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INTERVIEW WITH CATHARINE PIXLEY ROBSON
by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
September 10, 1975

INTERVIEWEE: Catharine Pixley Robson (CR)
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (CE) and Anne Kent (AK)
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CE: Today is Wednesday, September 10, 1975. Continuing the Oral History Project of the Moya Library Guild, for the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat and I will be interviewing shortly Catherine Pixley Robson of Corte Madera. We are recording this interview today at the residence of Mrs. Thomas Kent, 131 Goodhill Road in Kentfield. However, Mrs. Raymond Robson lives at 665 Redwood Avenue in Corte Madera. Catharine Pixley Robson is the granddaughter of Marin pioneer William Pixley who arrived in San Francisco and subsequently Corte Madera in the late 1840s and lived on the estate of his brother, Frank Morrison Pixley. The Pixley family has contributed much to the growth and direction not only of Marin county but of California. The interviewee herself is an avid historian and has spent many weeks researching her family at the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley. Mrs. Robson is a founding member of the Larkspur, Corte Madera Historical Society and is presently serving as a member of the Board of Directors of the Marin County Historical Society. It is a pleasure today to be talking with her. Good morning Mrs. Robson.

CR.: Good morning Carla. It's nice to be here.

CE: That's wonderful. We have a lot to cover because you have a fascinating and interesting family. But tell us first Catharine, what brought the Pixley family to California and eventually to Marin and when did this all take place?

CR: The love and marriage brought the Pixley family into Corte Madera. Frank Morrison Pixley had, in 1853, married Amelia Van Reynegom. Amelia was the only daughter of Captain John and Margaret Van Reynegom, whose ship had been devoured in the San Francisco Bay in the rush of sailors to join the miners in the gold country. The ship was unusable. And the family who traveled with their father, Captain John, were forced to seek a new way of life. So taking the furniture from the cabin and, one must presume, walking or riding horseback, or went into the region, now Larkspur.

CE: Catherine, what was the name of that vessel, do you recall?

CR:: The Linda. It's designated as a bark, a sailing ship. Now, it appeared upon the maps that was later put into the form of a form to be sent to Washington, D.C.. The area that they found was marked "Public Land." And the reason for this was that the Reed family, grantees of Corte Madera Del Presidio Grant, had been persuaded by surveyors, government surveyors, that they would claim just one -- I'm sorry, that they would claim just one league, which was according to their grant, and this would end at the Alto Hill. However, the wording of the grant also said not to be further north than the Arroyo Holon. In the interval, Mr. Reed had died, the Reed heirs, the children, were growing and there was a great interest in the recapture for them of these sobrantes or leftovers, so called by us, public land.

CE: Excuse me for interrupting a moment Catharine. Wasn't it Hilarita Reed Lyford who was so interested in getting these claims straight?

CR: Well actually Carla the litigation went on for fifty years and the Reeds -- This is not their story however, but I will say that the Reed's were not actually confirmed; their boundaries were not actually confirmed until 1885 which was just fifty years later, fifty years after the granting of their Corte Madera Del Presidio. So, the Van Reynegoms and their heirs, after many years of having believed themselves to be on their own homestead and their own land, found themselves faced with a suit. The suit was conducted for the heirs under the name of "Bolton Versus Van Reynegom and Others" and it was heard in the Tenth Judicial District Court. There the Reed's attempted to dispossess those who had made claims and settled on their land.

CE: Is it a fair comment to assume that they considered these people squatters?

CR: Yes, they certainly were in that category; they were squatters. Now, when the suit came to trial a very interesting bit of testimony came up and I'd like to mention it because it does give a great authenticity to the word "Corte Madera." The gentleman who came in was Jose De la Cruz Sanchez, no less than the brother of Hilarita Reed. And he went over the day in the forties when he and the mission representative met to decide upon the line between the lands of San Rafael Mission and Corte Madera Del Presidio. I will skip some parts of the day but dwell upon his arrival at the Arroyo Holon. They came round about; they didn't go over the hill. They came round about from Mill Valley, something which we would have done just a few years ago. And as they approached the Arroyo Holon he said he recognized it as a corte madera, and that was with small letters, and a Spanish

speaking gentleman would have been quite accurate in saying that he recognized it as a corte madera.

CE: Which means what? Would you tell us?

CR: Well, the place where wood is cut.

CE: I see.

CR: And he went back into his own memories to say who had cut the wood there and what it was used for and this without any doubt was the flat around the entrance to the present Madrone Canyon. So at the same time it gave the Corte Madera its rightful name, it also must have been quite a blow to Don and his neighbors for it certainly pointed out that the claimant had intended their northern boundary to be the Arroyo Holon. And that was the way it was finally adjudicated, that that was their northern boundary and those who lived upon it must either pay for their land or leave. And our Captain John and Margaret happily were in a position that they could buy their land, which they did, for we can find the deed from Reed heirs to Franklin Pixley, their son-in-law, and the sum was the great sum of two thousand dollars gold which he paid for the 160 acres. And so at that same year, 1861, he not only bought the land but then deeded it to Amelia Van Reynegom Pixley, his wife, so that then she would have been the owner of what is the old town Corte Madera and part of Larkspur.

CE: And did this have a name, Catharine?

CR: Yes. Now, it subsequently became their country estate and was named Owl's Wood. That's two words: Owl's Wood. And by 1880 it was appearing in newspapers with a picture of it and it was designated as their country estate.

CE: This is fascinating. It eventually became as large as over 190 acres, didn't it?

CR: Yes. There was an addition made later. The opportunity came from the Coleman Forbes, who then owned the residue lands around, to buy twenty-nine- plus acres. This then extended the ranch to the very top of Corte Madera Hill.

CE: Well now you tell us all of this took place, this marriage to Amelia Van Reynegom in 1853 to Frank Morrison Pixley and it was used as a summer home. What was he involved with in those years prior to going into the newspaper business at age 53, which was much later in 1877? What did Frank Morrison Pixley do in those early years?

CR: Well Frank Morrison Pixley is a man of quite general California interests. He was one of the fortunate people who was educated in Utica, New York before coming. He came out, arriving with a party from Missouri, as they did. And he first went up to the mines, spent a winter at the mining camps with no particular good fortune and then came to San Francisco and realized that there was a great lot of work to do that he was well qualified to do. He was educated as a lawyer. And through himself -- He was a short man

of great energy and possessed of the talent to speak and influence people. And because the times were what they were, he spoke with a very loud voice and he was always being put upon boards and commissions and served on a good many Board of Regents at the University of California and on the Governing Board in Yosemite Valley and on the Golden Gate Park District and he was the State's Attorney General and he was District Attorney for San Francisco; and that's another big story.

CE: Wasn't his name not proposed also for Governor of California?

CR: I wouldn't be surprised. He was very active in the beginnings of the Republican Party. He was by nature a fighter and would very often take the unpopular side. And, well, in 1877 had made his fortune and had already spent some time in Europe collecting things for his home. He came to the farm and my dad was there and he said, I remembered him saying, "You know I'm going to start a newspaper. I have a lot to say and I want to say it." He said, "I'm going to put lots of money in it and it's going to be a good newspaper." And so he founded the *San Francisco Argonaut*. He was publisher but he was also very active as its editor, almost to the time he died in 1895. And he spoke out on causes whether popular or mostly unpopular causes. And also --

CE: He wrote a column, did he not, or a weekly editorial?

CR: Yes

CE: What was the name of that column?

CR: That was "Olla Podrida."

CR: Could you tell us what that means in Spanish?

CR: Stewed, things all stewed together.

CE: Melting pot of ideas?

CR: Yes. And his other service to the City of San Francisco was in the scope it gave him to hire new writers and there were many new writers.

CE: That's right. Wasn't he one of the first men to permit Gertrude Atherton space?

CR: Yes, there's another long story there.

CE: Ambrose Bierce?

CR: Ambrose Bierce appeared in his columns.

CE: Mark Twain?

CR: Mark Twain and others; the poets also had a place that they could write. His influence in Marin County, I feel, was rather largely through his wife's devotion to her responsibility towards the farm which was, after all, her patrimony. And I think it rather remarkable that with all the active, social, and mostly intellectual and political life that they led in San Francisco, which by the way their home was at the corner of Steiner and Union.

CE: Is this the same corner where the St. Mary the Virgin Episcopal Church now stands?

CR: St. Mary's the Virgin Church was built upon the corner next to their house, on the corner of their land. And it was not, the lot was not actually put into the Church until after Franklin Pixley's death. The year 1896 is the year that they gave the lot, but the building had been there some six years.

CE: How many years did Amelia survive her husband?

CR: Not many. She passed away in 1898.

CE: So you never had the pleasure of knowing her, either?

CR: No. I didn't, only knew her by reputation. But I feel, the more I read into the years that she both owned Owl's Wood and then owned, of course, her home in San Francisco, she had a very active part and always kept the ranch in its finest condition and as much a part of their living as she could. And it's -- She was a woman of her time and she was not educated, I believe, although she had many cultural interests. Her responsibility to her father's gift to her is in the form of this holding in Marin County strikes me as being very indicative of the character of the people who settled Marin. She could have been idle and pleasure-seeking but she wasn't. Her responsibility weighed heavily upon her. She, through family word, I always was given the impression that she was quite a tyrant. Very demanding, a task master, and required everybody who worked for her to give and for her to give full measure, and I'm quite sure that was true. For by 1891 it happened that a description of Owl's Wood was published in the *Argonaut* itself and really amazed at what had been accomplished. It had come from just a bare little home farm started by her father to be a well-watered ranch. There were twenty-five acres that were described as being laid out in nut-bearing, fruit-bearing trees and there was a reservoir with a very large capacity of stone reservoirs and pipes lain. There were houses for all the little poultry and the pigs that were raised. There were several barns, and saddle horses, and there was the stock of milk-producing cows, and there were grapes. I remember from the picture of the place how many grapes were laid out in the vineyards. And all of this, while still absent from it and with no telephone and no car to come back and forth, I always feel that Amelia has been underrated in what she accomplished in keeping this 191-acre place running and viable until it came time to divide it.

CE: Well you have made her very alive today and this is the International Year of the Woman so Amelia is with us and will be shared and recognized and appreciated from certainly this year on. But it is not an unusual story. I have found, Mrs. Kent and I, in

traveling around Marin County, that so many of the women of the pioneers and their descendants have been remarkable people and have quietly gone ahead and done things which today in women's lib they keep talking about but they were doing them then.

CR: Yes. I would, just because we are speaking of her, I think of her in the terms of the privacy and the landedness that she started with and then remember that she had to allow both the County of Marin and the railroad to cross. Their land lay across the land above high tide and it was necessary everyone coming in to the northern part of Marin had to cross their farm. Now this meant that her privacy had to be invaded and she had to sustain much injury at the hands of those who traveled across. I can just imagine a farmer coming over and saying, "Mrs. Pixley I'm sorry to say but the fence is down again and the stock has run away." And that would be because there would be a boggy, wet winter with the wagons going down into the holes and into the creeks and they would reach for the fence posts and other lumber and buildings around rather than not to pry themselves out. And so there would be again a problem that would have to be faced. Then there was a very interesting experience my father told me about. It happened very often. The railroad would bring carloads, open flat cars, of organizations going north for a picnic; this would often happen on a Sunday.

CE: Weekend excursions.

CR: Yes. And these people were fun-loving -- I suppose you'd call it that -- and didn't realize that this was the farmer's property and precious to the farmer. But they enjoyed filling their packets with rocks and pelting the people, the stock, the buildings, and whatever came in their path. My father, who at the time was living on the farm as a young boy, devised with his friends a way of revenge. They filled their pockets with hard little apples or other bits of fruit and made ready on a Sunday morning, under a bridge, so that when these people came across they would get the return vengeance that he and his friends could throw at them and he said they were not without success. Another little incident which almost never recorded but this is very true because I read it then, later after my dad told me -- I read it later in the *San Rafael Journal*. It happened that my father at the age of about eleven was building a raft. In order to do this, he borrowed a horse for which he had no bridle but he did get a whiffletree and used that in some way to guide the horse and to attach to it ropes that would drag logs. And these logs were being dragged across the railroad and down to the water which was then about where the present City Hall is. There were creeks that came in there and that was where they were building the raft. Well, on a return trip when he didn't have a log, he was on the back of the horse and someone shied a rock at her and she set off toward the crossing. At this time a train was passing and it had already gone far enough to have, in the middle of the road, a flatcar upon which was an open tub, a very large tank tub of water. My father couldn't control the horse; it went directly into the train and threw him overhead and he landed into the water. The impact and jar of the whole thing knocked the tub right off the flatcar and my father descended by way of a cascade of water and the only harm that came to him was that he was thoroughly wetted and frightened because he realized the horse would have to be destroyed; the horse was pretty badly damaged. He was so afraid

to go and tell his father about what he'd done to the borrowed horse, but his father only raised him and said, "My dear little boy, you're safe."

CE: Let's talk about Owl's Wood, which is a beautiful name. But for those newcomers to Marin would you tell us the present-day landmarks that would be the boundary of this 191-acre farm of your grandmother's?

CR: Yes. Amelia had this lively interest in the place and when her husband passed away, and that was 1895, it's observable that she immediately began to arrange for the future, both her place in San Francisco and Owl's Wood. At this time she had a very interesting plat prepared which was the basis of the disposition of the 191 acres. It's on file in San Rafael. And we find that Amelia kept the home place with its buildings and vineyards and orchards, fifty-five-plus acres for that. The future of that by the way was that it became Chevy Chase. The line that was drawn from just below the tracks to the very top of Corte Madera Ridge, then called Little Tamalpais, that line divided Owl's Wood from a section which she then gave to her sister, who was my grandmother, Emma Catharine O'Reilly Pixley. Emma Catharine had been widowed, tragically, in 1881 and by this magnificent gesture Amelia gave all of that land to her sister. Her sister, almost with sons, grown sons, almost immediately began to catch up with the little town of Corte Madera in the sense of streets and building lots and tracts. You must remember that they, the Van Reynegom was not the only pre-emptive claim, that the land that had belonged to the neighbors, the other squatters, had similar patterns of going from one owner to another and --

CE: You're talking about the Gardiners and the Dowds and the Dolans and the Cummings?

CR: Yes some of that, especially Matt Tierneys, had come into the possession of a man by the name of McCue. He was a circus man who had bought it for the wintering over of a circus. He, almost immediately, in fact as early as 1888, had drawn a plat and laid out some downtown streets, oddly enough in somewhat the same pattern as they are today. That would be now what is Tamalpais Drive and First, Second and Third Streets, were laid out that early and the town lots were divided. So that right at the border of the Pixley land was this little town and the pressures on them to also divide and to put in streets and make the district around the station livable for small families; the pressure was great. So immediately upon the transfer of the property to the other Pixley family, a tract was drawn and lots were sold which somewhat constitute the downtown, the little downtown, or the village, the early village, Corte Madera. That was known as the E. C. Pixley Tract. In a year or more, three other tracts which were on the lower reaches of Corte Madera Hills, were filed. And those were, the Colony Park, Mary Colonist and Morningside Addition. I soon realized that then, in 1909, eight and nine, the City of Larkspur decided to incorporate. This line, drawn there in 1896 by Mrs. Amelia Van Reynegom Pixley, became the boundary between Larkspur and Corte Madera. In other words, the southern boundary, the southern boundary of Larkspur was the line drawn between the properties Owl's Wood and the gift to her sister-in-law, Emma Catherine Pixley.

CE: That's very interesting. I noticed, Catherine, you haven't talked about Christmas Tree Hill.

CR: Yes. I thought I'd start that now.

(End of Side A)

CE: Catherine, could we interrupt you now? Would you tell us the names of the children of William Pixley and Emma O'Reilly Pixley?

CR: Yes. They played a large part, several of them did, a large part in the earliest days. We're speaking now about 1898, 1899 and early in 1902.

CE: Was one of the sons, William Isaac, who was your father, was he the eldest?

CR: Yes, the eldest. No, my mistake. The eldest was again a Frank.

CE: Another Frank.

CR: Another Frank. And it was he who had some prowess as a surveyor and who busied himself, along with his brother Henry, Henry O'Reilly Pixley, in selling, arranging for the sale of the property that made the first little town of Corte Madera. It was his work and he was active in it from the time of the acquisition until 1909 when he left. And in all the old records of the clubs, in the Booster Club and the Women's Club and so forth, when you hear Mr. Pixley mentioned they're speaking of Frank Pixley, the eldest son and the most active. His second brother William was my father and my father --

CE: That's William Isaac?

CR: William Isaac.

CE: When was he born?

CR: Was born in sixty eight. He was always around but not active in the real estate development; he was a traveling salesman and spent most of his time away from home and preferred living in San Francisco. So his name really didn't come into it until he moved his family back to Corte Madera and that was at the time of the San Francisco earthquake.

CE: And then he came back to live.

CR: From that time on resided in Corte Madera. And all of his children and four of us were born there in the home in Corte Madera.

CE: Now you mentioned there was another child. That was a daughter?

CR: Elsteen.

CE: Elsteen?

CR: Elsteen, with her mother, was also a Corte Madera resident and lived there for several years. She attended San Rafael High School and she also lived in Pixley, California much of her girlhood and married from that area, from Tulare County, where the Pixley, where Franklin Pixley had a town in Tulare County. And that was where she spent some of her girlhood. And Elsteen, at her marriage, moved to the Seattle area.

CE: What's her married name?

CR: Mrs. Jones. She married Edgar Jones. Elsteen Jones, yes.

CE: All right, that's good. We have the children now of this marriage. And about this time does Christmas Tree Hill enter?

CR: Well after we -- On the early maps the ridge now known as Christmas Tree Hill was designated little Tamalpais and it was --

CE: Why? would you tell us?

CR: It was a part of the nature of Frank Pixley Jr. to prefer a rather flossy, fancy names. And he was a most unique and interesting character. I would like to mention one of his projects. While selling the land while staying at home there, running the real estate business he also had a water business because in that time it was a requisite to have water to sell land and he developed springs and put in pipes. He developed a little water business which occupied him. He also had a house built which is still standing on Redwood Avenue at the corner of Edison which resembled a castle. It was known as the "castelette." It was a feature then and still is. It was not his home; it was his real estate office. And within the walls of this little "castlette" was printed a most unique publication. It was called *The Golden Hinde*. It came out monthly and it was not -- It was a philanthropic project. He would donate any monies that came in to the welfare of the Holy Innocents Episcopal Church. Mrs. Pixley had given a lot for the building of the Holy Innocents Episcopal Church.

CE: Which Mrs. Pixley is this?

CR: Emma Catharine. This church is still on that land. The family was attended there and were very interested and so this would be -- Any moneys that would be made by publication of the *Golden Hinde* would go to the Episcopal Church. It was a most unique publication. I am fortunate enough to have, well, I think it's probably the only extant copies of it. In the first place it was published by rice paper, all oriental papers; all the lettering was set by hand. It was all hand-set type. And the -- Each time the paper came out it was a different type; it was selected. And all the lithography was done by hand with hand-cut stencils. It was not only unique in its appearance but in what he had to say was

really worth many laughs, even today. He attacked with the same vigor that his famous uncle had attacked the major problems of the world; he attacked the little irritants of living in a small town, particularly a small town Corte Madera. And I think I can recall to almost all the large building that sits beside the railroad track in downtown Corte Madera which it's easy to call the Parkside Hotel but in its origin it was built by a Norwegian or Scandinavian gentleman who came over, mostly made his money up around Olema, and came down, and as a venture built this building as a hotel and operated a very successful saloon there; his name was Adams. And at one time --

CE: Oh, is this the Jerry Adams that had been postmaster at one time?

CR: Yes. Well Jerry, was, as postmaster, received the notice to send into Washington, to the Postal Department, the name of the town. And he yielded to the temptation to put down that the name of the town was Adams. This went in and duly everyone who lived within Corte Madera had to have their mail directed to Adams. Well, the editor and publisher of the *Golden Hinde* with his little wee voice stood and howled about this. When asked to review this little *Golden Hinde*, we always point to this article as being so typical of the nature of life in a small town, especially when the village that's been known as Corte Madera since 1848 suddenly and perfunctorily becomes Adams. They hollered enough at least to get the town changed back to Corte Madera. But there were other things that bothered them. There was the people coming from the city having picnics and leaving their litter, and so as they are today they were concerned with litter. There were the little clubs that were going to get money together to put boardwalks because everyone had to sink in the mud; there was no paving. There were the trains that went shrieking through at all hours, waking people up. He was always directing diatribes at them. And it was, within the sheets of that little paper, which I think that maybe were nine or twelve issues that came out, one could really get a good picture of what it was like to live in Corte Madera.

CE: Tell me, Catharine, have you considered letting some of this be reprinted in the local newspapers during the next year?

CR: Well whenever I have the opportunity -- It has many times, during my lifetime had the chance to do columns and things and I nearly always -- Because it's picturesque language; it's not great journalism at all, but it is picturesque and unique and a delight to read.

CE: Well tell me, Catharine, did not your own father, William Isaac Pixley, donate some land for a church also?

CR: Oh well yes, the Presbyterian Church was on land given -- My dad had a little tract, called the William Pixley Tract, Will Pixley Tract, and from that he took a key lot and fixed the Presbyterian Church as well as the Episcopal Church had been.

CE: Is that church still standing at present?

CR: No they sold that property and moved down. It's the Redwood Presbyterian Church presently and it's on Madrone in Larkspur. But the lot that he gave was on the old Corte Madera Grade and there was a church. I attended it myself; it stood there for many years.

CE: Do you remember your Uncle Frank at all?

CR: Yes, yes.

CE: Did you have family get togethers?

CR: Now we're speaking of young Frank.

CE: Young Frank, Jr. The Golden Hinde Frank.

CR: The Golden Hinde Frank I do remember. He never changed; he was as unique a character in his older years as he had been and went to take up acreage along Puget Sound. His struggle to get water had so marked him that he said, "I'm going out of California, I'm going to get where's plenty of water." So he went to Seattle and went out on Puget Sound and took up government land out there and never a day in his life did he ever live for anybody else. He said, "Never ask anybody for a job; give a job," and that was the way he arranged his life. It was a rugged life, a hard life to most, hard on his family, but he was really an individual. My father said that in Seattle they had three seasons. They have June, July and winter. So they had quite a lot of water.

CE: Did your father, Catherine, live to a good age?

CR: Yes. Corte Madera, the same home he had built on the Morningside addition. They built there in 1906 and always lived there until his passing in 1952.

CE: But it's his father who was burnt in the fire?

CR: Yes.

CE: How did that occur? Was a vast forest fire?

CR: Well there's testimony on it; they had to hold an inquest because, of course, he died tragically.

CE: As a result of --

CR: Tragically, yes, and there was an inquest and I did read about it. And there was one witness who described the roaring fire that had resulted. They were clearing -- He had bought eight acres from Patrick King and he was clearing it for a living. His wife was down at the little cabin that they had started and she called him and he answered and went to see if she was all right and then after that he was never seen alive. So apparently he was caught or the -- They know exactly that he was caught by this --

CE: Well they say some fifty thousand acres of the Tamalpais mountainside was destroyed in that fire.

CR: Yes. There's was quite an article in the current *Bulletin*. Oddly enough the San Rafael people were not very much interested in that fire as far as the papers were concerned and I think that's because so much of the real life in the county at that time was set around in Novato in the northerly places, and that now seem to us to be outlying, but that was the heart then because of the arable land, whereas our end of the county was oriented towards San Francisco. And when you really wanted to find out -- As a historian when you wanted to find out anything about Corte Madera you had to go to the Sausalito paper. They were interested, San Rafael papers were not, they had very little to say about that fire in the San Rafael paper.

CE: Could it be because of the ferry boats? I mean, in the late sixties and then the commerce and traffic and even the idea of commuting to San Francisco from southern Marin became prevalent?

CR: Yes. And the homes that were built in earliest times were built as summer places and people's interests were mostly in San Francisco and so those few local people who did make their living here were not as preponderantly supportive, you know, of San Rafael, as were those of the county so naturally the interest in the papers was the upper regions of the county.

CE: Tell me, Catherine, have you done research in the files of Sausalito, in their library?

CR: Yes I've read daily papers down there; found some most interesting little gems down there, yes, yes. That's a great place.

CE: We have to go down there sometime Mrs. Kent; we haven't done that. And you've gone to Bancroft. Now what does Bancroft give you? The early period of the area in general?

CR: I spoke about this little Larkspur, Corte Madera as a setting. Well we were given some money or we had some money, we decided we'd put a rock or some kind of a plaque, memorial, and it was -- Our thought was to note the presence in Larkspur of many Indian mounds. Every old-timer will tell you that the creek is bounded on both sides by large piles of Indian mounds. So it was our notion first to mark that for coming generations. We also remembered that they wouldn't know about the trains. The tracks were completely gone in Larkspur, so we added that to it. Then we also noted that the first house in Larkspur was not far from the point, the little park where we put our plaque, so we did research. We had a Bickerstaff family member come over and tell us about the Bickerstaff --

CE: You wanted to tell us about the house; was it adobe?

CR: Oh, the Bickerstaff house was built as adobe, certainly, although there were parts of it that were also frame and so you'll find the controversy somewhat, mild controversy, rages about the nature of that house. But I know from my own clear memory that there were adobe bricks left there and stood there many years during my childhood and I'm sure you remember as you rounded the turn there into Larkspur over there was the remains of an adobe, but roofless, which of course was destroyed by -- It's now a part; the land of it is occupied by the Niven and Serrat Nursery.

CE: I see. Now what was there first?

CR: The first important structure that we remembered on that plaque was the presence there of the government mill and it was the research on this that sent me to Bancroft Library. And I was most fortunate, with the help of Helen Van Cleave Park, to find the very contract, witnessed and signed, by Captain Fulsom that was entered into by John B. L. Cooper, grantee of Punta de Quentin and Captain Fulsom on behalf of the United States Army, to log the Madrone Canyon, to remove the timber, which they did, and which they carried to a point on the creek, not the main Corte Madera Creek as we know it but a tributary of that and at this point built a mill which operated -- It is said by Belle Brown that there were at one time five hundred people working there. It was a very big time for Larkspur and it didn't last because of course the Presideo had other ways of getting timber and the timber ran out. Now we have some confirmation of that in a living Larkspur native who is Judge Gardiner. Judge Gardiner came to one of the meetings of this little society and because his home was right beside, where he was born was right beside the Madrone Canyon Creek -- Not the mill, no.

CE: Where was the mill again?

CR: The mill was on a little tributary at the Corte Madera Creek and stood not far from what later became the Doherty Lumber Company. There is no connection between the two, but the mill as it is presently shown on many old maps was located at the site, the marsh, not too far from where the Doherty Lumber Company was for so many years.

CE: And was the lumber off-loaded there onto schooners that were --

CR: Yes, made into rough timber and then was tied behind a schooner and drawn through the water to the piers to rebuild. The concern of the government was that the piers, the pilings and so forth, and the warehouses had to be quickly thrown up in order that they could supply the Presideo and make it strong. And the timber, which had already been located by the Mexican Presideo builders, was their first source of supply and they came to Larkspur and established this mill, brought equipment, and put many men to work to take redwood into the Presideo.

CE: Well tell me -- Tell us, Catharine, there is reference often to these twin cities of Larkspur and Corte Madera. Is there many things that you share in common?

CR: Well it happened that as I was, in the 1940s I was working for newspapers and I was thoroughly initiated into the scheme, which was a very lively one put forth by many to make our two towns into one town. A good, well-financed study was made and many able men worked upon it and tried to bring the governments together and after all this it was decided that no real economy would be effected and that the sentimental drive toward doing it was quite negative. And in fact, really, the only -- Well this is facetious, of course, one of the things came out about it was, how would you name it? And they finally ended up with Corte Larpadero, which was just about as silly as they all felt the idea was and it was dropped.

CE: Although there is some rivalry, there is a great deal of cooperation and I understand certainly with the creation of this Larkspur Corte Madera Historical Society, both communities are interested in reviving the history of this rich area.

CR: Yes. But don't you feel that there's a reversal now in the hopes and dreams of all of us have turned from bigness, inefficiency toward trying ecologically and through planning to preserve rather than destroy city lands and city cultures? And I do think that even at that early date there was a thought among all of us that we would better, each of us, to go toward the objectives of our own town and not because of some military efficiency that we might bring about, not to lose what was precious to us.

CR: Well this society -- I would imagine you're all for this historical society; you share many things. Do you house your artifacts in the same place?

CR: We have been somewhat disappointed in the slowness of the library in Larkspur, which had promised us a secure vault, and this is not built and there is a reluctance on our part to accept artifacts unless we can give them --

CE: The proper storage.

CR: Yes. And so we have not -- I believe there are only pictures and copies of pictures that we have kept -- And tapes, we have some tapes.

CE: Well that is one reason, and we have been questioned on this and I see no reason in revealing it today, but Mrs. Kent and I have been questioned, why are we doing this oral history project, which this program is a project of -- It happens to be Mrs. Kent's interest which is the Moya del Pino Library in the Octagon House in Marin Art and Garden Center. Well certainly we can't keep these tapes in that wooden structure. They are of Marin County pioneers and history, and perhaps some people feel it should be in the Marin County Historical Society but that is a picturesque but not too safe building realistically. So we have made the decision to have them in a more secure depository which is certainly the Civic Center California Room.

CR: They asked me about the hill. And Christmas Tree Hill is such a picture-evoking word that I will hasten to bring that --

CE: Maybe you can conclude with that story then.

CR: All right. The residents upon the hill -- Now it goes back to the fact that the farm came to a point. One of the axis of the original --

CE: Square?

CR: 160 acres.

CE: It was a square, more or less?

CR: Well it was a -- Forty chains each way. It was simply laid out forty chains, forty chains, forty chains, forty chains, so that it was a square. And one of its points was -- It happened when the 29 acres were added. It happened that one of the points was right at the top of the ridge. So when these lots were sold it naturally formed a point; the lights at night formed a point, and that was noted by some early dwellers who spoke about it often that the lights at night made a Christmas tree. So it was the kindness of the PG&E for putting in colored bulbs in the street lamps that started the idea of calling it Christmas Tree Hill. And they were then after several years of Christmas seasons being that way asked not to put in any green lights because certain people didn't like the green and red lights -- Were too dark, they couldn't see, as a street light. And I suppose they were discouraged and dropped the project. And some years later a little group that I happened to belong to called the neighborhood Forum would like to do a public service. So they questioned every householder upon the idea of appointing a particular night and everybody putting out a very bright light of some different color and this was of course voluntary. Well we did, the night came and we put them on and don't you know the enthusiasm carried them so far that everybody had strung little tiny lights. There were a few that had remembered the bright light and there was a particular man who did a marvelous job. His home -- His name is Bill Schwartz. His home was at the point and being a very able man, he contrived a star, not only brightly lighted but revolving, if you please. So, for two or three years -- I also forget --

CE: What years are we talking about?

CR: Oh this would be fifties, forties and fifties. Just before, I shouldn't forget, Daniel Connor who was an enthusiastic man in Corte Madera for a while, did go up and at his own expense, erect a star on what he thought was the point. This star that I speak about moving on the Bill Schwartz house was a second version of that star. So, we did get into Ripley's with -- We said were the largest Christmas tree in the world.

CR: Believe it or not.

CR: When we found it necessary up there to have an improvement society, they immediately adopted the name Christmas Tree Hill Dwellers. So I think Christmas Tree Hill is --

CE: Here to stay.

CR: Here to stay even though now lots are being sold all around it and the shape is not as exact as it was in earlier days. Many homes have been built on the sides so that the shape is changed.

CE: This is a fascinating story. Before we do sign off, could you give us a little brief biography of your life?

CR: Oh, well, I was one of four, second of four. California Winter is my sister.

CE: California Winter is her name.

CR: California Pixley; she married Mr. Winter. California Winter is the senior member of our family and she lives in the house where we were all born. So she is presently the oldest lady in Corte Madera sleeping in the bedroom in which she was born.

CE: Well what generation are you then?

CR: Well from William, the third.

CE: The third, from William.

CR: And of course our children are the fourth. And --

CR: You mentioned earlier you had done newspaper work. Could you discuss that?

CR: Yes, when it came time to go to school I needed to earn money, I naturally fell into the family pattern of writing in the newspaper. And I did quite a bit. And after I was married again I took this up. I think they called it a correspondent, and I corresponded with San Anselmo and San Rafael papers and I also wrote for a short, very happy period for the *San Francisco News* and sent news of Corte Madera to their special edition. So it gave me lots of opportunity to write about history, and I often did.

CE: Catharine, we are certainly privileged to have you come and talk with us today and I think the County of Marin is the most fortunate of all to have amongst their pioneers, descendants of their pioneers, a woman with your intelligence and enthusiasm for the history of this county. I hope we can return some day and delve into other subjects regarding your family and even in greater detail. Thank you so much for coming.

CR: Thank you. I enjoyed it as I always do.