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Anne T. Kent California Room

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Anne T. Kent California Room
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INTERVIEW WITH NELL DOHERTY

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
March 12, 1975

INTERVIEWEE: Nell Doherty (ND)

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

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 12, 1975

TRANSCRIBER: Marjorie Hoffman

CE: Today is Wednesday, March 12, 1975. We are at the residence of Mrs. Randolph C. Doherty, known to all of her friends as Nellie Doherty. Her residence is located at 501 Casitas Drive in Greenbrae, California. This is Carla Ehat reporting with Mrs. Thomas Kent for the Moya Library, a project of oral history for the California Room at the Marin County Library at Civic Center. Good afternoon, Mrs. Doherty.

ND: Good afternoon to you.

CE: Now, I understand that you have lived in Larkspur, and we're up on the sixth floor overlooking the Corte Madera Creek, river, or slough, however you wish to name it, and you've been here most of your adult life. Tell us a little bit about your background. I understand you were born in 1885, is that right?

ND: That's right.

CE: Where were you born?

ND: In Los Angeles.

CE: And then, I heard later you moved to - -

ND: Well, then my folks came to Bakersfield when I was a year old.

CE: You were raised there?

ND: I was raised there on a little farm.

CE: Farm?

ND: Yes, on a little ranch and when I was going to high school I rode a bicycle for three miles each way to school. We were three miles out of Bakersfield, you see. And...

CE: Was the farm a source of income for your family? Was the farming their livelihood?

ND: My father, yes.

CE: What did you have on the farm?

ND: Oh, just alfalfa and fruit trees and everything - had a dairy.

CE: Did you enjoy farm life?

ND: Not too much. Oh, it was hard work. That's what we thought.

CE: Well, I understand Mr. Doherty, whom you later married, he was raised in Bakersfield.

ND: He was raised in Bakersfield.

CE: When was he born, Nell?

ND: He was born in 1880.

CE: How did you two get together?

ND: Well, our families knew one another and, I don't know, after I was going to high school and we just - I don't know he just asked me to go to a watermelon feed or something - a hay ride one night and it started from there and we were married in 1904.

CE: 1904.

ND: In 1904 in Bakersfield.

CE: Well, how did it come about that you and your husband relocated to Larkspur in Marin County?

ND: Well, it was through Mr. Doherty's cousin, Earl Doherty. They were down visiting

their family that year for Christmas and Mr. Doherty's uncle had sold his lumber yard where he worked and we didn't have anything to do then so Earl suggested we come up and take over the yard in Larkspur because he had the yard in Larkspur and also in Mill Valley.

CE: Where was the original yard located?

ND: That was in 1906 - in January.

CE: And was that on the main street in those days, Nell?

ND: It was on the main street, between Ward and Cane Street.

CE: Well, we'll talk about the lumber company a little bit later. You perhaps know as much about the history of Larkspur as anybody we could speak with this year. It's our understanding that it was around 1888 that most of Larkspur was bought from Patrick King by a Mr. C. W. Wright. Is that correct and if so tell us what you know of it.

ND: Well, what I know when we came here in 1906 it was Mr. Wright that owned it.

CE: He owned the town.

ND: He owned it.

CE: What did he do, did he have it surveyed and sold lots?

ND: Sold lots. See, when we came here in 1906 there weren't very many buildings. And after the quake in April 18, 1906, people came over and built homes in Larkspur and lived there.

CE: Well, was the Larkspur Inn in existence then or had it burned down? The original Larkspur Inn?

ND: No, it hadn't burned down at that time.

CE: I see.

ND: That is, if that's the right Inn, if that's the one.

CE: Because later there was built the Larkspur Hotel in 1894, which is known today as the Blue Rock.

ND: No, you're talking about –

CE: Two different places - okay, would you straighten us out?

ND: Well, the Larkspur Hotel was there - that was built in 1895.

CE: And where was that?

ND: It's where it is now.

CE: Right where it is now.

ND: And the McCormick's, when we came here in 1906, the McCormicks were running it, the hotel. And they left about in - I don't know, just in maybe 1913 or before and the Stringa and Marilli bought the hotel. Then they remodeled and put the blue rock, and the blue rock came from up the canyon.

CE: Well, this is what we heard from Estelle Murray Peterson. She said her grandfather told her that, that stone was quarried right here from Larkspur.

ND: Yes.

CE: Whereabouts, up at Baltimore Canyon?

ND: Yes, up on - I don't know, not right up in -

CE: But it came from this area?

ND: Yes, right in Larkspur.

CE: What do you remember about the Limerick Inn? Was it standing when you were first in Larkspur?

ND: Yes, yes it was.

CE: Now that was on Escalle property?

ND: Yes, Escalle property. I knew them very well.

CE: Well, tell us about them because no one has as yet been able to tell us about that family too much. What was the little setting like?

ND: It was very - you don't have it, do you?

CE: No.

ND: It was a very pretty little place. They had grape vines on the hill, it was all planted in grapes and they had a winery. They made their own wine and they sold wine to the people in Larkspur, deliver it with a horse and wagon.

CE: Did you know Jean Escalle or had he died before you came?

ND: Jean - -

CE: Jean Escalle.

ND: Oh, yes, we knew him well and Mrs. Escalle, too.

CE: Well, tell me that on Bastille Day thousands of people would come over to his place and drink the wine.

ND: Sure. It was very popular.

CE: He had a production of 20,000 gallons of wine a year, I understand. Was a good wine. What kind of wine?

ND: It was usually claret, a red wine.

CE: Well, he had close to 25 acres in vineyards, I understand.

ND: I don't know how much. That whole hill was planted in grapes.

CE: What brought him to Marin County, did he ever tell you?

ND: I don't know.

CE: It's said that he came to work in a brickyard, I was just wondering if you knew that.

ND: You see, he was married before he married this Mrs. Escalle. I didn't know the first wife.

CE: Well, what was the property like, could you describe it to us? Would you go through a big doorway and - what was the property like?

ND: Well, they had a - I don't know it seemed like- I wish I had a picture to show you, I just gave it away. They had a sort of a little lattice place and you could play games and there was no restaurant then - and they had a home.

CE: Was it like a wine garden? What would people do when they went there?

ND: Well, a little bit like that. And they had their own home and the winery was adjoining the home.

CE: I see.

ND: I wish I had - you don't have any.

CE: That's all right. We pass by every day; people can find it. Did they have a taproom I presume?

ND: A what?

CE: A taproom where you could get your wine. They tell me they used to decorate it beautifully in the fall, too.

ND: Well, they added on and they had a - opened up a bar, had a bar, and dining room, you could eat later. Somebody else called Nick took over that part of it.

CE: Well, we understand that this property along with much undeveloped property in Larkspur came into the hands of Adolph Tiscornia. Is that correct?

ND: That's right.

CE: And when he died in 1967 he left this old winery along with much of this land to Alice Copeland. Did you know her?

ND: That's right. Yes, he did.

CE: Was she his secretary?

ND: Yes, she was, for about thirty years.

CE: Thirty years! And then I understand eventually upon her death, it will go to a member of his family, Mary Tiscornia, a granddaughter.

ND: Well, he had a daughter - it would be his granddaughter. That's right.

CE: Tell me, how did the name of Larkspur come about, Nell?

ND: Well, through Mrs. Wright - it used to be Corte Madera before it was named Larkspur, it was. Did you know that?

CE: No, I didn't know that. I thought they were twin cities that came about.

ND: On the side, over the winery there it was Corte Madera.

CE: At Escalle's, you mean?

ND: Yes, it was Corte Madera, but when Mrs. Wright named it she saw all these hills covered with lupin, you know the blue lupin, she thought that was larkspur. It wasn't, but she thought it was, and so she named it Larkspur from the blue lupins.

CE: Isn't that something! Well let's see now, if you lived here all these - at that time you would have known the Bon Air hotel

ND: Yes.

CE: What do you remember of that place, Nell?

ND: Well, I know that there used to be a group of us go over on Saturday nights for dances, we danced there, and that's about all I...

CE: What was the architecture, similar to the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley today perhaps, or the Rafael Hotel?

ND: It was white, I think. You know, I had all those pictures and I've given them away.

CE: Well, that's all right, just thinking from your memory. Was it a place with large verandas and you'd overlook the Corte Madera Creek?

ND: Yes, it was very attractive, very pretty.

CE: Look over towards Tam?

ND: Yes. Burned down.

CE: Burned down. What do you remember about some of the arks that used to be along the creek there, Nell? You told me earlier you had some friends, the Franzis?

ND: Yes.

CE: And they had an ark. What was the name of it again?

ND: Their ark's name was Tillamook.

CE: Most of the people I understand who had arks around World War I and subsequent had them for weekend places and usually kept power boats or cruisers, would come over and spend weekends.

ND: Yes usually, but a lot of people lived there, too. After the fire they did.

CE: Well, after the fire and earthquake did some of the people move over permanently?

ND: All that was water clear to Kentfield, the creek run - you wouldn't believe it, would you?

CE: You mean the marsh was - -

ND: The marsh was all the way practically to Kentfield.

CE: Not just at high tide but most of it - -

ND: Was water - the tide would come in.

CE: Well, Mrs. Kent has a photograph of about in the 1880's of James Ross' tri-weekly packet schooners that used to leave from Ross Landing every other day to San Francisco loading cordwood and bricks, and there must have been deeper water, Mrs. Kent?

AK: Well, the channel was always open.

CE: The channel was always open.

ND: And down on the creek and Hill's boat house –

CE: Hill's Boat House, Mrs. Thurbach told me about that. And wasn't there a man named Varney who had something down there?

ND: Varney, that sounds familiar but - -

CE: Do you remember any of the old bathhouses that used to be on the creek or was that before your time?

ND: The bathhouses? Well, that was Hill's Bathhouse that was the only one I knew of.

CE: I see. Where was that located in relationship to where the lumber company was?

ND: Well, it's more - It was really down - Oh I don't know –

CE: On the Greenbrae side more?

ND: Well, toward, you know where Safeway –

CE: Yes.

ND: Well, not that far.

CE: But was it on the south side of Corte Madera Creek or across the way side, do you remember?

ND: We used to walk - Well, kind of opposite of Escalle's

CE: Opposite Escalle's, I see. Well, what would you do down there at Hill's Boathouse, rent boats?

ND: Well, they would rent boats.

CE: How much would they charge for a boat all day?

ND: I don't know.

CE: I bet it was something cheap!

ND: Mr. Doherty used to love to go duck hunting and he and a friend would rent a boat and go out on the bay and hunt - shoot ducks.

CE: When did you build your lovely home on Doherty Drive?

ND: We built it in 1925, started it, and moved in February 1926.

CE: And when did they name that road that connects now between Magnolia and 101?

ND: After Mr. Doherty passed away.

CE: And what year was that, Nell?

ND: He passed away October 5, 1959.

CE: He was always known by the natives here as Dolf –

ND: That's right.

CE: How did he get that nickname? Just came?

ND: Even his family –

CE: Randolph was just too much for him.

ND: That was too much.

CE: Tell us, Nell, what do you know about those hothouses that belong to George Niven near your former residence?

ND: Well, they were over there and had started there - had one hothouse when we moved the yard over there in 1925.

CE: What are they renowned for, orchids, roses, what?

ND: Orchids and roses.

CE: Is that business still in existence?

ND: Oh, it's wonderful.

CE: Does the family still have it?

ND: Well, George passed away several years ago.

CE: But the children still involved?

ND: And Inez isn't very good and the son runs it.

CE: It's still in the family.

ND: Yes.

CE: I understand that some of these roses were sent to Washington when President Nixon's daughter was married.

ND: That's right, that's true.

CE: What was so unusual about these roses? Was there a variety he had developed?

ND: Yes, they have a very wonderful variety.

CE: Did you know that, Mrs. Kent?

AK: Never did, no.

ND: Oh, there was a write-up in the paper about it at one time.

CE: Tell us about your husband's lumber company. You relocated it, you said, in 1925 near the railroad spur, was that one reason?

ND: Well, no. Where we were on the main street, we didn't own the lumberyard, Mr. Yost in Mill Valley owned it and he wanted to sell the property so we had to find a new location. So we bought across the track from the Coleman ? people, and there was quite a knoll there and that's where the home was. And it was about three acres. Well, they moved the yard in 1925 and they had an awful time getting a spur track in but he finally made it and that was the only way we had to get the lumber in, was the railroad.

CE: I know! Well, I remember twenty years or more ago I used to buy lumber from that company and I always was fascinated by that spur track.

ND: Sure. So they moved the yard and then we thought, well, we had no place to live, so we decided to build a home on the knoll, which we did and - -

CE: What year was that?

ND: We started to build, I think, in October 1925 but it wasn't finished until February of 1926 and we moved in and I was there until 19 - I came in here in 1969 –

CE: This present residence?

ND: Yes.

CE: Do you have children now?

ND: No.

CE: No children.

ND: Have no children.

CE: There is an historical marker at Doherty Drive that was placed there in 1972, could you tell us about that?

ND: That was on our property, just back of our property. Originally there was a home there built by the convicts of San Quentin.

CE: How did that happened?

ND: Did you ever see that?

CE: No.

ND: Oh, that brick place was right back of our house.

CE: Well, how did it come about that convicts of San Quentin built that?

ND: Well, they did.

CE: You mean forced labor or had they escaped and built it?

ND: I don't know; it was there when we came.

AK: Isn't that interesting?

ND: I had a picture of it, too; I gave away everything.

CE: Where did you give your artifacts to, the Larkspur Library?

ND: I gave an awful lot of my things to Doug Archer in the Fire Department.

CE: Well, that's nice. Are they on public display there now?

ND: Yes, they have a wonderful display.

CE: That's a very fine thing to do.

ND: Also, I gave some of the girls on this heritage deal a few things I had left.

CE: Well, tell me, I remember that hill which has now been leveled and there is this new shopping center which is attractive. There have been quite a few changes you have seen, haven't there? Even the twenty years I remember there were no houses or apartments on this hill where you're presently living.

ND: No, there wasn't anything, that was just - they used to play - have a ball park right there where the lumber yard is.

CE: Ball park?

ND: Yes they used to play ball. You see when you go into the Fire Department then I can tell you some things.

CE: Okay. Would you go there with us sometime? Would you go there sometime with Mrs. Kent and I, and you can relate on tape some of the pictures, would you?

ND: Yes, I would

CE: Tell us a little bit about the old Rose Bowl and those dances. I understand it was sort of a hobby of your husband. What was the purpose of the dances and when did they start?

ND: Well, it was. After we became Larkspur a few of the boys in Larkspur that worked there decided they had to have a Fire Department. So they started out and they had just a hose cart and then they needed some money. They had to buy caps and jackets. Well, they decided to have a dance. So there was a large oak tree - you know where it was, Doug Archer's Service Station?

CE: Yes.

ND: Well, the tree was right near his station.

CE: You mean Cliff Archer, don't you?

ND: Cliff Archer, yes. They built a platform around the tree and a platform up the tree for the musicians and held a dance and it worked out very well and that gave them an idea of getting a platform and having dances every Saturday night. So - that was in 1909, that was the first time.

CE: 1909 that was.

ND: That was 1909 and that was a Booster Day. They had about three Booster Days and that's the way they raised money to buy their property and build the platform on Cane Street, that was the start of the famous Rose Bowl.

CE: How did it get its name?

ND: I don't know why they called it Rose Bowl. I don't know - can't tell you that, just why. But it was -

CE: Well, we were talking at a social event at Mrs. Kent's last year and Ernie Heckscher was there, and he leads the orchestra at the Fairmont, and he said, it was from that place getting his first job and a regular paycheck coming in that he had the courage to propose to his present wife.

ND: Did you know that they made Collier's one year?

CE: No!

ND: Yes.

CE: Do you have it?

ND: Yes.

CE: All right, do you want to go and find it for us? Nell has gone over to her secretary and has brought back an early issue of Collier's Magazine, May 17, 1947 and on the cover is a photograph looking northwest of the Blue Rock Hotel, Main Street, Magnolia Avenue, with a red fire engine with all the volunteers astride her and the lead is "Want to be a Fireman". And on page 2 of this ten-cent magazine back then is an article by Grady Johnson with many illustrations of Larkspur. Tell us a little bit about this article, Nell, that's wonderful you kept that all these years, tell us a little bit about it. What did the firemen do? I mean, how did it come about again?

ND: Well, Larson was the one who was always getting these things going and he always - many things didn't turn out, but this did. They were really surprised that they made - you know -

CE: Well, it was a first. Nobody had ever tried anything like this, had they?

ND: No. And anyway they had all these things done, you see, there are the different firemen in the barbershop - -

CE: You mean when the bell rang no matter what they were doing, they'd - -

ND: With their first little hose cart. There's Cap Larson and the Chief. Here it shows the firehouse with all their trucks.

CE: And there is the dog, their mascot. This is something. Well, through this effort they completely financed, I understand, a modern \$500,000 department then.

ND: That's right.

CE: Now, think what that would cost today!

ND: They did - they paid and built - and they're still using the firehouse. They built a lovely firehouse.

CE: Well, do you mean to tell me the revenue came mainly from this dance?

ND: From the dance. Sometimes they had 3,500 there during the war time, 3,500 people. I'll show you the pictures here.

CE: All right - you continue because they mention it in this article, too.

ND: You can see it yourself.

CE: Okay - Mrs. Doherty has a photograph here – Oh, judging by the dress it's what year would this be, just when it started, maybe 1915? And it shows a huge crowd of people, and very nicely dressed, I might add. Look at that, Nell - isn't that nice under the little lanterns?

ND: And they used to have the most beautiful fire fall, it was just beautiful, every night.

CE: Here, Mrs. Kent, take a look at that. You've got some more? Is that a program Nell?

ND: Well, no, but it will show the Blue Rock -that's their menu.

CE: Oh, this is a menu that Nell has just given me of the Blue Rock Inn, there's no date on it but it shows an early photograph of the Blue Rock (then called the Larkspur Inn) and it must be about 1916 and here's the fire hose being pulled and some of the men in business suits trotting down the road. And then also there is, Saturday Night the Rose Bowl at Larkspur, and according to this little clip they have Japanese lanterns. What a delightful way to show it. And here must be a couple of hundred, at least three or four hundred, perhaps, dancing under the redwoods. And this operated from 1910, it says here, to 1963, is that right?

ND: That's about right.

CE: And they had all kinds of prominent orchestras.

ND: Oh yes. They did.

CE: Do you remember any of them other than Ernie Heckscher?

ND: Oh - this tells you.

CE: Does it - in the article?

ND: But it's probably too much to read about it - to give them all.

CE: Would you mind reading some of this a little bit on the other side of the cassette? Maybe we could go into that a little bit on the other side, Nell.

ND: About the what?

CE: Well, the prices here on this bill of fare for the Blue Rock are certainly tempting. I wish we could go in tonight and get veal cordon bleu for \$4.50 etc., we won't find it. Now let's see what other photographs you have here, Nell.

ND: This was the Booster Day of the first dance under the oak tree at Archer's.

CE: And when was that again, 1909?

ND: 1909.

CE: Isn't that a lovely thing. And what is this, Nell?

ND: That's our boys going to war, the First World War.

CE: In the Larkspur Station. Here's another scene of the Rose Bowl. Now here's a group of hearty souls in front of an old, old timer.

ND: They're leaving to go to the First World War.

CE: Is your husband amongst this group?

ND: No, he didn't have to.

CE: Now where are we?

ND: Oh that's me and Mrs. Rice and Mrs. Murphy - that's their first firehouse they built.

CE: Is it on the property where the present - -

ND: Where we were on the main street.

CE: On the main street. Look at the man with the bowler hat –

ND: That's Mr. Murray.

CE: Is that William Murray?

ND: Bob Murray - plumber.

CE: Oh, you see that was one of the Murray family, Mrs. Kent. Now what's happening here?

ND: Well, this was at my home where the women's club wanted a Christmas tree, so I let them do one of my deodars, and they're decorating it.

CE: You had those beautiful trees. Now, here I have a picture which must be downtown Larkspur in what year?

ND: That is – and now see the lumberyard was just all in this block.

CE: Well, we're looking this way - we're looking south aren't we? The hotel would be on this side of the road wouldn't it? Mercy! There is nothing there but two telephone poles, Mrs. Kent, two stores on the right, one on the left, look at that! Well, isn't that something! This one photograph here you didn't identify, looks like it's a dinner meeting somewhere, Nell.

ND: Well, that is the council and the fire department. You see, when the town hall was built, they built a firehouse in the rear of the town hall, the city hall, and that's where this was, and each year the fire department would have a little get-together, you know –

CE: What year was that? It must be very early, judging from the state of the photograph –

ND: I don't know. It was. And they would entertain the council, you know, they would have beer and sandwiches or something you know and that would be the council and the fire department.

CE: What were some of the names of some of your early residents there, that were your friends at that time when you first came over, Nell? Families?

ND: Well, first friends were the McCormick's and the Rice's, Charlie Rice's, and let's see, who was there?

CE: Rice's? Charlie Rice? Well, perhaps you can think of some more in a moment – we have to turn off.

CE: Getting back to these Booster Days, raising money for the fire department

ND: That's the Bellamy home, George Bellamy, and he had an asparagus farm in the Sacramento Valley. And he used to come up on his boat and he had a light up on the peak here that he could see the light when he was on the river coming up.

CE: Well, you know there is a mention in several articles about a house way tippee top on the hills in Larkspur that people even in San Pablo Bay would use as a point of reference and don't you suppose that's the house.

ND: That's the house.

CE: Bellamy.

ND: Bellamy, George Bellamy.

CE: Isn't that interesting? I think you're the only one that knows that, Nell, don't you?

AK: I think so.

CE: I don't think anybody else knows that.

ND: You never heard that before?

AK: No.

CE: No. The house isn't there anymore, is it?

ND: Yes.

CE: It is?

ND: Still there. Although it was made into a rest home. That is like - you know for a while. I don't know who has it now.

CE: Are there any other houses in Larkspur? Did you ever know the Clarks? Jewell Clark and her husband?

ND: Oh, very well, yes. I took her to the hospital for her first baby in my Model T.

CE: Oh - no, you didn't.

ND: I did, for both the children.

CE: Oh my goodness, isn't that something!

ND: Oh, it was like one big family when we came to Larkspur. It really was. Everybody

helped one another, if they were sick somebody helped, did something for them - you know take them to the hospital.

CE: And you said about that time there were about 300?

ND: Oh, probably five or six hundred, probably.

CE: Where was the Post Office?

ND: The Post Office then was in the Lynch Building.

CE: In the Lynch Building, and you'd go down and pick up your mail, you'd have a box down there - they didn't deliver it did they?

ND: Oh, they didn't deliver, no - not for a long, long time.

CE: And was the train in, then, when you moved over?

ND: Yes, the train was in.

CE: And went down through Corte Madera through the tunnel and on down?

ND: Yes, and to San Rafael, Fairfax, all around.

CE: Was this steam or electric?

ND: Electric. I know when Dolf came up he was afraid he was going to hit the third rail and he stepped higher over it.

CE: You know, it's a wonder more people weren't electrocuted but the children were warned, I guess - -

ND: But, well, it was protected, it was boarded so you couldn't get on it, but he had heard about it, you know, before he came up here.

CE: Do you think if we were very kind and protective, you'd trust us to make a copy of one or two of these photographs, Nell?

ND: Would you like to?

CE: We'd certainly love to. Mrs. Kent and I would treasure it much, and so would the California History Room, where this is going. Well, now, I think we're running out of our little tape here. It has certainly been a pleasure to see you today and have you share your wonderful reminiscences of early Larkspur. It has indeed been a privilege.

ND: I suppose there is a lot of things that I couldn't -

CE: Well, listen would you think about it and maybe we can condense this story in Collier's and you would read it to us. Would you like to do this for us?

ND: To read the whole thing?

CE: Some of it. No, I'll just take an extract of it, okay? I'm afraid we have to say goodbye. Thank you again.

ND: Okay, goodbye.

CE: Goodbye.