what to do about this. I did not make a fuss even though I had been cheated out of what was rightfully mine. I felt then that what I did was going to set a tone for what other women would do in public office. I very deliberately chose to be a lady and to be nice and not make a fuss. I took my place on the board and went to work on the problems that confronted Mill Valley. I had four marvelous years on the City Council.

In 1950, when my term on the City Council ended, I decided to run for State Assembly against incumbent Richard McCollister. I had been going to the state legislature for several years as the advocate for the California League of Women Voters. Our job up there was to represent the public interest on bills of concern to the League. They selected certain legislative directions every year and wanted to influence them. Fern Andrews and I were the first resident lobbyists, although we called ourselves advocates for the League of Women Voters. We lived there and our job was to see every one of those one hundred and twenty legislators on each of these bills that were pending and to make sure they understood the legislation and the position of the League.

This was the heyday of Artie Samish and lobbyists. I became so sickened by the corrosive effect of the third house, the lobbyists, on legislation, it made me become a candidate for the Assembly. I felt that someone had to tell the voters what was going on, how our government was being corroded by selfish interests. The incumbent assemblyman had been shown to have accepted bribes, and this had been spread all over the newspapers. At that time politics in the State of California was very much in the hands of the lobbyists because of what we called cross filing, which was a device that made the two parties impotent. The two-party system in California was appalling and it was the lobbyists who called the shots.

Richard McCollister had been a member of the Board of Freeholders with me, and we rode back and

forth to Sacramento from Mill Valley while I was an advocate. He was very nice. He'd come up and pick me up and all the way to Sacramento, we'd discuss legislation. But I was disappointed that he was part of the cronyism.

In order to get the nomination for the Democratic Party, I had to go to the Democratic Central Committee and ask them if they had a candidate for that office. They did not. They said they had had very bad luck with their candidates, Sam Gardner and Leonard Thomas being defeated by the cross filing device, so that there hadn't been a Democratic candidate in November for sixteen years; it was always settled in June.

After I got the blessing of the Democratic Central Committee in Marin, I had to go to Sonoma to get their blessing since they were part of the Assembly district. They did not know who I was, so I explained to them I had been up in Sacramento as a lobbyist, and I had seen with my own eyes what was going on—that I knew how the game was played. At that time, *Colliers Magazine* came out with a big picture of Artie Samish with the capitol on his knee, and he was lifting the lid of the capitol and saying, "I have more power than the Governor of California." I used that cartoon to say that this is why I wanted to be a candidate; I didn't like to see our government corroded by selfish interests. I got the nomination and went to work mobilizing the women. I told them the story of how women had struggled to get the vote and how long it had taken. I started the coffee hour by getting groups of friends together to tell them why I was a candidate and having them spread the word. Then one of Artie Samish's lieutenants came to my treasurer and said, "We are impressed with the way this candidate is conducting her campaign and we would like to help." We were very broke; we were selling these little campaign buttons for a dollar each to finance our campaign. My husband was so marvelous, he financed the campaign. But, we turned down Samish's help. I said, "Thanks but no thanks." I did not think the members of the third house (lobbyists) should elect the members of the assembly or the senate and then tell them what to do because part of the deal was that I had to promise not to ax around in other people's business. However I believe that this is the business of the people of California, not his business. As an aside, years later I brought Artie Samish to Marin to give a talk in Mill Valley for the American Association of University Women on what to do to reclaim the legislature from the third house.



Vera, 1974

I was defeated in my bid for Assembly; out of 61,000 votes cast, I lost by 4500. Richard McCollister was re-elected. One day I met him in the street in Mill Valley. Our relationship had always been cordial, notwithstanding I had gone after him with hammer and tongs. He suggested that I run for the Board of Supervisors. He wanted me out of the way, so that in two years when he had to run again he didn't want me to run against him again.

McCollister went to the editor of the *Mill Valley Record*, Stan Wilkins, to get him to support me for Supervisor. Wilkins had not supported me in the assembly campaign because I was a Democrat and he was Republican, but since the county offices are non-partisan he could support me. He came to

my house and said that I had done a good job on the City Council and if I ran for office, the paper would be behind me. It had really grieved me that the *Mill Valley Record* hadn't endorsed my candidacy for Assembly because I felt I'd been a very good citizen of Mill Valley; but that's politics and you do have to recognize the facts of life.

I was not running against an incumbent, I was running against six men, including Steve Balzan. My campaign went very smoothly, and I felt good about it. I knew county government. I had been an observer at Board of Supervisors meetings for ten years for the League of Women Voters.

At the same time that I was running for the Board of Supervisors, I was a delegate for the 1953 Democratic Convention in Chicago for Estes Kefauver. Mr. Kefauver had put Artie Samish behind bars for income tax evasion and a few other things, so I was just ready made to support him. So I went on the ballot that June in two places: for election to the Board of Supervisors and on the partisan ballot as election for the Kefauver slate to the Democratic convention. It is not a good idea to be running for a nonpartisan office like the Board of Supervisors while you are also on the ballot for a partisan race.

I had been selected by *Ladies Home Journal* to be the subject of a feature story on that convention as a delegate. This came out in the *Ladies Home Journal* in October just before the election, and I think it helped me find the voters. Marin was a very Republican county; it shared the distinction with Orange County of being preponderantly Republican.

I won by something like 145 or 165 votes that November against Steve Balzan, but something had happened because I had almost won the whole thing in June out of a field of seven. My husband and I went on a little vacation after the election, and when we returned we found that the defeated candidate had called for a recount. The action for the recount came from George Jones and Steve Balzan who had two Republican attorneys who didn't charge him a penny to bring that recount action. I hired Delger Trowbridge to defend my election. The very first day we started opening the ballot envelopes, they began to disqualify my votes on the basis that they were a recognizable ballot. They had pin pricks on the corner or they were torn. There were, unfortunately, and are still probably people who sell their votes, who say for so much I will vote for so and so, but they have to give some evidence that that's what they did. For the first two days none of Steve Balzan's ballots were disqualified, just mine. There were sixty extra votes for Mr. Balzan that showed up the second day of the recount and none for me. There were twenty each in three precincts in Marin City. But the unique thing about this circumstance was that in those three precincts more people voted for supervisor than voted for president; this upset the voting pattern of the whole United States. We discovered that the ballots had not been brought to the County Clerk's office that night. They had, contrary to the requirement of law, been in the Marin City Fire House until the next morning, and then had been brought to the County Clerk. Somebody had access to those. Some of my votes were disallowed because they claimed that the person who voted for President Eisenhower, when he folded his ballot, it put an X after my name and they didn't mean to vote for me; it was an accident.

They finally wiped out my margin by disallowing ballots and all that stood between me and really having the election taken away from me was the absentee ballots. All of those had been counted in the County Clerk's office, so he proposed that we let them stand. We declined; we wanted those counted also. My friend Sam Gardner proposed that we go into the three precincts with affidavits for the voters asking whether they voted for either candidate for Supervisor. It was a terribly rainy,

stormy time, and my friends went house to house in Marin City and one after another the voters signed these affidavits saying they voted for neither candidate. We also came to Judge Martinelli who was supervising the recount with several oddities about the envelopes. They hadn't been sealed with sealing wax as the law requires. They were sealed with scotch tape, with can be lifted up with a warm iron and there is no evidence it has been tampered with. The judge began to scrutinize every challenge more carefully. Finally we found that someone on George Jones' staff at the County Clerk's office had, in counting the absentee ballots, given twenty-one of my votes to Mr. Balzan and so we emerged, at last, as the victor! I should have pressed criminal charges. Mr. Jones, whose duty it was to swear me in as the new Supervisor, would not do so in the Board room, but rather he swore me in out in the hall.

One of the first issues on my agenda as a new supervisor was to unite the scattered government offices in one location. Anyone who wanted to do business with the County had to run all over Marin to do it. We needed to think about a Civic Center. We had outgrown the Courthouse, and we needed to acquire acreage for a Civic Center and draw county government together. The second issue that I felt we should pursue was that we too, should move into the field of modern administration and have a County Administrator rather than having such a hydra-headed monster of so many independently elected department heads, each doing his own purchasing from pens to paper clips. I advocated centralized purchasing and a public works department to gear ourselves for more efficient government. I was not alone in this perception; others on the board recognized the lack of efficiency in our scattered offices.



Frank Lloyd Wright on his first visit to the future Civic Center site

We met every two weeks at the Courthouse. Our agenda was prepared by the clerk and the meeting was run by the Chairman of the Board, who during my first year was Bill Fusselman. Also on the Board were Mr. Marshall from West Marin, William Gness and Walter Castro.

The first issue with the Civic Center was acquisition of the land. We were looking for two things: a Fair site (because the Art and Garden Center in Ross was getting too small) and a site for the administrative buildings. We appointed a citizens committee to seek a site for these two needs with sufficiently large acreage for both. Mr. Fusselman wanted us to buy the San Rafael Military Academy. The Courthouse gang, lead by George Jones, resisted change and wanted to stay in downtown San Rafael. They liked being downtown because it was so easy to go shopping at noon. But the site we ultimately picked was property that belonged to Mr. Scretini in Santa Venetia; we paid half a million dollars for it.

We also wanted to have a trained County Administrator. We wanted to give him job security so he could make recommendations without fear of being fired. I advocated that we do it for the County in the same way we did it for the town of Mill Valley, with an ordinance so that if any change is

made in it, it has to have a public hearing. At the county level it was merely enacted as an ordinance by the Board of Supervisors, which means they can change it too. This is a lot of power in the hands of so few people but in a representative government, you trust them with the responsibility.

After we had the land selected, we had to select an architect. I had always admired Frank Lloyd Wright's style. I had my husband take me to Carmel to see a house that Mr. Wright had designed there, looking out to the ocean. On New Year's Day, 1957, I was looking at an issue of *House Beautiful* which was devoted to Frank Lloyd Wright, and I thought, "Why don't we reach to the top?" So, I called Mary Summers, who was our Planning Director and who was on the committee to select an architect. I said, "Why can't we think about Frank Lloyd Wright?" She asked me to write him a letter. Well, I spent the rest of that day trying to draft him a letter. I, as an individual, had no right to ask Frank Lloyd Wright to consider working for us, so, I called Aaron Green, Mr. Wright's San Francisco representative. He told me that by chance, Mr. Wright was coming to San Francisco to give the Bernard Maybeck lecture at UC Berkeley, and that he could arrange a meeting with representatives of the County while he was in town.

Four members of the Board went except Mr. Fusselman who protested it. All five members on the committee to select the architect went along with Lee Jordan our County Counsel, Mary Summers our Planning director, Marvin Brigham, Head of our Public Works Department, Leon DeLyle our auditor and John Jensen our administrator.

Mr. Wright was a very charming man, and we were so entranced with him that we stayed and went to the lecture that night. We were enthusiastic about working with him, you see; he had never had a civic center structure designed by him actually be built. He had designed one in Wisconsin, but there was so much opposition it never got built. We asked him to make a presentation to us of his ideas.

He came to San Rafael and gave a talk at the high school. It was packed, standing room only; the community was really interested in Frank Lloyd Wright. We had a sophisticated electorate in Marin County. But there was also opposition from organizations such as the Marin County Taxpayers Association who didn't feel that Marin could justify paying Frank Lloyd Wright ten percent when local architects would charge six percent. But what they were not looking at was that Mr. Wright included all of the exterior engineering and the interior design and a great many other facets of construction costs that would have been added to the others' price making it more like sixteen or eighteen percent.

There were a number of traumatic episodes in the course of moving from having asked him to design the building and actually getting it under construction. The American Legion accused him of un-American activities because he had written an article many years before commendatory of Russia. This came at a public hearing, and it was an embarrassment to some of the people in the audience to witness this abuse.



*Frank Lloyd Wright
with Civic Center plans*

To counter those who were saying that the County couldn't afford this kind of architectural feat, a group of volunteer citizens put together a slide show called "Marin's Greatest Hour," and toured the County with it. They were alarmed by the encroachment of bad design in developments throughout the County and did not want to reproduce San Francisco high-rise buildings here. The rank and file public wanted Mr. Wright's building and every time we had a hearing, they were there.

The Board of Supervisors voted four to one (Mr. Fusselman) to select Mr. Wright and his design. We already had the money because we had put a tax on our annual revenue for construction of a Civic Center years before. So there was no bond expense. Later we did have a bond election to build the adjoining Hall of Justice.

Tragedy struck on April 9, 1959, when Frank Lloyd Wright died. We had a crisis. Mr. Fusselman wanted us to cancel the whole thing at that point because Mr. Wright was no longer involved. But Mr. Wright had completed the plans and since this was his last great works, it would be terrible not to build it. After another fight on the Board, again four to one, we went on with Mr. Wright.

The groundbreaking was held February 15, 1960 and dedicated October 13, 1962. Unfortunately, in the interim, I was defeated in the November election of 1960 and the building almost wasn't built. I lost in the 1960 election because we had a big property re-appraisal, and it went into effect in Mill Valley first because most of the property was changing hands in that district. The Assessor, Bert Brommel had to do it there. George Jones selected the candidate to oppose me, J. Walter Blair. He won.



Marin Civic Center

The composition of the Board of Supervisors changed in that election with the addition of Blair and Ludy who voted with Fusselman. One of the first things that the new Board did was to stop work on the Civic Center to try to convert it into a hospital. That cost \$14,000 before it was reversed. They also went after the Administrator and told him that his days were numbered. The voters of Marin were mobilized, and they came through with a referendum that had so many signatures on it that George Jones stopped counting. Work on the Civic Center was resumed and the office of the administrator was saved.

The voters wanted to recall Walter Blair but they had to wait for the man to be in office for six months. It is not that way anymore; they can do it immediately. The voters waited six months and almost everything that the "wrecking crew" as they called them did added fuel to the flame. Walter Blair was recalled, and Peter Behr was elected in his place.

After I retired from public service, I took up a cause that had been of interest to me for many years. In 1953, in passing the benches on the Courthouse grounds every day, I saw them occupied by idle old people. I often stopped and talked to them, and I found that our County was very much in arrears in making any kind of provision for the housing and the recreation of the seniors in Marin. I

called a meeting in my home of the presidents of the women's clubs in Marin and asked them to give thought to what we could do to provide a senior center. The Outdoor Art Club of Mill Valley offered us their space for a public meeting, and we had a fine panel of speakers. At the County Health office Dr. Dufficy was there as were spokesmen from the Welfare Department telling what the problems of being old were. The end result was that private individuals put up money to rent a house and open the first Marin Senior Center on Fourth Street where the Pancake House is now. We established the Marin Senior Co-ordinating Council. Today, the converted bus depot in downtown San Rafael is the Whistlestop and we have fourteen dining centers where we serve people meals. This is primarily subsidized by federal funds.

After my many years in public service, I believe the democratic principle that each of us is responsible for our government. The Board of Supervisors is there to serve the people, and we should never be intimidated by them. They are our representatives. The adoption by Marin County of the manager principle of government has definitely led to a permanent improvement in the administration of County government. We have had good government in Marin County.

You may also enjoy reading the complete [transcript](#) of this oral history interview.

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- [The Wright Web Guide](#)
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