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Anne T. Kent California Room**

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INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE O'CAINE STRITTMATTER  
by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent  
November 22, 1976

INTERVIEWEE: Catherine O'Caine Strittmatter (CS)  
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (C.E.) and Anne Kent (A.K.)  
ALSO PRESENT: Lynn Fitzgibbon (LF)  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 22, 1976  
TRANSCRIBER: Marjorie Hoffman

CE: Today is Monday November 22, 1976. Continuing the Oral History program of the California Room at the Marin County Library at the Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat. And today we are way over in Newark, California, which is on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay in the vicinity of Hayward, Centerville, that area. We are recording the interview of Catherine Strittmatter at her granddaughter's home, Lynn Fitzgibbon, who resides at 35987 Brandywine Street in Newark, California. Catherine Strittmatter has an unusual story. She was born in San Francisco in 1887 and has the rare distinction of having lived for 19 years on the Farallone Islands. Her father, her uncle before her and then her father became "Keeper of the Light" and it's for this interesting story that we are here with Catherine today. Good afternoon, Catherine.

CS: Good afternoon.

CE: Thank you. Tell us, you were born in San Francisco and then how did it come about as a tiny baby, at two weeks, you found yourself on the Farallone Islands?

CS: Well, my father was out of a job and that's what he wanted to do, be in the lighthouse service any place. My uncle was Lighthouse Keeper so he asked when he took the examination if he could be sent there and so they sent him there and he was there a month before I was born.

CE: A lot of people don't know that the -- Because the Coast Guard nowadays has the responsibility of maintaining all the aides and navigation in all the lighthouses, but in that day we're speaking of that was before the Coast Guard had that responsibility, and it was called the Lighthouse Service, was it not?

CS: Yes.

CE: And do you have any idea what those Lighthouse Keepers made in those days? Did you ever remember hearing your family discuss it?

CS: Well it wasn't too much, but I don't remember what it is.

CE: Well, I think it was, depending on whether it was a first or second light, it was anywhere from six hundred to twelve hundred a year, that was about it. Do you have any recollection?

CS: No, I don't because my father never discussed anything like that but I know it wasn't as much as they should have gotten, that's for sure. They get more now.

CE: All right. What are some of your earliest memories of being there as a baby on that fascinating, foggy, exciting place?

CS: Well I don't know.

CE: Did you go to school? How did you get your schooling?

CS: I had to go to San Francisco to go to school. I stayed with my aunt. And they did have a couple of teachers; they were young girls and they'd come in for the vacation and wouldn't come back. So instead of trying to get any -- We had a nice school, they called it Stone House, with the books, the desks, the blackboards; they furnished everything. But there was nothing out there for the teachers, young people, you know.

CE: So they would give up?

CS: Well, they wouldn't say anything. they'd just come in for vacation and then asked to have their stuff sent to them.

CE: How often would a ship touch the Farallones in those early days?

CS: Well, you mean the Lighthouse Madrona?

CE: Whatever means. You'd have to get supplies and mail.

CS: Once every three months; that's all they came.

CE: Once every three months.

CS: And we never had-my mother had three children die on there, from the lack of communication. My father had to build, when they got sick, build big camp fires all around the island and a sailing ship going by knew there was some distress so then they sent the Madrona out the next day.

CE: The Madrona was a regular vessel that serviced the island?

CS: Yes, Captain Thompson was the headman; he used to be on the ship when it came out.

CE: Was it a schooner?

CS: No, no it was a pretty big boat.

CE: I mean was it a sail?

CS: No.

CE: It was motor-driven?

CS: Yes. A large one had a cabin and what-have-you.

CE: What were the duties of -- How did your mother handle all of this? What were her duties? She had the children to raise of course.

CS: Well, she had seven children so those were her duties right there.

CE: Seven? Are some of your brothers and sisters still alive?

CS: No, I think they've all passed away.

CE: They've all gone.

CS: I had a brother and he was in the Navy and I never heard from him anymore, so I think he passed away.

CE: Did you visit the light often with your father?

CS: Oh, once in a while he'd take me up there and my mother would put a biscuit in a little can and I thought the cook made them. He'd show me the cook made them and left them for me because I didn't like biscuits and I ate them because somebody else made them.

CE: What was the light? Would you describe the light? There's a photograph here in this wonderful book and I'd like to read this into the record, it's a two volume book printed

1934 by Milton S. Gray called *The Farallones, the Painted World and Other Poems of California*. There's a photograph in here of the light.

CS: Well, it seems funny, all those years we lived out there and the Farallones were just nothing; nobody knew about them. And when I came in to go to school and they saw I lived on the Farallones, they thought I was a native, like a cannibal. I couldn't explain to them what it was but they just --

CE: How did the weather affect you, Catherine?

CS: Well, it didn't bother us; we had fog, plenty of fog.

CE: Well, did you have good weather sometimes?

CS: Oh, yes, some days. The days it was really good we could, with the telescope they had, we could see the beach in San Francisco. You could see the people moving they looked like flies but you could see them. But the fog was mostly always there.

CE: Well, now in reading this narrative, I noticed that when the boat would land there was a trap that would take supplies up.

CS: Yes, from that landing I showed you.

CE: From the wharf there?

CS: Up to the homes, yes.

CE: And that would be supplies for the whole three-month period you say?

CS: And that included the hay for the horse and the --

AK: Did the donkey --

CE: And the donkey pulled it; wasn't there a mule or a donkey that would pull the --

CS: Yes, and when they'd blow their horn to let us know, you know, that they'd arrived, the donkey would take off and they had to chase him all over the place.

CE: Because he didn't want to go.

CS: Oh, no, he didn't want to haul that thing up.

CE: I've got a little map here Catherine of the Farallones; north landing at Tower Point. Is that generally the area where they would land, where the Madrona would land?

CS: Oh, I can't tell much by the map but this book is just where they landed. And when that other girl was out here, Annie, she said they changed that to the east.

CE: The east landing; now they land there.

CS: I don't know why they did it because the east was always the worst, treacherous place.

CE: I know. Well, maybe the kind of vessels they have today they can maneuver in there better. But the east landing was certainly closer to the installation to what is now the Coast Guard and where the settlement was; see the light's right up here on the top.

CS: Yes.

CE: Did you collect bird's nests?

CS: Well, sometimes my father let me go with him, they used to have these egg shirts, you know, loaded with eggs, because they used to sell them to the restaurants. The murre eggs and the seagull eggs. The murre eggs had to be washed and I used to think it was a big joke.

CE: Well, describe an egg vest. What do you mean egg vest?

CS: Well, out of heavy muslin they would make these big shirts and then they'd shove them up with eggs and carry them that way.

CE: It was terrible the way they'd sell those for a dollar a piece, I understand, sometimes during, in San Francisco --

CS: No, they never got that much.

CE: During the Gold Rush days, before your time.

CS: Oh, I wasn't out then.

CE: Well, the Lighthouse Station was established in 1855 and your uncle was the first one in your family to go then?

CS: Yes.

CE: What was his name?

CS: His name William Beaman.

CE: William Beaman. And had he been the keeper of the Light for quite a while?

CS: Yes, he was until my cousin died and then my aunt couldn't live there no more, so they went out to Point Loma and then my father took over.

CE: Describe your father to us. What was his first name?

CS: His name was Cyrus.

CE: Cyrus O'Caine. And where was he from?

CS: Oh, he was born in Virginia City. My grandmother came from Ireland.

CE: Oh and they crossed over to Virginia City?

CS: Yes, they came and went to Virginia City and she had eight children; they were all born, except one was born in Dawson City.

CE: How would you describe your father?

CS: Well, he was a very strict father.

CE: Was he very strict?

CS: Oh boy and how.

CE: Lynn, did you know him?

LF: No.

CS: When he said, you do this, you did it.

CE: That meant the family and the whole staff on the island, I presume?

CS: Well, just his own family. Well, they all -- It was pretty near the same, when they said you're going to do something we did it, we didn't just walk off and say we're not going to do it but we did it.

CE: Are you making comparisons with today?

CS: Ah, with the kids today, I'll tell you. I had to go to my room and stay there for two hours, couldn't even have a toy, nothing. I was saying to Lynn, twice was enough for me.

CE: What was your house like that your family lived in? Can you describe it?

CS: Well, I think that -- I guess Annie's the one had the pictures. There were just like two big buildings and we lived downstairs.

CE: Do you have a picture there, Lynn? Oh, I see, we have some early photographs. Is this your residence?

CS: Yes that's it. They've made them all over as Anne said, there's only one family lives in the whole big house.

CE: Who is Anne, the girl that interviewed you last?

CS: Yes.

CE: Where was she from?

CS: Where was she from Lynn, do you know? She lives in Stinson Beach now. Real nice girl.

CE: All right, you lived -- Did you have your own bedroom or you probably shared it with some of your brothers and sisters?

CS: My sister and I.

CE: That appears to me to look east. Did the sun come up in the morning? Did you see it through there?

CS: I couldn't remember that far back.

CE: Well I just wondered, it was sunny?

CS: No, I don't remember.

CE: There's no vegetation around the island, is there? Very much vegetation?

CS: Well, I don't know about now but there wasn't.

CE: Well, there wasn't then, certainly.

CS: No.

CE: Did you have any kind of a little garden?

CS: Yes, my father had a big garden.

CE: He did?

CS: But the rabbits used to dig under and pull his carrots out.

CE: I'd heard that somebody brought some rabbits there and they really took over.

CS: Well, oh no, they came from England; they were Belgium Hares, so Anne said they got rid of all the rabbits and I don't know why. And then, one of them they said that, about pets, the cats and dogs and there wasn't a cat or dog allowed on the island, on account of the birds.

CE: Well, they were trying to keep the bird life there, weren't they, by the time you were living on the island? Weren't they protecting them?

CS: Every six months they sent a man out from Washington, two men rather from Washington.

CE: What would they do, Catherine?

CS: Well not much of anything I guess, they just looked around to see -- You know, the men from Washington.

CE: But other than that, what were they sent there for? To do a bird count?

CS: Yeah, to check on the birds and see if they if people were destroying them or the seals because we had plenty of seals, and they took care of them, to see that nobody would -- We had no way of getting in touch with San Francisco until, oh, I guess later years because my sister wasn't there. It was from Farallones to Point Arena, my Uncle was Lighthouse keeper up there at the time.

CE: Well, what did you have a --

CS: Half the time, the thing didn't work because of the storms.

CE: Did you have a short wave or what?

CS: Well, I guess it would be that; it was under water.

CE: Oh, it was under water, they had a cable connection.

CS: If there was a very big storm, then you couldn't use it at all.

CE: Charles Nordoff who is a famous writer visited the Farallones in 1847 and he talks about the boom of the surf constant and the only music. Would you agree with that?

CS: No.

CE: Is it an ever-present thing, the surf?

CS: No, in the winter we did have storms, very badly, thunder and lightening and you could hear the waves. But you couldn't hear them from our house; it was too far. You'd have to be down closer.

CE: Of course you were on the eastern end; you were in the lee of the island so that over here in the windward side, it's Shell Beach, West End and Main Top. These names intrigue me. Did you, after you were old enough to walk around and be on your own, could you explore the island? Would your mother permit that, for you children?

CS: Well, she didn't permit it but we did it once in a while, sneaked.

CE: Well, are any of these names familiar to you on this map? Shoe Brick Point? Would you look at some of those names? Any of them familiar to you Catherine?

CS: Well, Arch Rock, yes.

CE: What's Arch Rock? Would you describe that?

CS: Well, it's a great big rock with a big hole just like an arch; that's why they named it Arch Rock.

CE: When you went on these little scouting parties, what would you do, just explore as all children do?

CS: Well, we went places we were told not to go, see, because it was dangerous and we had to see what it was.

CE: Well, it was dangerous because of the current and the tides and you might fall in and all of that.

CS: If the rocks were slippery, yeah.

CE: And you might be trying to collect eggs out of a little nest and slip off.

CS: No, no, we never did that.

CE: But you never had any trouble did you?

CS: No. But there was nothing for us to do, just roam around. Of course, sometimes my mother had company and they'd have little kids.

CE: How would company come?

CS: They'd come out in that boat.

CE: So this was all pre-arranged, and the boat would come out and then would it lay over for a day?

CS: You see you had to get a permit to come out and sometimes --

CE The Lighthouse Service?

CS: You know Marion Davies?

CE: Yes.

CS: She was out there, with her father. I believe her father was a doctor.

CE: And they would get a permit from the Lighthouse Service I presume?

CS: Yes, anybody had to get it, a permit. And then they'd have to watch them, like a fish boat would come out to take them back. You see the fish boats used to come in to that cove where Sugar Loaf is.

CE: Yes.

CS: And then my father would take them up there and the fishermen would take them back.

CE: Sugar Loaf. Oh that's way up north there.

CS: But now they live quite up to date out there.

CE: Well, they have phones; they have everything.

AK: But no children.

CE: No children.

CS: We had coal oil lamps. No children.

CE: Today, I don't think that's permitted. But at the Point Reyes Bird Observatory have people there don't they, Mrs. Kent?

AK: Yes.

CE: Two or four?

AK: Four. That's all I guess. Two of the four always have to be on duty they say not all four at one time, but two always. But I wondered when you were there if there were other children. Did you have any fun at all?

CS: Well, not until I got older because it was all one family.

CE: It was all one family

CS: Seventeen cousins.

AK: Oh!

CE: Seventeen cousins?

CS: Seventeen.

CE: Well, in addition to your father who had the prime responsibility of maintaining the Light, he had an assistant who was member of the family too?

CS: Yeah, his brother.

CE: His brother. And his brother I presume was married?

CS: And then the other two men after that was just strangers.

CE: Strangers. Well, now when did you go to school on the mainland? How old were you when that took place.

CS: I think I was eight.

CE: Eight.

CS: I went to school in Vallejo. My father's sister, my father called her the commander, because she was so strict. And then he puts me up there with her.

CE: So you went through your grammar school days with her?

CS: Yes.

CE: And then what, come home for the summer?

CS: Well, yes.

CE: And the winter vacations?

CS: Well, then when I got older, I went to live with another relative in San Francisco to go to school. So I never finished high school. I was a homebody. All I did was cry to go home.

CE: What was Christmas like on the island?

CS: Well, we had wonderful Christmases.

CE: Would you try to share one of them?

CS: They always had a Christmas tree. I used to wonder why my mother used to usher us. They wouldn't let us go down the landing. That was the only excitement we had, when the Madrona came. And then, around the holidays we couldn't go down when we were kids. My father used to say there's a sickness and you're going to catch it.

CE: Now what was the point of that?

CS: And they would have a Christmas tree sent out and they didn't want us to see it and all the toys and --

CE: They wanted to surprise you.

CS: We done good at Christmas.

CE: Did you have your presents on Christmas Eve or in the morning?

CS: Well, no, we had it -- My uncle -- My mother made a suit for my uncle and he would have a couple of egg-nogs and of course, and I was scared to death. I used to make my mother sit on him because I was scared of him.

CE: You were frightened of him? When he was in the suit you mean?

CS: Oh, yes. He used to come over you know and take your hand and shake it and kiss us and I thought, "Well, gee." Of course we were the nieces but I didn't know that was my uncle. I thought it was real Santa Claus. And we had everything: doll buggies, dolls. And my aunt, as I said, the one commander, she was pretty well to do and she supplied us with everything. So we weren't bad off at that time.

CE: Do you have a photograph of your father anywhere?

CS: No, I haven't.

CE: You haven't.

CS: My mother and father would never get their pictures taken. I don't know why. You see my mother was only eighteen years older than me and we were more like chums than we were mother and daughter.

CE: Describe your mother to us. Do you resemble her, Catherine?

CS: Well, no.

CE: Are you like her in anyway?

CS: I look like my father, seeing what he looked like.

CE: You do look like your father. Was he short?

CS: No, well, he wasn't tall, he was five ten.

CE: Five ten.

CS: That isn't tall.

CE: Did he have a beard?

CS: No, he had a mustache, small one

CE: Was he blond, fair?

CS: Blond. And my father he had snow white hair when he was eighteen, from shock.

CE: Shock! Do you know what did it?

CS: Well, no, I never did hear but I know that's what it was from

CE: Well, tell me, did he stay in the Lighthouse Service all of his life then?

CS: No, he stayed until I was nineteen and then there was three younger than me to be educated and he says you can't get a teacher to come out and he said the kids go in and their crying and we're wondering how they're being taken care of so he resigned.

CE: Oh, he resigned.

CS: Yes. He went back to his old job as an assistant baker.

CE: Baker, in San Francisco?

CS: Yes.

CE: Where did he work then? What was the company?

CS: Oh, well, I don't remember the name of the company. It was over on Fillmore Street. It was a big place. And he went over there -- He thought he would go over as a helper and then he got assistant.

CE: Good.

CS: Well, he was a better cook than my mother. Much better. Especially Italian dinners out there.

CE: What was his routine? Can you tell us sort of what it was like?

CS: You mean out there?

CE: Yes. Eventually they had to --

CS: Well, he had the first watch from nine to twelve; then the next one came on from twelve to three and then from three to six.

CE: Are we talking about the morning or night?

CS: Night.

CE: We're talking about night, yes, because --

CS: Then in the daytime, they only worked 'til twelve o'clock, four of them, four men. But then they had to keep the brass, down the signal. Oh, the brass, they kept it up beautiful. And my father was such a strict, clean, oh, he was so fussy in our house. Boy we couldn't put our hands on the table like that if they were dirty. He was strict. And they worked --

CE: Well, they had to keep the lens clean, they had to --

CS: They worked from eight 'til twelve then they quit because they had to go on night duty.

CE: But he had the first watch, nine 'til twelve did you say?

CS: Nine 'til twelve, yes. I used to go up a lot of times. As I say, my mother put these biscuits, butter them and put jam in them and put them in a bag and I never liked biscuits, but those were good. I used to tell her, "They're good because the cook left them for me" It was the same biscuits.

CE: Who was the cook?

CS: Well, there was no cook; my father used to say that. The cook, so of course we just believed there was a cook.

CE: Well, when you went in the main floor of the lighthouse, was there an office below?

CS: No.

CE: Main floor?

CS: You went in the main floor and there was this door and you went up these winding stairs.

CE: And they were metal stairs?

CS: Yeah.

CE: All the way up to the top?

CS: Yeah. Now Anne says they took this off, no more revolving light; it's a steady light and they don't have to go up.

CE: It's been automated.

CS: And one time it wouldn't work and the men had to do it by hand all night.

CE: Well there was your father and one assistant, two other assistants, so there were three men really responsible for the light?

CS: There was three assistants and my father.

CE: Four. There were four men that were actually responsible to tend the light.

CS: Yes.

CE: And naturally then, all the other personnel required to maintain the station.

CS: Well, from three to six was a good watch because daylight came around five. Of course, you had to stay there but you could do anything you wanted. Go up nine to twelve, it's dark. And then we had to go up all those winding -- Now they've got a railing for them to hold on to. And when the rain and thunder and lightening would come you just had to hang on the best you could. But you see now they've got it easy, everything is fine.

CE: Well, the rain wouldn't get inside, what do you mean?

CS: A railing outside going up the hill.

CE: Oh, I beg your pardon.

CS: Yeah, it was a winding hill. You can see, I think there's some pictures are there. But they've put a railing up there now.

CE: I see. Did you ever take biscuits up to your dad, any particular night?

CS: Well, he had them for me. No, no, I didn't, no. No we never went without a parent at night.

CE: Did you ever sit up there and visit with him for a long time?

CS: Yeah, stay up until twelve o'clock.

CE: You would? Did you have any music at all? Did you have a phonograph or anything out there?

CS: Nothing, no. My uncle played the harmonica but that was it.

CE: That was it.

CS: He played at it I guess.

CE: How about the horns, the fog horns?

CS: Well, what do you mean?

CE: Well, they have the big diaphone.

CS: Well of course they are automatic now.

CE: Yes, I realize that. There was supposed to be a cavity in the rock, a crevice, that they put a horn over and it was the air to activate this horn. Did you ever know that place?

CS: No. They had to stay down there three hours, each take a shift when the fog was in.

AK: Did they blow it by hand?

CS: Well, it was coal; a big furnace, they had to keep it up with coal all the time. And one of them said, I don't know who it was, said -- this is how they get stories -- that they had to turn the signal off when it was foggy because it scared the birds. Wasn't that silly? And there was a wreck out there but it was all before we went out, the Franconia was the name of it.

CE: Say it again?

CS: Franconia.

CE: Franconia, sure, because don't they have a bay named for it?

CS: Well, we used to call it Franconia Beach. And that part of the ship was still there when I left.

CE: It was?

CS: Yes, buried in the sand but it was still there.

AK: Where did it come from? Was it an English ship?

CS: Oh, I wouldn't know. Franconia. What does that sound like, Italian?

AK: Sounds like Italian.

CS: I don't think they ever did have anything on it.

AK: I never knew the islands were so large; I didn't know there were so many.

CS: Oh, yes they're pretty big.

CE: There are some birds listed here. I wonder if any of these are familiar to you, Catherine. The Western Gull, of course.

CS: We called them seagulls.

CE: The Common Murre, the Black Oyster Catcher. Have you ever seen those?

CS: No.

CE: The Tufted Puffin.

CS: Yes, and the Sea Parrot and then they had the Rock Wren, the bird, and the ones that have the long beak on them, what do they call them? Humming birds, we had some of them.

CE: Oh, you had some of those.

CS: Yes, we did.

CE: Were there many gulls left? I mean many seals left when you were still there?

CS: Oh, yes when I was there were because they're protected. Once in a while, one of the sealing boats would steal a couple of them but my father had no way of communicating with San Francisco to send a boat out right a way and catch them.

CE: They had no -- He had no protection there did he?

CS: No.

CE: He had no authoritative protection there like Coast Guard, of course that came later, and Marines, but there was no one really to exercise the law of your father.

CS: No.

CE: Did you have any poaching? A great deal of poaching?

CS: What do you mean?

AK: Well, when people come in boats and they still did it quite late, and shot the seals from the boats --

CS: Not when we were there they didn't do it, no, they didn't.

CE: Good.

AK: Well, that's what they did after then; that was very bad.

CS: I know once in a while the fish boats would want to land but my father would meet them half way and tell them it wasn't permitted. And they'd give us a lot of crabs and it was a great place to catch crabs.

CE: Yes, sure.

AK: The old cormorants, did they live there too, the black birds that stand kind of high and walk on their funny little feet?

CS: Yes. And there's another bird there they call the Petri.

CE: Yes, that's a very long flying bird, very wonderful thing.

CS: And they laid little white eggs.

CE: Well, the Point Reyes Bird Observatory is very interested in the Farallones, as you know, and they have a vested interest in it now, don't they Mrs. Kent?

AK: Oh, yes.

CS: Well, Lynn and -- She's been trying to get out there, my niece, my granddaughter Susan. Susan, my granddaughter, is the one that knows Annie so well; she lives in Stinson Beach too.

AK: Susan does too?

CS: Yes, my granddaughter.

CE: Your other granddaughter, what's her name.

CS: Susan Rakow.

CE: Is she married?

CS: It used to be Swanson before she was married. Yes, she's married.

CE: I think she might be Sally Rakow's daughter, is she? Or daughter-in-law?

CS: No, she's my daughter's daughter.

CE: Well, Mrs. Kent got a letter, you know, recently from Costa Rica, in Central America, by Barbara and Jim Lewis who were very interested in that and they are coming back here some day and they want to write a history about the area so maybe this tape can be of some assistance.

CS: Yes, I just got a letter from them. Yeah, they were here one day they are very nice people.

AK: Yes, they're going to stay in touch with you. I was looking for -- There was one place there was a picture of the rock wren and I didn't see it in here.

CE: Well, would you say in a very civilized way it's sort of a Swiss family Robinson existence when you were there? I mean you were the only people weren't you?

CS: Yes.

CE: You had plenty of things for your creature comforts, obviously.

CS: Yes, we lived good.

CE: But you were isolated; you were away from communication.

CS: But when you're born there you don't notice the difference. I used to come to San Francisco to get my teeth looked over or something and oh, I thought it was terrible and oh, I wanted to get home there was so many people around in the street; I'd never seen so many.

CE: And you wanted to get back to the serenity of your island.

CS: Yes, I wanted to get back to the silent night.

Side B

CE: You said you were there 19 years and that would bring us up to 1906. Did your family then relocate from the Farallones to San Francisco just before the earthquake?

CS: Yes, two months before.

CE: What happened? Were you living in San Francisco? Where were you living?

CS: We were living on Green Street and then we moved from there up to a brand new place up on Broadway Hill. And when the earthquake came we went to sit on Nob Hill to watch the fires instead of minding our own business and staying home, and when we came home, the soldiers wouldn't let us in. We had nothing and my father said to them,

“Can’t we get some clothes?” And nothing at all, and here was all my Easter outfit. I thought that was a crime. And he said, no, so my father was going to force himself in and he took his bayonet out.

CE: He did? What happened?

CS: So my mother said, “It’s not worth it, let’s go.”

CE: Where did you go then?

CS: Well, we went down the hill. We didn’t know where to go. My mother happened to have her purse, luckily, and when we got down to the bottom of the hill, a fire wagon came along and he said, “Where are you people going?” My mother said, “I don’t know. I just don’t know where we’re going to go.” He said, “Have you any relatives across the Bay?” And my mother had this friend that stood up for her that time, and she had a big home, so we went over there and we all went in the fire truck.

AK: Over to where?

CS: Down to the Ferry Building and then on the ferries. There wasn’t a charge or anything to get over across the Bay and we went over to Fruitvale. We stayed there a while. In the meantime, my father got lost. He went to work. He thought he was going to go to work. They wanted all the men to clean the brick and everything they could store. So, he was gone about three months.

CE: My father had a similar experience. He was about 16, I guess, and he left. They were burned out and he was walking down the road and they grabbed him; he worked in the hospital. They didn’t know where he was for days.

CS: Yeah, they made you -- They grabbed anybody, and they didn’t care. So then, finally, my mother came across the Bay to see, you know, to see what was doing and if she could get any place and they were putting up notices in the Ferry Building, and my mother put up his name and we also picked up a little girl we had. She was all by herself and she had her Easter hat, she was hanging onto that hat. And so the fireman stopped and picked her up and we took her with us and we had her for about three months before my mother put up a big sign at the Ferry Building. And somebody, friend of theirs, had read it and called them up and so they came over and got her. I don’t know what would have become of her if we didn’t pick her up. She was about eight years old.

AK: Is that the way you found your father, too?

CS: No, we didn’t find my father until later than that little girl. Now I just don’t know whether somebody told him about the notice and my mother telling where we would be. We were out in Richmond in a, these things they build, these homes for the people who have no homes.

CE: Refugee?

CS: Yeah, refugee camps in the Richmond District. So we came there.

CE: Did you hear what happened to the Farallones as a result of the quake? Was any -- They were sort of in the line of the San Andreas Fault, weren't they? Did anything --

CS: No, we had loads and loads of earthquakes out there, good ones, never bothered. The only thing it bothered -- It would shut the power off but then they had to go out and fix it, otherwise it was all right. Because they had phones and I remember my father went to take the phone down to call my uncle up before he was Lighthouse Keeper to tell him you know that he thought the power was out and it knocked him flat on the floor. My mother says, "Well, this is no time to be fooling." She didn't know he fell down from the electricity.

CE: I'm fascinated with that story. You said before there was communication that you built fires all around the island to attract attention There were the pilot boats that always came out there, the schooners.

CS: Well, one brother drowned on the day the Madrona was there.

CE: He did?

CS: In front of everybody, he fell off that landing. My mother thought my father had him, my father thought we had him, and yet he drowned.

CE: How old a boy was he?

CS: He was six. And we came in. My father couldn't get in because there was nobody to take his place, there was too much for three men to do, so my mother and I and the rest of the kids went in.

CE: To San Francisco?

CS: Yes, for the burial.

CE: You probably went on that same boat, then, that was there.

CS: Yes, the Madrona. And the Captain put him in his cabin; they had him stretched on a board and wrapped in canvas. And then one of the Lighthouse Keepers, he was a diphtheria carrier, but they didn't know it and my two brothers got diphtheria and they died before they could get help. They had bonfires going, and some sailing ship seen it and knew there was something wrong and the next day the Madrona came out and they brought a doctor with them. And I slept in the same bed with my brother because my father had to go up the tower and he said if he wants anything you're maybe asleep and won't hear him. I drank out of the same glass he did.

CE: And you didn't get it?

CS: No.

AK: Isn't that amazing.

CS: And they both passed away.

CE: When the doctor came, did he isolate you children then, do you remember?

CS: He burned everything. Everything he could get a hold of, mattresses, everything. We were just like poor people that just came over.

CE: And yet you never got it?

CS: None of us got it.

AK: And yet you never got it?

CS: None of us got it.

AK: In later life you never got it either?

CS: No. And one was twelve and the other was, I guess, nine, nine and a half.

CE: Now the carrier, what did they do with him?

CS: Well, they took a culture of all our throats and he was the only one that they found something in him.

CE: Did they get rid of him?

CS: Oh, they, of course they took him off.

AK: But there was no law to say that he couldn't go where other people were.

CS: Well, I think, they had -- I don't know then but now I think they have something that if you're a carrier, they cure you. I don't know what, but he had four children and they never got it.

CE: Now, these assistants to your father -- Here's the Lighthouse at the top of the island, the southeast Farallone Island, right?

CS: Yeah.

CE: And here are the houses to support that activity and every assistant would have a house of his own, I presume, with his family?

CS: Well, not a house, it was all one big -- Like she'd live upstairs and we lived downstairs; just one big house.

CE: One big house.

CS: Yes.

CE: What were some of the other buildings, warehouses or supply?

CS: Well, there was stone house that was there, oh, I guess when the Russians lived there.

CE: That was still there when you --

CS: No, Annie told me they'd torn part of it down.

CE: Well, I mean that was there when you were there.

CS: Oh yeah, that was a storage for cold things. When they wanted to keep anything cold, like, well, paints and all that junk it was their storage. It was three stories and it's stone.

CE: And the kerosene had to be kept somewhere, I presume.

CS: I think that was kept down by the signal where the hay was.

CE: Hay? What was the hay for?

CS: For the horse.

CE: For the horse, for the one horse.

AK: Now let's see, horse and the donkey and what else?

CS: No we didn't have a -- The first one was a horse.

CE: The first one was a horse. What was his name?

CS: What did I tell you it was Lynn, Jenny? Yes, Jenny. And the other one was Patty; I'd named her after the singer. It used to bray all the time and my father said, "Well, that sounds like Patty." What was her name, the singer? Do you remember the opera singer? Oh it was Jenny Lynn. That was it. So they called it cause it was always braying, always wanting brown sugar.

AK: So it was the donkey who was Jenny, not the horse.

CS: No, because Annie said the grave was still there. When Jenny Lynn died they buried her, put it in canvas and we had flowers, we had a regular funeral.

CE: Well, there are no humans buried on the island? Not to your knowledge?

CS: No.

CE: What if you had an acute dental problems.

CS: Well, we used to come in, see, every six months.

CE: You'd come in for a checkup?

CS: Yes, checkups. And I'll tell you every time I came in, we were healthy out there, we never had anything except the diphtheria. I came in to get a checkup when I get scarlet fever, and I had to stay; I couldn't go home. I stayed there in quarantine at my aunt's house. Well, then after I went home and everything was fine and then I come in the next time. And what was the next thing I got, Lynn? Well I come home with something else. So my father says it's better to lose your teeth.

CE: Were there emergencies that you remember other than that terribly unpleasant one?

CS: No, just one with a man, when he was picking eggs he fell down and he broke his leg, I think he broke two legs and they sent a boat out right away for him and it took him in. His name was Englebret.

CE: Well, these men would come out with the Madrona and stay there for three months or how would that be? Or they come out for the day? I'm confused about that.

CS: Well, if the government sent men out to work, then they'd figure just how long it's going to take them to work and then they would send the Madrona out again to pick them up.

CE: I see. That was the main boat?

CS: That was the main boat.

CE: Did the Jenny Griffin or the Owl ever touch base out there to your knowledge? Those were boats that were on in Bolinas Lagoon and used to come to San Francisco.

CS: No, the only one I know of is a schooner; it was named the Ida A.

CE: Oh, the Ida A!

CS: Captain Ahlin, yeah, he got the contract after.

CE: After the Madrona?

CS: Yeah. Oh, the Madrona, I guess they had all the Lighthouses to go around and this was getting a drag on them. And Captain Ahlin from Bolinas had the contract.

CE: What was the name of it again?

CS: The Ida A. It was named after, I think, his wife.

CE: Did you like the runs out there on a boat? Do you like the sea? Do you like to be on the water, Catherine?

CS: I used to but I don't now. I just hate it.

CE: I've been out there myself and those swells are unbelievable, aren't they?

CS: Yep, I'll say they are. I can keep my stomach down. Do they have the Lightship anymore?

CE: No.

CS: I thought they did.

CE: All of the things are getting automated. You mentioned earlier Catherine that you visited a lot of other Lighthouses. How did that come about?

CS: Well, my uncles were transferred. You see my father was the only one stuck it out.

CE: You mean for that long a period of time at one place?

CS: Yeah.

CE: But then he retired?

CS: Yeah, but he did it for the other three children.

CE: Yes, okay, but your --

CS: Well, I had one up at the Point Arena.

CE: Your uncle was up there?

CS: Had one down at Point Loma.

CE: Point Loma?

CS: Yes. And was only one of his daughters, children, living. They're all dead.

CE: And you would visit them whenever you had the chance?

CS: Yes, and at Fort Point, I was visit there. They said you ought to come out and visit us.

CE: What was his name?

CS: Rankin.

CE: Rankin?

CS: Captain. They called him Captain Rankin.

CE: I know that. We had the pleasure of interviewing a woman, Mary Carlisle, who lived twenty years on the Mare Island Light and she was brought there as a young baby also when her family, her father had to fight in the Spanish American War -- When went to visit her mother.

AK: Her mother was the light keeper?

CE: No, grandmother, her grandmother was the light keeper.

CS: Where was that?

CE: Mare Island. But it does -- Maybe that was a little later than when this story occurred but if the wife knew her business and the husband died, she could maintain and carry on the light.

CS: I know my aunt did.

CE: They paid them half the salary.

CS: Oh, yeah, I know.

AK: Where was your aunt?

CS: It's down at Pacific Grove. Do you remember the Lighthouse down there? Pacific Grove?

CE: Point Loma?

CS: No, Point Loma is down --

CE: Well that's Pacific Grove, Point Loma.

CS: This is a different place. Point Loma is down near Santa Barbara and this is down at -  
-

CE: Pacific Grove.

CS: Pacific Grove, yes.

CE: Point Pinos?

CS: Oh, what's that, Point -- His name was Williams. They were there for quite a number of years. Richard Williams. It'll come to me later.

CE: And the Point Loma Light is out near San Diego, isn't it?

CS: Yes.

CE: The one out in the point there? That's a beautiful thing, Cabrillo Point or something.

CS: Well, my uncle went there because it was brand new. He was trying to get my father to come down first; they needed a first.

CE: Do you have any artifacts left of your father, his uniform or anything, his cap or --

CS: No, you see everything was burned in the fire; we don't have nothing.

CE: Well that's true.

CS: They wore a blue uniform with brass buttons and then on the arm was U.S.L. in gold letters and they wore a cap with the U.S.L. And when they came to San Francisco they had to wear it, not out there.

CE: Did he have to do a lot of paper work and reports?

CS: Oh, yeah, they had a logbook. My mother done all the writing because she was such a good writer and he was --

CE: Oh, he kept a log?

CS: Oh, he had to.

CE: Do you know where any of those logs are?

CS: I don't know. I guess they would be in Washington. Yeah, my father had a desk and we didn't dare even breathe on it.

CE: Did he smoke a pipe or anything?

CS: No, he smoked cigarettes.

CE: Cigarettes?

CS: Bull Durham, I can remember that.

CE: He rolled his own? Did he like a little Schnapps once in a while or --

CS: Oh, sure, Irish coffee.

CE: Irish coffee would be good on a cold night.

CS: Yeah, well it didn't get out there too often. The fishermen used to give him wine but my folks didn't care for wine, red wine. They accepted it but they didn't drink it.

CE: Was your mother in good health most of the time, Catherine?

CS: Yeah, well, my mother, she died when she was 55. She had strep throat. She never was sick.

CE: Yet she had all those babies. Well now, how about those babies, were some of them born out there?

CS: No, just one.

CE: Who was born out there?

CS: My sister, they called her Farallone; that was her name.

CE: Farallone? Is she alive.

CS: No, she passed away. When she was baptized the priest said, "What kind of a name is that?"

CE: Sister, Farallone O'Caine. That's probably -- Probably she might be the only one.

CS: Well, see there was Russians out there before.

CE: Yes, but I don't think they brought their women. I don't think they had women there.

CS: You don't think so?

AK: There is one woman who says she went -- She answered that same night on television that she said she was born out there but that was way up in 1927, much later.

CE: Well, that could be when the Coast Guard took over of course they had everything there, all the conveniences.

CS: It could be after we left; we left in 1906.

AK: Yes, and this was 1927, a long way --

CS: But, I never heard of it because I knew some of the assistants that went out there.

CE: Well, you traveled, as I understand it, and seen some of the other Lighthouses along the Pacific Coast. Have you done --

CS: I'm trying to think of the one down at Pacific Grove, what the name of it is.

CE: Pinos?

CS: No. Isn't that terrible, I was down there, stayed there three months and I can't remember the name of it.

CE: Montara? Well, we can find that out, that's recorded. Had you traveled much to other parts of the world since you left there?

CS: No, if you call Canada -- We were there three times. We took her when she was small.

CE: Of the other places you've seen in the world, do you still have an affection for the wild beauty of the Farallones?

CS: No, I don't think I'd ever want to go out. Annie asked me if I'd like to go. I would feel badly to see the way they've destroyed it.

CE: So you haven't been back since 1906?

CS: No.

AK: I don't think she'd like it.

CE: No, well, none of us like to go back.

CS: Because there was -- Oh, things were different then than they are now.

AK: How about Ireland? Any of your family ever go back to Ireland?

CS: No. My grandmothers, my two grandmothers, my mother's mother and my father's mother were born in Ireland but they never had any desire to go back.

CE: Does Lynn want to go visit the Farallones?

CS: Yes, she and her cousin want to go.

AK: I think you ought to be able to get permission if anybody did.

CS: Well, Annie says.

LF: We have already.

CE: Did you get permission?

LF: Yes.

CE: From the Point Reyes people, Bird Observatory?

CS: Did you get it for Susan or just you and Jim?

LF: Susan already has it also.

AK: That would be nice.

CS: No, it would be a nice trip.

CE: Susan Rakow is your sister?

LF: Cousin.

AK: And when you do go, take pictures.

LF: Oh, I intend to.

CE: You know, it would be interesting if you could take pictures from some of those same vantage points, to show how it was, Lynn, and then how it is today.

AK: The landing apparently is just the same.

CE: There were no vehicles at all, any sort. Were there carts?

CS: No we didn't have nothing

CE: Nothing. It was just that horse?

CS: We didn't even have skates.

CE: Well there wasn't any place that was paved.

CS: We had great big porches we could have skated up and down but my father didn't think it was proper for girls to skate.

CE: Were you taught many things before you went to school by your mother? Were you taught sewing?

CS: Yes. And every Sunday, my mother got out the Bible and we all gathered, all the nieces and nephews, Sunday morning.

CE: And you had prayer?

CS: Yes, that was our church.

AK: That's nice.

CE: And the one man who played -- Your uncle played the harmonica and that was the extent of the music. Did anybody have a guitar or mandolin?

CS: My cousin played the banjo; he played it better than his father played it.

AK: Oh, that's nice.

CS: But I wasn't interested in music, so I didn't even know, thought it was a lot of noise.

CE: What was your impression of -- It's hard to make a comparison because you haven't been back, I realize, but were you always aware of the vast amount of birds. Was that a very present thing, Catherine?

CS: Well, we used to go out sometimes and see they were laying like the Petri and pull their eggs out. And one time my cousin, he was about 15, he put his hand in and there was a sea couch. Boy did he come down on him. So my father said you wouldn't like somebody coming in your home and pulling you out, would you? See, we did things to then that our parents didn't know.

AK: Well, were they in clouds? Do you remember, the birds all coming in a great big number?

CS: No.

AK: You didn't?

CS: No, no, they didn't-not when I was there, they didn't. They each had their own place.

CE: You have a very nice complexion, I noticed. Were you outdoors a lot when you were a young woman there? Outdoors all the time? They say that fog is just wonderful for your skin.

CS: Yeah, we lived outdoors.

CE: Some of these dowagers that live in Seacliff, they go out early in the morning when it's foggy to get that steam. You don't have to buy it in a jar; you've got it right there.

CS: I think the fog is good for anybody; its got a lot of iodine in it and we had plenty of that out there.

CE: Oh, my lord, you must have had it.

AK: Now what about the water system? Did they have to catch the water in little --

CS: Yes, rain water. They had a great big rain shed and then we had, when you come out of our house on this side, they had this great big round cistern. They had it and oh, it was an immense big thing and, see, then they'd get their water from there.

CE: I understand there were some springs but they weren't very good water.

CS: I never seen any of them.

CE: Did you ever have some dry years without water?

CS: No.

CE: Like we're going through in Marin County?

CS: No, no.

CE: Plenty of water.

CS: They used to get too much sometimes it would run down over the thing.

CE: Over the side?

CS: Yeah. And we had lots of goats.

CE: Goats for milk?

CS: No, nobody drank it. For pets. And then when the little baby was like this, they kill him and eat him for lamb. I didn't like it because it was a pet.

AK: The Italian people do every Easter now.

CS: Yes, they say they're very, very good eating. And then my cousin, he had a pet goat.

CE: What was his name, your cousin?

CS: His name was -- We used to call him Bud. He was a blonde.

CE: What was his last name?

CS: Elston. Williams was his stepfather. And we had this -- So my aunt, the one my father called the commander, she sent him on a big wagon. It would hold six of us and any time our pet died, we got a ride on this wagon. The rest had to walk behind the wagon.

CE: Were there any wildflowers on your island?

CS: Yes, Annie asked me that and I said we had a few. They had a yellow one there that you picked and it didn't smell too nice but it was beautiful. You couldn't bring them in the houses.

AK: It's the tarweed, I guess.

CS: I guess so, yes.

CE: Do you remember some beautiful sunsets Catherine?

CS: Oh, yes. Looked like you could reach out and they looked like a Chinese place going down, just like you could reach out and pull it in. And the rainbows, oh, they were gorgeous. So you see, I didn't know the difference, San Francisco, to me, was too many people.

CE: You'd look and see it through the telescope and that was it on a clear day.

CS: On a real clear day they had the telescope and they'd bring it down to the East End and we'd take a turn. You could see these people moving but they looked like little ants running around.

CE: Is there quite a bit of fishing activity, fishing boats always plowing around?

CS: They came out with it you could only come so close to the Farallones. They had it.

CE: But you could see them always, I guess they were prevalent every day?

CS: Well, my father seen them he always went down to the landing to see that none of them got in too close.

CS: What would he do, use a megaphone?

CS: No, he'd get the skiff and go out. They were all very nice.

CE: Oh, he'd get on the skiff and remind them?

CS: Yes. Just had to say that this water belonged to the Lighthouse. But there was none that was ever nasty to him. And sometimes those crabs were about this big. Oh, were they good. I don't know if they have them anymore or not; it was right near Sugarloaf.

AK: They were right there.

CS: Yes, my father used to go out, had a net and used to go out and catch the crabs and they had rock cod.

CE: Well, you're old enough, Catherine, to have seen the end of the sailing era. You've seen a lot of sailing craft go through there past the Farallones.

CS: Yes, we did, sailboats.

CE: Schooners and windjammers and then you saw the beginning of steam, of course.

CS: Yes. There used to be a lot of tugboats. they'd always stop and bring over fresh milk, milk I never drank because I didn't know what it was.

CE: Oh, you didn't have milk of course.

CS: No, we didn't have no milk.

CE: You were raised without milk.

CS: We had canned milk, Borden's, you know that thick --

CE: Oh, she'd dilute that.

CS: Until the cream came in.

AK: And not taking the goat's milk, think of the good milk you didn't know you were wasting.

CS: Oh, I guess so but I don't think I'd like that.

AK: I don't think I would either, but if there was no other --

CS: Well, we didn't know the difference.

AK: No.

CE: You know it's real extraordinary, Catherine, you have been very fortunate to have been raised in such a wonderful place.

CS: Oh, as I always said there was no place for us to go wrong so we had to be raised one way.

CE: And that was right with your father.

CS: And with the father I had, he was good to us, I don't mean he wasn't good. He'd do anything for us we wanted. But when he said something -- In the morning when we had breakfast, he just laid the law down, you going to do, you going to do and you. We did it, because I didn't want to sit in a room for two hours anymore.

CE: Did he live to a good age?

CS: Yes, he was 78.

CE: So he lived twenty-five years after your mother.

CS: He died of appendicitis; no he died before my mother.

CE: Before? I thought you said your mother was very young?

CS: Well, she was, she was 56.

CE: Well, you said he lived --

CS: No my -- Yeah, my father died first.

LF: No, Granny, he was 78 when he died; your mother was 56.

CE: He wasn't twenty years older than she was he?

CS: No, he was thirteen years older.

CE: Well, he did live longer than your mother, then, regardless.

CS: See, I always though he went first.

AK: You mean your mother was eighteen when you were born?

CS: Yeah.

AK: Still she had how many more after that?

CS: Six after me.

CE: And you were the first?

CS: I was the first, yes. She had three girls and four boys.

CE: All right, in conclusion, Catherine, I'd like to ask you now, what year did you marry?

CS: 1914 and Dorothy was born 1917.

CE: That's your daughter?

CS: Yes. And then her mother was born 1918.

CE: You had two daughters?

CS: Yes, two daughters.

CE: And where did you live most of your adult life since you left the island?

CS: Well in San Francisco.

CE: And what brings us to Newark today? Because you come and visit your lovely granddaughter?

CS: I was going to be here -- See I came yesterday. They picked me up yesterday. I come over every two weeks.

CE: Now when you're in San Francisco do you live in an apartment house?

CS: No I'm in my own home.

CE: What's your address in the city because we want to send you something?

CS: It's Thirty-Fourth Avenue right near Taravel, and do you want my phone number?

CE: Yes.

CS: 664-6984 Montrose.

CE: What's the address on Thirty-Fourth?

CS: 2427.

CE: Well, aren't you proud of your grandmother Lynn?

LF: Yes.

CS: She says it very low.

CE: Very low. Well she doesn't want you to get --

AK: She ended up when I talked to her, she said, you know not just because she's my grandmother but oh, she's a wonderful lady.

CE: Now Isn't that nice.

CS: Yes.

CE: Well, I think your parents indeed should be very proud of their daughter and how you were raised. It shows you can be raised in a simple way, removed from the school.

CS: Of course I didn't know any different and then when I went to go to work I was scared to death. I went to work in the phone company.

CE: Well, how did you meet your husband, anyway? We forgot to ask that.

CS: Well, I met him at a dance.

CE: That a girl, see.

CS: Yeah, but I went with him a year before, you know, off and on because I didn't want to get married too young. I was twenty-seven when I got married.

CE: You didn't want to rush it did you?

CS: No because I wasn't used to any boyfriends.

CE: Well, dear, I want to thank you so much for allowing us to come and visit you today Catherine and I'm looking forward to when Lynn is able to visit the Farallones and she'll have some exciting things to tell you and some photographs.

CS: You'd better make it so when I can come over and get some.

CE: Thank you very much for letting us come today. Mrs. Kent, you have a final question you'd like to ask?

AK: No, I guess not. I'm so interested in listening to all of this and I would also like to hear what Lynn finds when she goes there.

CE: Maybe she might surprise you, Catherine, and you might want to go take another visit.

CS: No, I don't think so. They've torn everything down, they've torn the chicken houses down and they've torn the stone house down.

CE: You didn't mention that you had the chickens.

CS: Oh, we had oodles of chickens.

CE: You had chickens. That was one source of -- The eggs and --.

CS: Well, my aunt tried to raise turkeys but they didn't thrive to good. When Thanksgiving come there wasn't a --

CE: This is Thanksgiving. Why don't we close on that? What would you have for a Thanksgiving dinner? Typical of what we would have here?

CS: Yes, well, we would have chicken. We didn't have turkey, but we had everything else, cranberry sauce and everything.

CE: And you'd have -- Perhaps your mother would get everybody together and --

CS: Nine of us around the table.

CE: Nine around the table.

CS: Well one was in the high chair. Well, my mother was a very, very strict Catholic. Any children the Lord gave you, you took them. But this day and age it's different. You know to raise them out there wasn't so bad because you had fish and eggs and crab and all that stuff.

AK: The days are very different.

CE: The simple good life. It shows you what the pioneer spirit has done and accomplished in this country, crossing the plains and all of that and then the isolation people endure and prevail without sacrifice of their standards.

CS: Well, my grandmother came from Virginia City in a covered wagon to San Jose.

CE: You come from a very good rugged heritage.

CS: With eight kids.

AK: Wonderful, wonderful.

CE: Thank you again, Catherine.

CS: It was good to meet you.

CE: And we'll look forward to seeing you again.

CS: Yes, I hope so.