

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE  
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**Anne T. Kent California Room**

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**INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD THOMPSON**

by Carla Ehat & Genevieve Martinelli  
July 16, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: Edward Thompson (ET)  
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (CE) and Genevieve Martinelli (GM)  
ALSO PRESENT: Pierce Thompson (PT)  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 16, 1984

CE: This is Monday, July 16th, 1984. Continuing the Oral History Project for the Anne Kent California Room, this is Carla Ehat, and joining me today is Mrs. Jordan Martinelli. We have the pleasure of being way out near Nicasio at the Marin French Cheese Company, founded, we understand, by Mr. Jefferson A. Thompson in 1865. And joining us today are two of the of the original Thompson grandsons. We have with us, speaking first, Edward L. Thompson who is 78. And he's going to begin our little story with an explanation of how the family came to Marin. Good morning, Edward.

ET: Good morning. Thank you.

CE: How did it happen? You didn't know your grandfather, I understand, but did you ever hear why he came to California and Marin County?

ET: Yes, I heard the family talk about Grandad, and they assumed that he had river experience near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The immigrants were coming west at that time. Having river experience, as I said, he was helping the immigrants get their wagons and their cattle across the river. And they hired these young fellows that were along the river to help them. Jefferson A. Thompson was one of them. And as he was helping the wagon train captained by Farley and McGuire, he saw a girl in one of the wagons that he liked the looks of, and Matilda Farley became my grandmother.

CE: Did you ever know her?

ET: I never -- Matilda Farley? Yes. I can vaguely remember Matilda before she passed away, when we lived in Petaluma. Now, then he came west on that wagon and helped, of course, along the route and they had their ups and downs, of course, crossing the plains in those days. I can remember sitting in a chair and listening to Aunt Katie, Matilda's sister, younger sister, telling about the stories and the experiences they had coming across the plains, which were very exciting to my brother and I of course, young fellows. We could go right ahead and fight Indians just the way they did. The trip took them probably around eight months to get here. And all the way across the plains, communications was from wagons going east as well as coming west. And they knew pretty well what was ahead of them. There was a good deal much more communication than most people thought because they get out here a certain distance from Chicago, or wherever they left from, Omaha, Nebraska, and things got to going too tough, they'd turn around and go home. And so they could warn the wagons that were going west.

CE: Tell them what was ahead of them.

ET: Tell them what was ahead of them and kind of prepare them for what they were going to run into. But anyway, the gold of California was very enticing. And that was the first question that would circulate among the wagon trains. How much gold they were going to get or how hard it was and all the ramifications, but gold was the start.

CE: I understand the word got back it was all placer gold that had washed geologically from the granite and the quartz, and was there in the river to be placered out or what they call --

ET: Free gold.

CE: Free gold. Well, my great-grandparents crossed the plains also, so I have heard some of this, and the power that drew the people west, this, this magic word of free gold. You didn't have to broker it, you didn't have to get a license, you didn't have to have permission. You just went up and tried your luck. And it was a chance in a lifetime. It was like hitting the jackpot, wasn't it?

ET: That's right.

CE: And everybody thought they could do it

ET: Everybody thought they could do it. And the stories circulating --

CE: And exaggerated.

ET: And exaggerated, were much bigger then they found when they got there, and that is the history. But Farley and McGuire evidently parted about the time they got to Placerville, or this side of the Sierra's. We never heard anymore about McGuire. I don't know what happened to him. You can't beat a good Irishman down. Anyway he kept right on going. He didn't stay very long at the mines around Placerville. Evidently, what Dad and Uncle used to talk about was that they weren't really fighters and there was too much fighting going on. They didn't like the atmosphere.

CE: Amongst the miners, you mean?

ET: Among the miners, and there was too much killing. One time or another, you'd go out in the morning, they said, "Had a friend yesterday. He's gone today." And so that was too much for them and there wasn't -- There was not enough gold.

CE: It's hard work, too.

ET: That's right. And at that time they were competing with the Chinese, too, in the panning and all, getting the gold.

CE: And the Mexicans.

ET: I suppose.

CE: They had a law that the Mexicans had to pay, you know. Well, go on.

ET: Well, they packed up their families and wagons again and then moved from the gold area right across to the valley to somewhere around Napa. And when they got to this side of the valley it appealed to them because evidently they were cattlemen. They saw a better country, grass country, than around Placerville and they thought, "Now then, this is a much better place for us." So, they kept right on going from Napa through Sonoma and then finally from Sonoma to Petaluma. When they got to Petaluma the country looked rather good to them probably and they decided they'd look around and see if they could permanently light in this area. Evidently grandfather went to work on ranches and he either had butter and cheese-making experience before he came over or he learned it, began to learn it, about at that time. Because he did work on dairy ranches, mountain and different places. By the way, the family located at the Old Adobe in Petaluma. And they were living at the Old Adobe while he was working in different ranches.

CE: Vallejo's Old Adobe?

ET: Old Adobe, right here. And the children, some of the Farley children and the ones that were very young, and Robert Farley was very young. He was either born just before they left; I think he was born in a wagon coming west. Imagine the family leaving Illinois, a woman going to have a child getting into a wagon and starting out in that kind of a journey. Hearty people in those days. The experience he had working on ranches gave him the opportunity to locate in this country. He was looking for a place. When he found this place -- I often heard Dad and Uncle wondering where he got enough money in the short time he worked.

CE: Well, the land was cheaper then.

ET: Oh, yes, the land was cheaper. However he did pay, even in those -- He paid \$10,000 and the old deed reads "in gold coin." They weren't -- They didn't mess around with paper.

CE: That's a lot of gold coin

ET: That's what they said. They wondered where he got it. Well, afterwards there were lots of jokes about that.

CE: How much land are we talking about?

ET: 700 acres

CE: 700, okay.

ET: Then after they got serious, a lot of jokes were passed around about his getting \$10,000. They decided that he knew wealthy men in San Francisco at that time. I often heard them talking about the association of Flood and, oh, some of the other big names of San Francisco, Stanford and --

CE: Crocker.

ET: Those fellows were miners and they weren't doing the digging but they were the miners. They were making the money. And they wanted Jeff Thompson to go along with them in different ventures in the Sierras. And he said the only mine he

had anything to do with was named Yellow Jacket Mine and he got stung and that was the end of the mining for him.

CE: Every family has a mining story around here that's lived out of the mines.

ET: Then, after all it's well known what all those men did in San Francisco. They all ended up multimillionaires, of course. Thompson didn't make it there but he had a lot of fun, probably, with what he was doing, making cheese and butter. So then that's why he did not lean toward a city experience. They were probably farmers at heart and they felt better there. So then in 1865, he bought this place in this valley.

CE: And this was the \$10,000?

ET: This is the \$10,000 place, right.

CE: Hicks Mountain right up here?

ET: Hicks Mountain right up here, yes. And started to make cheese and butter. The cheese he made at that time was called California cheese but it was a cheddar process. Now where he learned the cheddar process -- I often heard Dad and Uncle wondering where he learned to make cheese. But whether he picked it up here or had learned it before he came, they didn't, don't remember.

CE: That was never found out.

ET: That was never clear. Well, that was the way he started. He'd make cheese and butter was the only way they -- There was a good deal of milk being produced at that time, so the only way they could keep it was to put it into a product they could keep.

CE: Where would he get that to market?

ET: To market. They'd market the butter in those days in big boxes and haul it to Petaluma. It would go on a steamer from Petaluma to San Francisco and there was a lot of talk about selling it. It went to the Commission Merchants in San Francisco.

CE: Those are the men who made all the money, who bought lovely homes down the Peninsula and over here in Ross and Ross Valley; Commission Merchants.

ET: Commission Merchants, and I heard them talk about them. I won't quote just exactly what --

CE: Anybody who had a little money, who had a warehouse and put whatever in it became a Commission Merchant and made a killing.

ET: That's right.

CE: At the expense of whatever.

ET: I remember -- talking about it. Them sending back to him just enough money to keep you working. So, they were assured of their supply. About 1906, '04 or '06, when Dad and Uncle were going to high school in Petaluma, Jeff Thompson bought a little place in Petaluma so they could live there and go to high school. They lived near a man, and his name was Louis Cantel. Louis Cantel was probably the first man in the United States to make Camembert cheese on a commercial scale, on what was called a commercial scale in those days. He'd make a basket of cheese and put it on his arm, get on the steamer and go to San Francisco and sell it. Then come back and make another basketful.

CE: This was easier because you're close to Petaluma.

ET: That's right.

CE: Because a lot of dairymen who shipped butter out of West Marin, well, Point Reyes area, would go it out Schooner Bay.

ET: That's right, that went on the schooner, Point Reyes, and the *Owl*, to San Francisco.

CE: But this was easier, faster, right up here.

ET: That's right.

CE: Because it would go by wagon from here to Petaluma.

ET: Right. And they learned a little bit about making Camembert cheese helping Louis in his factory, whatever they were allowed to do.

CE: Well, I'm confused about one thing. Did your grandfather have the cows?

ET: Yes.

CE: Or did he get the process --

ET: No, no, he milked the cows.

CE: He had his herd here.

ET: They would milk the cows and took the raw material and made cheese and butter. So, he had the raw material right here. They also, Dad and Uncle, when they picked up the operation, they were milking cows and making cheese and butter right here also. Until about 1906 when they started to make Camembert, due to what they had learned from Louis Cantel. And of course, they could get more money for their milk by turning it into Camembert cheese than they could cheddar or California cheese at that time, so it was a big enticement to make more money, naturally.

CE: This is the brand you're famous for now isn't it?

ET: That's right

CE: Rouge et Noir?

ET: Well, that's the name, but the type of cheese that Louis Cantel was manufacturing in Petaluma is still the basis of the Camembert cheese we're producing today. The technical part of that my cousin Pierce can tell you. He's got that all down.

CE: We'll get to that.

ET: You're going to get to him later. So, that establishes Jeff Thompson making Camembert cheese here in Hicks Valley about 1906.

CE: Before that, 1865 to 1905, what did you make, the California cheese?

ET: Cheese and butter, California cheese and butter.

CE: California cheese. Anything like what they made then that you could identify with? What do you mean when you say "California cheese"?

ET: California cheese, he was using probably the cheddar process.

PT: Like the present Colby washed curd cheese. It was rather open in texture.

CE: So that was the transition then, 1906?

ET: That's right.

CE: Did he ever make the California cheese again?

ET: Oh, yes, he kept right on making California cheese and gradually getting into Camembert, getting more and more into the Camembert business because he was making more money in the Camembert cheese that he made than he was in the California and it gradually, gradually turned over. In the meantime, as this process went on, they manufactured a number of different types of cheese when I was a young fellow here. Greek cheese and -- He had a Greek cheese maker. We made

sheep's milk Romano at one time. Got into quite a variety of different types of cheeses. But there wasn't any of them lasted the way the Camembert product did.

CE: And it seems each year it gets -- There's a whole generation that are into wine tasting and have a palate for this cheese. Well, it's going nowhere but up.

ET: That's right.

CE: Well, tell me, you personally, Edward, when did you move over to this property, or did you stay in Petaluma?

ET: Well, the family moved out here probably right after the turn of the century.

CE: And you were raised here?

ET: I was raised here. I was born in Petaluma at the place that grandfather purchased in here.

CE: Did you go to the little Nicasio School?

ET: No, Lincoln School, here in Hicks Valley

CE: Lincoln School?

ET: Lincoln School. Grandfather donated it. Maybe I'll go back another step. There was a school up here that was on a neighbor's property. I won't mention the name. Anyway, there was quite a hassle about what, I don't know, but where the school was located and the property and so on. Jeff Thompson said, "All right, to settle the whole matter of who owns the property, I'll give them the corner up there of such-and-such a place. You take the corner and that can be for the schools." So, it still is.

CE: That's great.

GM: This school down here?

CE: No, Lincoln.

ET: And that's where the school is located today. It was moved from the original spot to Thompson's.

CE: Is it still going?

ET: Still going. Grandfather right out there -- You see, on the telephone, he's a big wheel in the school here. Well, where are we?

CE: What was life as a boy for you here? I mean, growing up you had probably access to your horse, right?

ET: Right. If I might continue with that thought, we had access to our own horses. Horses to ride, horses to work with, and horses to do everything. That's the only way it was done when I was a youngster. I had two sisters; they were always wanting to ride horses. The two boys only rode horses when they had to. If there was something to do.

CE: If you had to go somewhere you'd get a horse.

ET: Well, no, when we went somewhere, we didn't go that far. You know, I don't know what we did leaving the place. That was always done on a wagon.

CE: With the family, probably, too.

ET: Yes, with the family. But we didn't take a horse and go with a wagon alone anywhere.

CE: Were you a church-going family?

ET: Well, reasonably, yes, once in a while.

CE: Where did you go, to Petaluma?

ET: Petaluma.

CE: Once in a while?  
ET: Once in a while.  
GM: Easter and Christmas.  
CE: Well, that's once in a while. Did you go hunting around here?  
ET: That was the main thing. We hunted and fished and lived off of the fat of the land. If we would have followed that religiously, we would have been pretty hungry a lot of times. But, anyway, we did a lot of deer hunting, did a lot of fishing, and that was our recreation. That was what we did for fun.  
CE: Neighbors as such, neighboring ranches, would you get together?  
ET: Get together, they would hunt. All the talk in the evenings around the table was hunting and fishing.  
CE: Must have driven your mother nuts.  
ET: I guess probably it did. I don't remember her ever saying much. She did kick once in a while about picking ducks. I remember that.  
CE: Tell us about your mother.  
ET: Ma? Well she came out here --  
CE: How many children were there?  
ET: Four.  
CE: Two girls and two --  
ET: Two girls and two boys. I have two sisters. When they first came here she did the cooking. And even at that time there was --  
CE: Did they have some hands?  
ET: Yes, there were the milkers and the few fellows that worked around the cheese factory. The cheese factory was operating at that time.  
CE: More or less right where we are today?  
ET: Right where we are today.  
CE: This is the home place?  
ET: This is the home place, right.  
CE: Did you have any Chinese milkers?  
ET: Never had any Chinese milkers but we had lots of Chinese cooks. They had to run a kitchen, so they hired men, so --  
CE: Well, one rancher I talked to one time said that the Chinese could really milk cows.  
ET: Well, I suppose they could. They never tried it here. The milkers, when I was young, were mostly German, Swiss. The Swiss people came into the country following the Scotch and the Irish. The Scotch and the Irish came and they married into the Spanish families that were here. And of course, with every girl went about five to ten thousand acres. And I think, maybe, that had something to do with the Scotch and Irish staying here. But anyway --  
CE: Did you know Nellie McIsaac Codoni?  
ET: Yes, I did, sure.  
CE: She told me in her interview that her father sort of ran an unofficial Swiss Consulate, and he'd write back to Switzerland and get Swiss men to come. He'd say, "So-and-so needs some help on his ranch." Is that true?  
ET: That's exactly right. And when they came, those men that came that were brought out here by people who were running ranches here. They worked for their board

and room for quite a length of time which paid for their trip out here. But it probably turned out pretty well. Most of the fellows that came that way own the ranches today. It has shifted to that point. I think that's the way all of these -- A great many, I shouldn't say all, but a great many of the ranches here today came that way.

CE: Do you agree that this county, originally, was a cow county?

ET: Yes, it was.

CE: And that those people over the hill don't know really what's going on, over in San Rafael and along the --

ET: Absolutely. They still don't know.

CE: How are we going to clear it up?

ET: Well, I've been trying without any noticeable success at all.

CE: Have you ever served politically or ever held office or anyone in your family?

ET: Yes, my dad was a supervisor at one time in the county.

CE: Good. Jim Marshall -- did you know him?

ET: Oh, I knew Jim Marshall quite well, fine man.

CE: He's gone now, too.

ET: Yes.

CE: I had the pleasure of interviewing him; I thought he was a fine fellow.

ET: Very fine fellow.

CE: So, your father was a supervisor?

ET: Yes.

CE: What years? Do you remember roughly? What was his name?

ET: Rudolph.

CE: Rudolph.

ET: Rudolph A. Thompson. But he never went by -- He didn't like the name Rudolph, so they called him Rube.

CE: Rube? Bet he wasn't a Rube at all. And when was he a supervisor roughly, do you remember? In the '20s, '30s, '40s?

ET: I suppose early '30s. Yeah, early '30s into the '40s.

CE: Did he enjoy that aspect of life?

ET: I think he did. He enjoyed it. At first he enjoyed it, but as it became more complicated, just mentioned more committees and this and more people wanted things and everybody was -- He kind of got filled up with the job.

CE: And everybody leaning on you and why didn't you do this; you have to be accountable to everybody.

ET: Everybody.

CE: Did he ever mention that there was some piece of legislation or something that he did that he was particularly proud of or pleased with, an accomplishment perhaps?

ET: I don't -- anything that was especially outstanding that he said -- He was very pleased with the part he had in many of the things that were going on, but I don't recall any special thing. He was on the Golden Gate Bridge Board.

CE: He was?

ET: Yes, he was on that and he seemed to be at one time more enthusiastic about that then he was about the supervisor's duties. I don't recall anything --

CE: Interesting, this morning, just about a half an hour ago, the Olympic Torch carried by, crossed over the bridge.

ET: Crossed over the bridge, yes.

CE: Well, okay. Now you get through school. Where did you get to Petaluma to high school?

ET: I went to grammar school out here, then Petaluma High School. And then the College of Agriculture at Davis.

CE: At Davis?

ET: Davis, yes.

CE: You're a product of Davis?

ET: Yes.

CE: Wonderful. What did that give you to help you in this business other than the discipline of the university life?

ET: I don't think I got a great deal out of our experience at Davis outside of the university life. I was always in the -- At that time things were a little bit tight right here, due to finances and also due to somebody to do the work.

CE: What year are we talking about now?

ET: We're talking about 1928 to '30.

CE: The crash occurred, of course, and the ramifications of all of the turmoil.

ET: Things were in a turmoil.

CE: Your father said, "I think it would be nice you come home and work."

ET: That's exactly what happened. You read my thought.

CE: "Forget all this highfalutin stuff. Come back. We need you."

ET: "Get down to hearth here. Let's have something done." And we were very happy to come back, we really were. We were used to this. When I went up there we were looking over the courses we wanted to take and what would help us here when we came back, dairy industry and one thing and another. But there was one course that they had: they said it was barn practice.

CE: Barn practice?

ET: Barn practice yes. We figured we had had all the barn practice we needed. But due to the --

CE: You had that since kindergarten.

ET: But due to the fact that it had a grade, there was a grade with it, that maybe we could do something else and still get the grade. The course didn't sound too hard. So, we took the course, just added to what we had already been doing. In fact, I think we thought that, after we were in it a while, we might make some suggestions to the professors about how some of the barn practice should be done. Of course that was --

CE: Than what happened?

ET: Of course, the dairy business today is entirely different today than it was then. I can see these young dairymen now coming up in the dairy business here, about the same environment and things that we were in. However, they must be much more attuned to the scientific operation today than they were then. As I look at some of these young dairymen and they way they operate I think these young fellows are missing something.

CE: Automatic milkers --

ET: Yes, automatic milkers and everything like that. But we had a lot of fun with our work and also it seems to me they are not getting all that enjoyment out of what they are doing. They seem to be more serious. They're always looking at a computer or a string of figures or something else. We, come the first day of deer hunting, we never worked. And also, when trout season opened, why, we didn't work, either. And the story would come here from the coast that the tides were low and abalone fishing was good, why we'd go for abalone.

CE: Of course, there was always someone here to milk the cows.

ET: Well, yes, there was someone to milk the cows, I suppose.

CE: Well, do you know Franklin Burns out here?

ET: Yes, sure.

CE: Well, he only has one helper. He was at an art show, because you know, he collects art.

ET: I didn't know that.

CE: And it was in the Marin Art and Garden Center from two o'clock. I got to skaddaddle out of here, I got to get home. And he does it, 300 head of cattle, he and one man do it.

ET: A lot of the young dairymen.

CE: He never has a day off, he says, never have a day off.

ET: Grossi's down there, Ralph Grossi is a very prominent dairyman in this country.

CE: Oh, we interviewed him; I was very impressed with that young man.

ET: He's a very sharp young man, you bet he is.

CE: He represents you, the dairy ranchers.

ET: Well, yes, I believe he does.

CE: He fights for their cause, certainly.

ET: He does, and he is the type of young man that's going to be able to maintain the dairy business in this area, if they are maintained. It's going to be a big problem to maintain the dairy business in this country.

CE: Why?

ET: Because you're competing with men over in the Sacramento Valley where they grow all their feed and this country is not conducive to produce efficiently the quantity of milk.

CE: The cost of feed is --

ET: The cost of feed and the cost of operation, everything here. But --

End, Side A

CE: Charlotte, from San Francisco, and was a school teacher?

ET: School teacher.

CE: Smart fellow.

ET: She taught in Commodore Stockton School in San Francisco.

CE: How did she feel about leaving the great city of San Francisco and coming over to this beautiful area?

ET: She didn't feel good about it at all. And it was a very gradual process getting her from San Francisco to Marin County first. We lived in San Rafael for awhile and she couldn't give up teaching. She had to -- So she taught in San Francisco and then I would commute up here to the cheese factory. Gradually as things changed and I was needed more here, things needed more attention here, then she

gradually said, "All right, we will move up to the cheese factory." She said it wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't so dark up here at night.

CE: So, that's when you put on the neon lights. What year was that you were married? Or did you tell me?

ET: No, I didn't tell you. I've forgotten.

CE: It's not important.

ET: Oh, it's important all right.

PT: You had your fortieth last year.

ET: Had my fortieth last year.

CE: Forty, from eighty is forty.

ET: No, it was '40, after the war. No, I don't think it was. It was before the war, about early '30s I was married, had to be, somewhere in that neighborhood.

CE: Now, I haven't seen all of your compound here, but you don't live in the cheese factory. You have some housing.

ET: Yes, there are two houses. The old family home there --

CE: Did she get so she loved it?

ET: Well, yes.

CE: She's still there?

ET: She's still there, yes. She's over there.

CE: Could we meet her later?

ET: Oh, you sure could. I'll take the message over at noon if you're still here and maybe she can come over and --

CE: Sure, we're going to stay here and have a little -- whatever you serve.

ET: I'd like to have you meet her and she'd like to meet you.

CE: Is she getting used to it?

ET: Well, as used to it as she's going to get, I guess. Right now she's been here about over twenty years, up here. And I'll be honest with you, I've heard her say recently that she wouldn't like to go back to San Francisco anymore, because she goes out and meets some of the gals she worked with in school, school teachers and she doesn't like to drive in the city anymore. It just gets her down.

CE: Well, who does? Just look at the television this whole week and see the mess over there. The demonstrations --

ET: Yes, the demonstrations and all of that.

CE: The parades.

ET: Thank heavens we are not troubled with that kind of operation out here in the country just yet.

CE: Well, tell me, Edward, do you have children?

ET: No, but I adopted a young man a good many years ago.

CE: Is he in the business?

ET: He's in the business now, and he is --

CE: What's his name?

ET: Douglas Johnstone.

CE: Douglas. Who's this young man in here?

ET: This young man is Dave Brooks' son. Fifth generation.

CE: How does Dave Brooks fits into this?

ET: Well, Dave Brooks is my sister's youngest boy. And he came into operate the cheese factory about 1945, was it, Pierce? Maybe closer to the '50s.

CE: And his son is here with him, too?

ET: Yes, his son is here now. Got a daughter packing cheese.

CE: It's a family operation then all way around, isn't it?

ET: That's right. My adopted son, Doug Johnstone, has two boys and they have worked here in the cheese factory off times, but they're doing some other things now, to get a variety of their experiences. And they're twenty years old, two good boys.

CE: You live here in a house. Does Pierce?

ET: No.

CE: Pierce lives in Petaluma. We will get his story then later. What phase of the business have you enjoyed most?

ET: Well, I have enjoyed the -- what should I say -- freedom of the outside operation,

CE: I don't understand what you mean.

CE: Freedom of the operation. It's a freedom in that there is a great deal of variety. Taking care of --

CE: You're kind of the ambassador at large, or the --

ET: Yes, I have spent a good many years on the road, that is --

CE: Talking about, promoting your product?

ET: Promoting the product with the wholesalers on the markets. And I enjoyed that. I enjoyed that very much.

CE: I imagine you were well received, too.

ET: Well, thank you.

PT: He's a natural.

CE: Do you take your wife on these trips ever?

ET: No, she didn't want to go.

CE: Let me -- Do you go up and down the coast, or inland, or --

ET: I don't do that anymore, but when I was on that job I was going to visit wholesalers more or less San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, all along the coast.

CE: Up and own the coast.

ET: Up and own the coast. I was trying to promote the product with the wholesalers also going to the storekeeper to see what I could do about educating him or his staff to help take care of a very perishable product that we were producing.

CE: I bet that took some doing!

ET: Well, it did, but I found it quite interesting. I'll give you one funny experience. I went to a store in San Francisco and I saw that they had some of our cheese but it needed attention. So --

CE: Was it a deep freeze or something?

ET: No, No, it was too old, the product was too old. I could tell by looking at it.

CE: You always put a date on, don't you?

ET: Well, the time I'm telling you about now, we didn't have the date on the boxes. So, I had to wait quite a little while, this fellow was talking to someone else, the store manager. It was a deli. And when I gave him my card, "Oh," he said, "just the fellow I want to see." And I had had that happened to me many times," and I knew what was coming. He reached down under the counter and brought out a

box full of our cheese that didn't look too well, kind of messy. And he said, "What are you going to do about this?" I said, "All you have to do is count them, and I'll give you a fresh one for every one you've got there." Well, that kind of helped. That was a start. So, I got to talk to him quite a while. This particular fellow was a real nice guy. However, when we finished up and I thought I'd made a friend, he said, "All right, I'm not going to take your cheese out of the store, but the next time you come in that door, if the cheese is not better, duck." Well, I went back, needless to say, a good many times to that particular store, every time I was in the area. And I did, I made a nice friendship with that fellow. I liked him. And he evidently --

CE: Where would he keep the cheese, for example?

ET: Well, for example, he had it -- He was displaying it in his -- He had a deli and he was displaying it in his case. Whether it was refrigerated or not, I don't think refrigeration was common at that particular time in the delis. I think I remember talking to him about that. If it would be about the same to him, he might just put it in the corner where the sun wasn't shining on it. That was in lieu of refrigeration.

CE: How do you get your product to the market now?

ET: All through wholesalers. The wholesaler --

CE: They come pick it up?

ET: No, we deliver it to their establishment, generally. Now we have trucking firms that deliver to them.

CE: Quite an operation.

ET: They put it into the stores and they are supposed to service the stores, take care of the product after it gets there. However --

CE: What if they find a box that's said "use before" a certain date and that date is passed, do you take that back?

ET: Yes, we take that back, and --

PT: It never comes back here. We give them credit for whatever they send in as "spoils." It's not really spoiled but --

CE: I know it isn't; can't it be used?

ET: It could be used but there again there's not very many people that know about -- that is customers, know about the amount of cheese that comes back. Not only ours but all cheese that goes back into the wholesale establishment in the different cities, tons and tons of cheese that is still --

CE: Good, edible.

ET: You bet it is.

CE: Is this some of the cheese the government gave away?

ET: No, they don't give away any -- When they bring it back into the store they throw it away, that goes into the garbage. What isn't dispersed right close by in relatives, and so on.

CE: Well, this is a conservative date you always put on cheese, isn't it? If you were five days after that, it's not going to harm anything.

ET: No, it doesn't, but you have to set a time because somebody will pick that up and it's too strong for their palate, you've lost a customer. You try to put that on there at an optimum time for the use of that particular product.

CE: Well, where Mrs. Martinelli and I shop, Guasco's Market in San Anselmo, they sell your product.

ET: Yes.

CE: Is it the responsibility of those people to go and check all these dates?

ET: It's the responsibility of the man who delivers to the market, our wholesaler; that's where he comes in. He's to watch those things. He is supposed to, when he puts a dozen cheeses in, then he's supposed to rotate the product on the shelf so that the older cheese will be picked up --

CE: And if he doesn't, he suffers the loss?

ET: No, no, we suffer the loss if he doesn't. So that makes us responsible --

CE: You mean, ultimately you're responsible?

ET: Right.

CE: Even though he might slip up?

ET: They do. If he doesn't watch the cheese on the shelf, then we get the higher return from a certain individual, a wholesaler, then it's our job to go to the market and find out why he's sending back so much cheese. Is he overstocked? What's he doing? Are they taking care of it in the proper manner? And also when you do that it gives you the opportunity to re-establish good relations with the markets.

CE: Do you still do a little of that?

ET: No, no, once in a while.

CE: If it's a difficult case they send you. He's the ambassador, I can tell that.

ET: Speaking about an ambassador; well, I have enjoyed that. I do enjoy that.

CE: That's sort of like the fruits of all your labors in the business. You know that you can troubleshoot and go out, represent the company.

ET: That's right.

CE: Have you made speeches?

ET: I have, yes. I have spoken to clubs and Rotary, and all of them, the Lions and so on.

CE: Is some of your cheese at the convention parties in San Francisco?

ET: I hope so.

CE: There's so many parties going on, you can't keep up with it.

ET: If my son down there hasn't been asleep at the switch, it's probably there somewhere.

CE: Every party, they're drinking and eating little Camembert cheese --

ET: That's right, Speaking of drinking, the wine tasting has been the biggest thing that is promoted, our cheese helped, helped.

CE: It's a very clever idea of somebody, wasn't it?

ET: Yes, it was.

CE: It helped the wine industry, too.

ET: There is a story about that.

CE: Well, tell us.

ET: Well, as I was going through the markets a long time ago, wondering how we could promote our cheese in a better manner -- We didn't have a great deal of money to put out. The big posters and all the fancy lithography and --

CE: Look at all this expense. That's expensive stuff, isn't it, that lithographic poster there?

ET: Oh, I got an idea I would -- The idea was pushed by looking at the Wine Institute and what they were doing to advertise wines. Beautiful lithographed grapes and grapes leaves and all that.

CE: You can taste them.

ET: Taste them. So I went to the Wine Institute and talked to them. Not with very much success, if any at all, at that particular time.

CE: You mean they were kind of cool to you?

ET: No, they were cool to my suggestion. They said, "Well, now, that's fine."

CE: "Well, we don't need you."

ET: Oh, no, no they didn't say that. They said, "We're selling wine, you know, you're selling cheese. Let's keep it that way."

CE: It's like ham and eggs; did you tell them that?

ET: No, I didn't, I was too green in that area of the market. I was not quick with my answers, most of the time, at any time. Anyhow, after that, I've forgotten how long it was, we had a request from Krug Winery in Napa Valley. They wanted us to give them some cheese for one of their lawn tastings. Fine, that was great. I told my son about it, Doug Johnstone, and he said, "Yeah, sure we will go over there." There was some communication. He said, "We'll not only give you some cheese we'll send somebody with it and take some crackers. All you do is give us a table and we'll serve it. Give us an opportunity to talk about it." Because my whole reason for doing this was that I could see, at least I thought I could see, that the type of product we're selling is hard to get anyone to taste it. There's a certain percentage of people out there that if they could taste it would like it. There's a percentage that would taste it and never try it again. But, we were missing a percentage that would not try it because they didn't know what to do with it; they didn't know how it tasted.

CE: Are you talking about the Camembert?

ET: I'm talking about the Camembert. So, that was my reason for going to the Wine Institute and some way trying with it. I didn't see it at all clearly. Anyway, when Krug Winery made the suggestion that we come, my son went over there with his samples and they gave him a table and he spread the cheese out on the table; they had the tasting. I didn't know.

CE: How did it go over?

ET: When he got home that was the question, "How did it go over, Doug?" He said, "Wonderful. Everybody was around the cheese table. We were crowded." Ah, we thought that was great, at least I did. I thought, now the people, now they have got a chance to try it. A few days, here comes a letter from Krug Winery. They appreciate what we did; everything we did was fine and all that. But, here again, we're selling wine and you're selling cheese and there's just too much interest around the cheese table. So, what are we going to do about that? Well, there wasn't anything we could do about that, you know, at that particular time. We were disappointed, needless to say, and we kind of waited. It wasn't too long, though, that we received another letter from the winery. They wanted to rethink that again. They said --

CE: When was this roughly, about twenty years ago?

ET: Twenty years ago.

CE: Yes, in the 60s.

ET: Yes, twenty years ago. So, the situation arose where they said there was so many requests, or so many thoughts expressed, good thoughts, about the cheese and the wine together that they wondered if we couldn't get together and rethink this. Maybe we could help them again or something like that. Well, sure, we were very happy then, built up to the point where we had originally thought it might. And to shorten the story, the wine tasting parties increased tremendously. We had so many requests for wine tasting, cheese and wine tastings, that Doug was able to establish a good rapport with the wineries, and we cannot comply with all the requests that's coming today.

CE: Requests that you have --

ET: And I think it has had a big effect. I think Pierce will corroborate that. That the wine tasting had a great deal to do with the increase in our wholesale business.

CE: Would you say you introduced this idea, then, into the wineries here in the Napa Valley and --

ET: I don't like to use the -- that I introduced it, but I have to say --

CE: You presented the idea, they rejected it, and they came back after they rethought it. Who else approached them? Did you find, as the years went by, that there were other competitors also doing their cheeses?

ET: Oh, yes.

CE: Who was the first one? Did you notice anybody else there?

ET: No, no, not at that particular time.

CE: All right, so you mustn't be modest about that. That was your idea.

ET: I like to have you say that.

CE: Well, I'm saying it. I think one can say that with --

ET: Well, to pursue that just a little. You know, I was going through the stores, and again I'll go over that, I already said that, I saw the beautiful displays that the Wine Institute was putting on and I thought to myself, "Gee, isn't there some way that we can tie our advertising to theirs?" And the answer to my own question to myself was, "How in the world are you going to get that done when you haven't enough for the poster?" But I was going to capitalize or get on their wagon and follow them in what I thought was a very --

CE: It's very tasteful, too, beautiful.

ET: Very tasteful, very nice way to do it. And it was a way that appealed to me at that time because it was so nicely done.

CE: Right. That's a beautiful poster, the Christian Brothers with the cheese. Oh, yes, I mean that's inviting. That's -- And the young people, not my generation or yours, but the young people today.

PT: You know, it's really quite a switch, because at the first onset of this wine tasting deal, the reaction we got from most people when we went into this was, "We don't want such a strongly flavored cheese with our wines. The wine flavors are delicate. If it's a jack cheese or something like that, that is delicate in flavor, would be all right but we don't want --" And especially the Schloss cheese. It's completely reversed. Now the Schloss cheese is one of the most requested cheeses at the wine tasting.

CE: That's true and -- Don't you agree, the young people, this is their idea of a party today? In my day, you had to have cocktails and fancy hors d'oeuvres of everything, caviar and pate. The younger generation, this is what they want. And they have beautiful glasses. They have all the accoutrements and they have a party and nobody gets high, at least as high as we used to get.

GM: How long have you been making large wheels of Camembert for parties?

CE: Oh, yes, Mrs. Martinelli just mentioned about the large wheels of cheese.

ET: Why don't I turn that part over to Pierce?

CE: Okay we can do that. We'll get into that. Save the question. So, the wine tasting and the cheeses, that's still going on and that still on the increase?

ET: That's still going on. That my son does, Doug Johnstone, and he is the guy who takes care of that on the markets now and does the promotion and takes the cheese to the different tastings, all over the country now. A little bit --

CE: How far do you ship this?

ET: Well, Doug has gone to Chicago, Florida -- isolated --

CE: How can you do that? Do you put a refrigerated railroad cars or fly it?

ET: Fly it.

CE: That ups the prices, doesn't it?

ET: That ups the prices, but --

CE: They're willing to pay it? Eastern market?

ET: Well, they've upped the price so far that they've eliminated a good deal of the volume of the cheese -- so far away that we have to fly it. We're still trying, I might say, to get the product to the markets on the east coast in a good condition at a price that the people can buy it. In competition, of course there, with the European.

CE: Wouldn't Jefferson be surprised if he were alive?

ET: Yes, he would.

CE: Coming back to Illinois is some cheese that came out of his westward expansion.

ET: Yes.

CE: It would boggle his mind. He wouldn't believe it.

ET: He had a very set way of manufacturing cheese. Very set way of operating the mechanics of handling the milk and cheese and everything. If he saw what his son turned and did after he left here, he'd come back and tell him he shouldn't do it that way.

CE: I know, but now with the technological achievements, I suppose you could ease the work, the production of it.

ET: We have to make it much faster than we used to.

CE: Well, Pierce Thompson, with us here today, is he involved in the cheese making?

ET: He is involved and then, you know way back --

CE: He's the head of the company now?

ET: That's right, he's the General Manager.

CE: The General Manager.

ET: The bottom line or the top line or both.

CE: Well, that's good. I think it's very nice of him to allow you to speak first.

ET: That was, that was a --

CE: In deference to your vast experience and to give us the background of the family. You still active in the business though, Edward?

ET: Well, yes, not to any extent of physical effort.

CE: When you come to the office, they don't wish you weren't coming in, do they?

ET: No, I might say something about -- At least they don't say it!

CE: "Here comes Edward again. Give him something to do."

ET: Pierce has been the office man in this operation and he has taken the job that I wouldn't have had, couldn't have had, or wouldn't have done anything with if I'd had it. So I was very happy to ask him what to do! Anytime I -- those come across my thought quite frequently and what I do I come in and ask Pierce, "Have we got the money to do it?" Pierce says, "No, we haven't got the money." I walk right out of the door and forget it. I don't argue with him about it. And that's the separation right there that has made us compatible. He takes care of his end, the end that he knows and I don't want to have anything to do with.

CE: Thank God you've got him.

ET: That's right. And I'm very pleased. And I hope he's pleased with what I'm doing.

CE: That probably accounts for the success of this family operation, that there is this wonderful mix of talent and ability like yourself to relinquish to somebody else what they can do best. And you must have mutual respect for each other. It's a good marriage.

ET: Very much so. You don't go anywhere without that.

CE: And that's so rare today in business. Do you know how rare that is in business, family businesses?

ET: Yes, I think I've been around long enough to see the experiences of others. It seems like two people say, "Well I'm either going to run it or you're going to run it and this is the way it has to go." But it's not the way here at all.

CE: Today it seems men in business are very interested in making it for themselves, you know. The company -- They jump around a lot. They don't stick to an operation and they don't want to serve their apprenticeship either. They want to start in at the top. You didn't.

ET: No.

CE: Pierce didn't.

ET: No.

CE: I'm sure he didn't.

ET: That's right. So, I will gladly turn over the technical part now to Pierce.

CE: Before you say goodbye, are you happy with the way everything has turned out?

ET: I am very happy.

CE: Did you ever think as a boy you'd have this fulfilling a life?

ET: No. Never any idea. And I'm sure Dad and Uncle never had any idea that this little company here would go where it has eventually gone.

CE: It started just at the end of the Civil War, and look where it is today. Would you comment, before we close with you, on this lovely picnic area? Did you have anything to do with that? Conceiving this idea of the pond and --

ET: I can kind of give you a little run-down on how it happened.

CE: Well, let's conclude with that.

ET: We had --

CE: It's so inviting. I mean, everybody says, "Let's go out to the cheese factory. Let's have a picnic," except these hot, hot, days.

ET: We established a policy, quite a long time ago, with our distributors, merely principally San Francisco. We'd give them a barbecue.

CE: "Come on over here and see -- "

ET: The idea was to get the fellows that were delivering our cheese, the wagon men, not the wholesalers so much, but the fellow that was meeting the people on the market. He was the man that was selling our cheese to the market. Get him up here and his family, give them a barbecue. Let him get out in the country, bring the children, and have a good time. So, they did.

CE: When did they started this, sort of? In the '50s, '60s?

PT: We haven't recorded dates, apparently!

ET: Gee, early '50s probably.

CE: Early '50s, okay.

ET: Yes, I would say that, maybe even before that.

CE: Picnics and barbecues.

ET: We just had some tables and a barbecue pit. That's all we had. So a group came up from a Monterey Cheese Company. They brought their wagon men, their families. They went out here to a field that was covered with stickers and hard as cement in August and they played football. And I was standing here watching them. And their elbows were bleeding and of course their knees were bleeding and they were having such a good time. And I thought to myself, "You know, we can do better than that. If we'd just put some water on that field it would grow some green grass." And we did. And that started the picnic area. And we just did that for a few years and then we improved it by putting a sprinkler system and enlarged it as it went. This little lake out there, we were beginning to fix the picnic tables down here, after over there on that side, the west side. So, I had a fellow here that I had gone to high school with and he was helping me and we were digging some dirt out of a low spot and put it in so that we could have some place to put the tables. Leveling up the old corals that Granddad had. And he said to me, "Why don't you move some of this dirt, dig it out here, Ed, and make a little dam there make a little lake here."

CE: Little pond.

ET: Little pond. I said, "That's a great idea. Let's start in now." So, the next trip around, we dumped the dirt in where we were going to make the pond. And that's how all of this has developed. We see people come here, and they like something and we want to improve it a little bit so what are we going to do, for the interest that has been around and this is what you see today. We have been pushed into it.

CE: It isn't bad for business, either.

ET: Oh, no. So that's how that -- With that I'll --

CE: Well, I can't tell you how delightful it's been to talk with you Edward. I it's been a pleasure.

ET: It's been a pleasure for me, too.

CE: You've been a man who had a very full and interesting life and you should feel very proud of your achievements, very proud.

ET: Thank you.