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**Anne T. Kent California Room**

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**INTERVIEW WITH CLIFFORD CONLY**

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent  
August 26, 1976

**INTERVIEWEE:** Clifford Conly (CC)

**INTERVIEWERS:** Carla Ehat (CE) and Anne Kent (AK)

**ALSO PRESENT:** Elizabeth "Betty" Boyd (BB) and Virginia Borland (VB)

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August 26, 1976

**CE:** Today is Thursday, August 26, 1976. Continuing the Oral History Program of the California Room at the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat. Joining me today is Mrs. Thomas Kent of Kentfield, California; Miss Virginia Borland, Librarian at the Civic Center Library; and dear Elizabeth Boyd who is on the Board of the Audubon Society and most graciously arranged this meeting today with our host, Mr. Clifford Conly. This property at Cypress Grove is one of the loveliest places I have ever seen. You approach it off Highway 1, driving up an intriguing rutted road through the Caroline Livermore Marshland Sanctuary, and you arrive at a property couched in with cypress hedging, and you go through the picket gate and come upon a charming scene: a building that seems to have been put together of many little Victorian cottages, which is the manor house. And then down along the line of the lawn follow four miniature cottages, which have been restored and decorated in magnificent taste. San Francisco architect Clifford Conly Jr. bought Cypress Grove in 1952, restored the place, planted hedges against the wind, and it is about this place that we are going to speak with him today. Tell us, Mr. Conly, how did it all come about?

**CC:** Left to her bridegroom, Jeff Thomson, who was one of the three brothers who owned the Marin French Cheese Company, which is now very famous under the name of Rouge et Noir producing Camembert and Brie and Schloss cheeses. And in the next year -- They used it then as a summer home. They had a sailboat here and they would come out and get away from the cares of the cheese factory. And

the next year, 1923, the Thompsons, being friends of my mother's and father's, invited us all to come here for a picnic. And I still remember very keenly; I was nine years old and we came to this place and it was a beautiful day, not too windy as it often is here, and the water was high and we came in, surrounded by water and there were ducks and geese swimming, and to me it was a very romantic setting. We came back here subsequently many times, enjoyed it very much. It was always very remote. We would go rowing or sailing on the bay. I wish I'd paid more attention to it because at this period in the early 1920s there were still many Indians around here. The Salmina brothers had the store at Marshall. All of this that is now passed into escaped history would have been very easily observed. Anyway, for many years I would come to this place and look at it; I always loved it. And I had said to my father, "Why don't we try and buy it?" He didn't care very much for this part of the world. He thought it was too cold. He wasn't interested. But I continued to want to own it and in 1952, early in 1952, an uncle of mine who was also a great friend of the Thompson family called me and said if I were still interested in Cypress Grove I probably could buy it because many of the original members of the family had died and that they had decided now to put the place on the market. So I bought it very shortly thereafter and I've had it now 24 years and there have been many vicissitudes as Tomales Bay is at full beauty. You have to learn to live with wind and cold, but it's remained, because of its chilliness, a very remote, primitive, unspoiled area which now makes it very unique in the State of California. It's not overrun with subdivisions; there isn't any smog and so one can see a little bit of California as it used to exist.

CE: Your terrace is beautiful with that exquisite lawn under the cypress and everything is so tastefully done in the -- You seem to have planned your planting of white surrounding the lawn in the periphery. In back of the hedgerows you have a garden of vegetables. We've enjoyed some of that at luncheon. I'm certain that the dessert had raspberries in it from your garden. Gracious life style. How many acres are approximately on this property?

CC: Well, I own ten acres only. But about ten years ago all of this land suddenly became enormously valuable to sub-dividers and a series of groups were formed to buy this land and subdivide it. At that time the West Marin Plan called for extensive subdivision along the east shore of Tomales Bay. So I watched all of this with horror because the syndicate that bought around me planned to put a supermarket, a school, hundreds of houses, they were going to develop the little marsh and make it into another Belvedere lagoon. I was caught on this hook and there was very little I could do about it. I just felt that probably this was the end of my occupancy of Cypress Grove, that the whole area was going to be swallowed up into a suburban maze and I felt that I would no longer want to live here. Then suddenly one night a telephone call came to me, near midnight. Dr. Martin Griffin called in 1970 and introduced himself as the original inventor of Audubon Canyon Ranch and said to me that he understood Cypress Grove was for sale. I told him it wasn't for sale, and I never had it for sale. Then we went on to a long conversation and he told me of the aims and interest of Audubon Canyon Ranch and the fact that with the completion to a large extent of purchasable property or the achievement of purchasable property around the

Bolinas Lagoon that Audubon Canyon Ranch was turning its sights northward to the next threatened area which they considered to be Tomales Bay, and that they were very desirous of obtaining a foothold here on the bay, and they were hoping maybe I would be that foothold. Well, it's proved to be a case; I was the foothold. And we have formed a very close, fruitful and attractive association. Eventually this property will pass to Audubon Canyon Ranch to be used for educational or whatever purposes they choose. And because of this possibility, the Board of Audubon Canyon Ranch then decided to start purchasing properties in this area and immediately surrounding me; about 155 acres have been purchased. And we have established a small educational program here which we hope to expand, and there's a great deal of interest from a number of allied organizations for different ways in which this land can be used in the future. So, I feel that we have made a considerable achievement in saving this land for the future.

CE: Well, Betty Boyd, who very kindly brought us over here today -- Betty's on the Board of the Audubon Society. Betty, come over here a minute.

BB: So's Cliff.

CE: I noticed in walking over your property that the end building next to the workshop seems to be kind of a headquarters for Audubon. Do I read that correctly?

CC: Well, we have a large educational program in operation at the most southerly canyon at Audubon Canyon Ranch on the Bolinas Lagoon. We owned four canyons on the Bolinas Lagoon. The main canyon is, of course, the famous heronry where the public comes in and where there is an exhibit hall. The more southerly canyon, which we now call Volunteer Canyon, houses an educational plan and we have a resident naturalist-biologist and his wife who conduct classes there. So that was a great step. When it was decided to expand the Audubon Canyon Ranch activities northward, it was necessary to have some type of headquarters where people could come on Tomales Bay and so I've made available to Audubon Canyon Ranch two buildings which I formerly rented to tenants. And they've been put together and there's a little hall for meeting and the former kitchen has been turned into a laboratory and there are bathrooms. The people who are designated have keys and they're free to come and use these facilities and we occasionally have scientific educational meetings here. And, of course, every week a group of volunteers similar to the ones who operate Volunteer Canyon come here and conduct a series of studies on the marshland and the meadowland around here.

CE: Well, Betty, you talked earlier, driving out here, about an affair you had, was it last weekend, where your host very graciously took you to that island I see through the window, Hog Island. Tell us about Hog Island.

CC: Well, Hog Island had a house on it. The Hulbe Family, Martha Hulbe, was born on it and actually she was the mother of Pierce Thompson from whom I bought this property, and she sat in this room one day and told me the story. But she's gone now.

CE: She was born on Hog Island?

CC: Born in a little farm house on Hog Island. And there's a ruin there which I think is the basement of the farm house. In the depression it was expanded, made into sort of a hermit's hut, and a man lived there for a while. When I used to go there

in the early '50s it was still a complete little building but it's since been pretty badly demolished by vandalism. Several years ago that island -- Hog and Duck, there are two islands, Hog and Duck Islands -- the larger one is Hog -- became available. They were owned by a young man who owned the local newspaper. He had hoped to build a house on the island, and the problems were insurmountable, and so we found it was available and we were able by public subscription to raise the money to purchase the island and we've held it since. We would like the state of California, or the Federal Government through the Point Reyes National Seashore, or the County of Marin, really, to buy this island from us, or we would give it to them.

CE: When you say "from us," do you mean the Audubon Society?

CC: The Audubon Canyon Ranch. Because we don't have any way to maintain it. But on the other hand we have -- By buying it, we have kept it from being subdivided or built on or ruined in any way. Now, more recently, it was decided by the Board that many of the members had never seen Hog Island, and so an annual meeting was coming up, one of our quarterly meetings was coming up in August and so it seemed like a good idea to try and have the meeting out on Hog Island which pleased a lot of people. It was quite a romantic do.

CE: How did you take them all over there?

CC: Well, we got -- I know Gordon Sanford operates the Tomales Bay Oyster Company here and he has a large barge that they pull out and for which they gather the oysters for their oyster farm. And so I asked him if it would be possible for us to get that barge for a few days, and he gave it to us very nicely. And Bill Tykodi, who was here with me, took a boat down and he got the barge. It took quite a few hours to get it here; we kept it overnight and then the next day he and the man who works here on the property.

BB: He loaded it with firewood first.

CC: Betty, and all four of us -- There's no firewood on the island; people have taken everything that's there and they're even chopping down trees.

CE: So you took all the provisions for a picnic.

CC: So we had to take water. There's no water on the island. We had to take cooking utensils. We had to take a lot of firewood which was a big chore to gather, as Betty will attest. We loaded the barge with all this stuff and then Bob and Bill took it down to Hog Island and then that night Betty and I and a woman who lives here went over in a boat and we had dinner over there and it was nice. It was a beautiful day, fortunately. Then the next day -- We came back, and we left Bill on the island for the night so he could guard everything. He had taken his sleeping bag. Then the next day we went over again. Later in the morning about forty people gathered at Miller Park which is a County Park directly across from Hog Island on the east shore and Bill came over with the barge and they all got on the barge. It looked like an evacuation.

CE: Was it a calmer day than today?

CC: Yes, it was a very calm day. It was foggy in the morning but it broke about eleven and I had a big bonfire going on the beach and we had food there, stuff cooking. We had a meeting up on top of the island on the mesa and then afterwards it became quite warm, sunny and warm, and everyone went wading.

We had an Adirondack guide boat that was stored at the ranch; our manager had brought it up and so he rode people around the island and so --

CE: How large an island is it? Twenty acres or something like that?

CC: No, it's not --

CE: Not that large.

CC: No. A lot of it is under water.

BB: Did you tell me once that it came by the name of Hog Island because --

CE: Yes, how did that name come about?

CC: Well, as we understood, Pierce Point is the -- Tomales Point is the designation that's now used for the northerly end of the Point Reyes Peninsula but it was originally called Pierce Point because the Pierce Ranch was situated there and in fact the man from whom I bought the property, Pierce Thompson, was named for this same Pierce family, and --

CE: Is that still a working ranch, Cliff?

CC: Well, it is now owned by the Point Reyes National Seashore. It's been a great brouhaha in this neighborhood. They recently destroyed the lower ranch which was a complex of hundred year old buildings and a beautiful old place and it was just all -- A great hole was dug and everything was knocked down and buried in the ground; it was an outrage. There is an upper ranch which is also very beautiful, and the proposal was to destroy that similarly. But an artist in Point Reyes named Barry McDowell did a photographic essay and that's had quite wide exposure and there is now an attempt to save that ranch. It is occupied at the present time by a tenant farmer, a man named McDonald. But in the early days all of these ranches had large herds of hogs and similarly the Pierce Ranch had and they would ferry them over in barges such as we used, kind of a similarity taking our Board and taking hogs across, and --

CE: Well, if you took them there you wouldn't have to pen them up; they'd be on an island.

CC: No, what they did, they had them on the point of land. They'd bring them over and put them on the little train, you see, that went to Sausalito, for butchering in San Francisco, and apparently a barge overturned and a number of hogs got loose and swam ashore and were on that island for quite awhile, and that's how, I understood, the name Hog Island arose. It's not a very pretty name for a very pretty romantic little island. It's really Treasure Island.

CE: There's so much history in this area. Of course, a little further north is the Russian influence down from Fort Ross into Bodega Bay and the hunting of otter, etc. There is an interesting book written by Joseph Warren Revere who is the grandson of our revolutionary patriot Paul Revere who at one time was the owner of the Rancho San Geronimo. And he, in one of his books, talks about coming out to this point when there had been a shipwreck in the days when the Briones Family were still prolific here and getting a raft and going out and getting some of the supplies from the vessel. Had you ever heard that story?

CC: No. Perhaps that's the Bolinas area if that's the Briones?

CE: No, it was up in Tomales Bay, and then they salvaged much of the goods aboard and the Captain told Joseph Warren Revere that if he could get the safe out of the cabin he could have whatever artifacts he could collect. So he got someone from

- the Sandwich Islands who was in the area and they made a dive and they got the safe out, and he tells of this in his narrative and that they had a three or four day festival after that where the Briones entertained. You didn't hear that?
- CC: No.
- CE: He's written two books: *Keel and Saddle* and *A Naval Officer's Duty in California*. It seems he had been a lieutenant aboard the Portsmouth which was the man-of-war that Captain Montgomery was in charge of, of course, and when Commodore Sloat raised the flag at Monterey in 1846, why, he commissioned Montgomery in the Portsmouth to assemble in Yerba Buena and sent young Revere up to Sonoma to haul down the Bear Flag Republic and put it up the American Standard.
- CC: Well, I had no idea that a Revere was -- I hope he had some of the family silver.
- CE: I wonder.
- CC: That's valuable.
- CE: And it's so interesting because as a young midshipman he had gone on the Mediterranean cruise. In that time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when you were a naval officer or army officer representing your country overseas you were often given entrée and he and a group of fellow officers found themselves in Italy and requested a visit to Napoleon's mother who was living in Rome. And it seems so strange to me, paradoxically, historically interesting that years later, not too many, maybe thirty years later a descendent of Joseph Bonaparte, who was the brother of Napoleon, Adolph Mailliard, should come west and buy the same Rancho that this young man, some years earlier --
- CC: Was that just by accident?
- CE: Just by accident. And people who are from the east often think there's no history out here.
- CC: Well, you have to look at it from the eastern standpoint. Anything that we have that is a hundred years old is considered antique here but anything a hundred years old in the east is practically modern. It has to be --
- CE: Well, we're talking about buildings now, but when you think -- And Virginia Borland and her staff have created a timeline study which was published for the bicentennial celebration in the bicentennial almanac, and you think that beginning with 1579 and perhaps even a little earlier with Drake's arrival; a lot's been going on.
- CC: Well, of course not much happened between 1579 --
- CE: There's a two hundred year gap.
- CC: In 1776.
- CE: 1775, I think, was when the San Carlos came into the -- the first European ship to come in.
- VB: Can you give us the history of this property from the beginning? You said that General Halleck owned it.
- CE: Was this part of his Rancho?
- CC: Well, it was a grant, yes. He sold it to a man named N. J. Prince and Prince in 1880 sold this point of land to a man named J.B. Warrington. I've taken this all from the records in the Marin Civic Center.
- CE: And who was Fred Warrington? Have you any idea?

CC: I have no idea. And from there on it disappears. Once in a while I have some clippings. One time in 1906 it was offered for sale. I have a newspaper clipping for that, and a little before that in 1901 it was owned by a man named George Covert and he used it as a summer house, coming from San Francisco. A man working in the Howell Book Store found a little advertisement for me in their records that advertised it about 1910 as a resort.

CE: When, in your judgment, do you think these buildings were built?

CC: Well, I don't know, Betty, I presume when Warrington built it with these separate houses that this must have had a --

BB: Because the railroads --

CC: The railroads, they had a flag stop on the property and I suppose people came up here to hunt. There were many more buildings on the property; I tore many down because they were derelict. They were falling to pieces. So, I presume people came up here and stayed in those houses and went hunting.

CE: About 1870?

CC: It all started, yes, in the 1870s when the railroad came through here. You see, when the railroad cut this point off from the upper ranch it then made it a little separate piece of property and there was not an entrance in from the county road until -- I forget the exact date, but way later, did the owner of the upper ranch give the people who owned this land the right of way, which I still use. It comes in from Highway 1, to get to here because the railroad was the means of entrance and exit.

CE: And how far is the railroad from your entry here?

CC: Well, it was just up at the back line of the trees. And I have a reservoir now where the cut came for the railroad. I filled it at each end and had it full of fresh water, thank God.

CE: You also have wells on the property.

CC: Yes, I had a well but it pumped dry yesterday, so we're approaching that point. Well, it'll fill again but that's --

CE: As you leave Highway 1 and stop at the gate there's this sign, "Caroline Livermore Marsh." How did that come about?

CC: Well, that's a 35-acre marsh and that was the marsh that the sub-dividers proposed to dredge and turn into a minor Belvedere Lagoon. After my association with the Audubon Canyon Ranch, the chief people who operated the land acquisition program, this would be Marty Griffin and Stan Picher and Howie Allen, were very active in obtaining the land around here. And, but of course, all of our land is bought by public subscriptions so we're always looking for money. We've run out pretty fast. So this 35 acres became available from the land investors. They decided to give up the idea of lagoon. They couldn't do it, and Stan Picher found that there was a \$12,000 bequest in Mrs. Livermore's will to provide roadside rest stop in Marin County, and that had never been activated. Nobody had ever acted on that thing, and the money was just lying there, and, of course, \$12,000 would be a drop in the bucket for buying a roadside rest anyway and the Department of Parks in Marin County isn't really particularly anxious to extend its commitments; they say they don't have enough money not to maintain what they have so it's almost impossible to get them to agree to accepting

- anything. So Stan Picher prevailed upon Mrs. Livermore's heirs to give that money to, apply it towards the purchase of this marsh, and we then raised -- That was \$12,000. And we then raised another \$23,000. The purchase price was \$35,000, as I remember. And so then, of course, the credit was given to her; it was named for her.
- CE: Well, there's no doubt that she has been a leading force in this county. Mrs. Kent told us earlier one time of how the Marin Art and Garden came about, of course, and that story is on record. What were your dealings with Mrs. Livermore, Mrs. Kent?
- AK: -- had very much to do with it.
- CE: Would you describe her to us?
- AK: She was the most wonderful kind of a person. She was the kind of a person who - - My Tom, I think, sized her up pretty well; he said, "You know, Caroline is the kind of a person who doesn't know that something cannot be done, so she goes right ahead and does it," and that is about what she did. Sometimes it was kind of blind, but it always came out right. She just had one idea and sort of followed through and she was such a dear person and so friendly everybody sort of fell in line. That's just what happened to the Garden Center. Some people think that the Livermores bought the Garden Center, but they didn't. The Garden Center was this wonderful estate in the heart of Ross that could easily have been subdivided, and she went to the bank and borrowed money to put down just to hold it.
- CE: She was pretty smart, though, according to Judge Martinelli who told us his involvement with that whole creation. That he guided her legally as to what to do. Well, tell us, Cliff, I know you have been involved in many interesting buildings in Marin County and one of them dramatically was the Lyford House. How did you get involved in that project?
- CC: The Lyford House had been established by John Lord King's architect, and Beth Armstrong and Jean Carter as decorators about 20 years ago. It had passed through many vicissitudes; unfortunately it was used as a living quarters for the warden of that property and this tended to, forced it into a state of deterioration. A year or so ago the Verrall Estate furnished money to the National Audubon Society to build a center for education and to house the warden and on the completion of that building. Lyford House was then vacated and the proposal was made that it should be turned back into a museum and furnished as a historic house for this area, since many of the Audubon Sanctuaries have houses of this quality and character on the property. So I was asked by the manager and the warden of the Richardson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary if I would undertake the furnishing of that house, and I had so done and we had a marvelous patroness, benefactress, Mrs. Palm Stout who made it possible for us to paint it and to fill the house with shutters and to buy enough Victorian furniture and artifacts to give it a pretty complete appearance. And so it's now open again to the public and it's met with a very nice reception.
- CE: Is it open on Sunday and any other day?
- CC: I believe it's only open on Sunday afternoon when they have docents to conduct tours.
- CE: What are your dreams for this property after you're gone?

- CC: Well, my dreams have been pretty well realized. I think it was Oscar Wilde who said, "There is nothing sadder than not being able to achieve your dreams than to achieve it," and, of course, I am in that dangerous situation having almost achieved everything that I wanted to do here. But now a whole new frontier is open with the entrance of the Audubon Canyon Ranch. We have such beautiful property down on the Bolinas Lagoon, but it's completely different from the property that we own at Tomales Bay that I think that there lies in the future a very nice possibility for educational purposes here. I really don't know. I would have to leave that to my successors. Whatever they do is all right with me. But I've found in working with the members of the board of this group, Audubon Canyon Ranch, they're a very sensitive, highly educated, dedicated and devoted group of people and that's something very rewarding will come out of it. And so it's nice to think that rather than having a house torn down and a lot of little condominiums put up that a little historic house will remain and will be savored by future generations.
- CE: Thank you, Mr. Conly. It's been a pleasure meeting with you today. I would like to add an addendum to our visit with Mr. Conly by reading a couple of paragraphs from Jack Mason's book just published, entitled *Earthquake Bay, A History of Tomales Bay, California*. On page 123, Mr. Mason writes:
- Cypress Grove. Night hens nest in this craggy old forest. Sanderlings and willets gut across the beach. Eel grass rusts in the Caroline Livermore Marshland Sanctuary next to it. Westernmost tip of what was once the Prince Ranch, north of Marshall's, it is one of the loveliest places on Tomales Bay. The 360 acre ranch, Cypress Point, was purchased by Nathaniel Prince, a seaman turned farmer, from Henry W. Halleck in 1865. The railroad quarried rock here for its tideland track bed. Cypress Grove is on two and a half acres that the Prince's sold J. B. Warrington between the tracks and the water in 1880. Probably it was Warrington who planted the trees and built the little Victorian cottages that are still there, five of them laced together to form the main house. George H. Covert of San Francisco took over in 1902 but sold the grove to recoup losses suffered in the earthquake and fire. His agent, one Commodore Fred Woodworth, "I am more familiar with Tomales Bay than any living man," advertised it for \$10,000. An ideal county seat with its own flag stop and \$20,000 worth of improvements including six substantial houses and every kind of shrubbery and flowers. Laura Thompson bought the grove in 1923, and by this time it had belonged to Herbert Roeford Jr. and she gave it to her husband, Jefferson Thompson, as a wedding present, his marriage to Martha Hulbe having ended in divorce. Thompson turned it into a poultry farm, selling a half-interest to cousin Everet Farley who made boxes there for Thompson's Hicks Valley Cheese Factory, raising chinchillas on the side. One of the tenants established a sinister precedent by ambushing deer as they swam the bay to escape dogs and shotguns on Tomales Point. The Coast Guard preempted the grove for housing during World War II facing a 65 foot launch at Tony's Seafood Café south of it. And San Francisco architect Clifford Conly Jr. bought Cypress Grove

from Thompson and Farley in 1952. Planted hedges against the wind, restored the old stable, and put in a great lawn under which five of his faithful dogs are buried. Mignonette and snapdragon share his hot houses with cabbages and lettuce. After each windstorm he sweeps up after his brittle old cypresses. From his parlor window, Conly sees the willets run. Audubon has study space in one of his buildings, and when he dies they will get all of them. Truly a magnificent legacy for the Tomales Bay environment.