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INTERVIEW WITH HARRISON DIBBLEE

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
January 13, 1975

INTERVIEWEE: Mr. Harrison Dibblee (HD)
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (C.E.) and Anne Kent (A.K.)
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CE: Today is Monday, January 13, 1975. We are at the residence of Mrs. Thomas Kent, 131 Goodhill Road, Kentfield, California. We will be talking today with Mr. Harrison Dibblee who is descendent of one of the first pioneer families of Marin.

"Fernhill," the Albert Dibblee estate in Ross, was one of the many beautiful properties in the lovely Ross Valley around the latter part of the 1800's. Mr. Harrison Dibblee is the grandson of this Mr. Albert Dibblee and informs us today that he was born in Grass Valley. Is that right Mr. Dibblee?

HD: That is correct.

CE: And December 7, 1899?

HD: Right.

CE: Where do you live presently, sir?

HD: I live at 40 Poplar Drive, Del Mesa.

CE: 40 Poplar Drive, Del Mesa, all right. Now your grandfather's name has been so prominent in this community. I live in Ross myself and I know where the Katherine Branson School is and what a beautiful estate that must have been. Could you begin today by telling us a little bit about your grandfather?

HD: My grandfather was born in Kingston, on the Hudson, New York. He left for California in December, 1849, and he came as a merchant, not as a prospector.

CE: That was rare.

HD: He came around the Horn, arriving in San Francisco in June, 1850, and he brought with him all kinds of materials to set himself up as a merchant, including, believe it or not, a prefabricated house.

CE: That he'd shipped around with him?

HD: That he brought with him around the Horn.

CE: Wonderful, wonderful.

HD: He lived in San Francisco primarily until he moved to Ross, which was about 1868. And he was very active there in many ways. He was a manufacturer's agent, representing the DuPonts and others. He was at least once and I think twice, president of the Chamber of Commerce. He was vice chairman of the committee to keep this state in the union at the time of the Civil War. He was active in the Vigilance Committee; he was not a member of the first committee. He was asked to be on the executive board but that required two meetings a day and, as he was leaving the state sometimes, he refused, although he supported the committee. He was a member of the executive committee of the second Vigilance Committee. His activities were not confined to San Francisco although--- and one thing I forgot was, according to my father, he was asked to run for mayor by both parties in the same year. But he refused that as he did not want to get into politics.

CE: My goodness, what an honor, what a distinction!

HD: He bought a ranch in Southern California, which was the Santa Anita Ranch, and where the Santa Anita Race Track is now. And he got his younger brother, Thomas, to come out to run the ranch. The ranch was a failure financially. They sold it and then started looking for ranches near Santa Barbara. Colonel Hollister at that time had moved from Hollister to Santa Barbara and had bought some ranches there. They decided to go into partnership and buy additional ranches. I don't remember the exact amount; I think they had about 150-200,000 acres of cattle and sheep ranches north of Santa Barbara. That partnership was terminated in the late [18]80's, I believe. In the meantime Thomas Dibblee had married Francesca DeLaGuerra. The old DeLaGuerra ranch had been purchased previously to that. The "San Julian" was the head ranch of the group. Now that is still owned by the descendents of Thomas Dibblee in Santa Barbara.

CE: Isn't that interesting?

HD: My grandfather married Annie Mecham - I think it was in [18]'68. In any event, he bought property in Ross and moved here in 1870. The property, as I remember it, (I don't know the exact amount) was roughly bordered on the north by Bolinas Avenue and went from Sir Francis Drake up to the timberline on Bald Hill, then went across following the

timberline down the water company line to the road that comes up from Lagunitas Road into the water company property.

CE: Where Phoenix Lake is now?

HD: Yes, that is now called, I think, Dibblee Lane from there down to Lagunitas Road. And then it angles over on top of the hill, which is to the south of the Branson School today, and then from there, more or less down to Sir Francis Drake. That property is outlined on the county map, which we have in Bolinas, and is dated (I think), 1894.

CE: How much acreage was that?

HD: I don't know. Incidentally, my grandfather was very much interested in plants and he planted a great many things, including his driveway, which goes from what is now the entrance of Branson School down past the Catholic Church. The elms there were all planted by my grandfather.

CE: All that, what is now Fernhill?

HD: Yes. Well, the place was called "Fernhill."

CE: Yes, what a beautiful name.

HD: And he also planted the elms along Shady Lane in Ross. Shady Lane, incidentally, was named Longfellow Lane but was never known as anything but Shady Lane, as far as I know.

CE: Had you visited the place as a young man?

HD: Yes, yes. When I was about six. But before we get to that, my grandfather was very much interested in plants and as he had a lot of contacts with shipping captains, who sailed all over the world, they would bring him plants from various areas. And he developed those at Fernhill, many of them in his hothouse, which he loved to work in. They also had dairy cows they ran up in the area and so on. My grandfather died in 1895 and my grandmother sold the property, I believe, around 1900 or shortly thereafter, and built on what would be the southwest corner of the property. That's on Upper Road, where she built a home then, which was later bought by my Uncle Benjamin.

CE: That house is still there, is it not?

HD: Still standing. It was sold to the Ross' about five or six years ago and since been resold.

CE: Such a beautiful home and beautiful gardens there.

HD: Well, he was very much interested in gardens and particularly in azaleas and rhododendrons and things of that kind. They started to grow up, all the children in Ross, that is my--

CE: Well, how many were in your family? Do you have brothers?

HD: My uncle, Albert James, my father, Harrison, and my youngest uncle, Benjamin H., and my aunt, Anita L. The boys went to school in the Bates School in San Rafael. That was off Mountain View Avenue. If you know that area, it's where the Madison home was later built.

CE: I'm trying to think. Mrs. Kent and I interviewed a gentleman who went to that school. Do you recall, Mrs. Kent?

AK: I can't remember which one, but that was the place to go.

HD: Well, they went in and they rode horseback from Ross to there everyday and then rode back. And Mr. Bates apparently (according to my father) was a very well educated, high class Englishman and he used to take the boys on camping trips. He was quite a botanist. He told them all about the plants and the fauna and the flora, and this and that and the other thing, and no one had any idea of his background. He never mentioned it until one time when he was out on Santa Barbara Ranch with my Uncle Ben, and word came out that King Edward had died. And so over a bottle of bourbon they sat and Bates talked about when he was young, how he had been on King Edward's suite – not – what is the word? It isn't "suite" – King Edward's – whatever it is - the group that goes with the Prince of Wales.

CE: His staff?

HD: Yes, his staff.

CE: When he traveled?

HD: He traveled all over with the Prince of Wales and he told one story, which was very amusing. The Prince of Wales got quite bored when they were in Brussels and so he ordered them all to collect all the bed pots on that floor, and toss them on the main street, as the signal from the Prince of Wales. Well that was the only time anybody heard Bates speak of his past in any way.

CE: And he was so moved by this.

HD: And his name was, as I remember it (and I can't guarantee this) was James Mortimer Seymour Cavendish Bates, which would be connected with many of the leading families of England. So, nobody knew why he was here, but in any event--

CE: He must have done a fine job.

HD: He ran the school and did a good job. Then, if this has any bearing on it, my grandmother and grandfather decided that schools here were not advanced enough and so she took all the children back to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and put them in school. And she lived there, excepting in the summers, for about three or four years. And my two eldest uncles went to Browne and Nichols, and my Uncle Ben went to Groton and he later became quite ---Well, they all went to Harvard, but he became quite well known as he was captain of the Harvard football team and All-American halfback and later became an overseer of Harvard.

CE: Very interesting. There are so many Yale people in Ross; it's nice to hear somebody went to Harvard.

AK: You didn't know that, did you?

HD: Now, all the Kents went to Yale. In any event, there was one other thing that might be of interest to you (I don't think anybody knows), and that is the Emmet family. I don't know. Do you remember, Mrs. Kent?

AK: No.

HD: They lived here and grew up more or less (I suppose they were very young at the time) with my family. And Bay Emmet, who married Rand, Bay Emmet Rand became a well-known portrait painter. My aunt studied painting with her in Paris but gave it up because she didn't think she was good enough. But Bay Emmet Rand, when she died, was written up in at least one magazine as being second only to Cassatt as a woman portrait painter.

CE: Would you spell her name Bay Emmet Rand?

HD: Bay Emmet Rand. And two best-known portraits, I think, are the one she did of Peabody Groton, which is quite famous, and one of FDR that hangs in the living room in Hyde Park now.

CE: You know I've visited Hyde Park and I bet I have seen that painting.

HD: Probably did.

CE: Are any of her works in your family?

HD: Yes. She was a great friend of my uncle's and aunt's and she always stayed with them when she came out here. And she insisted on painting his portrait, which I have, and I think is magnificent, and she also painted my aunt. I don't think that is as good and she didn't either.

CE: Are these paintings in a museum here in this area?

HD: No, I have them in my home.

CE: You have them in your home. Well, it's interesting because, as an ancillary thing, I don't know if you know the Smithsonian Institute is trying to inventory a lot of art (pre-1900 art), have you been approached by---

HD: But this is not pre-1900, see.

CE: Oh, I see.

HD: Then, well, I have some that might interest them, but that's another story - one other thing that you would remember, Mrs. Kent, and I don't know if it goes into this, but I remember going to Bolinas in the old horse stage---

CE: Do you?

HD: Yes, and that reminds me of one thing I thought would be of interest. We lived for some time at the corner of Mission and Grand Avenue in San Rafael, and the duck hunters used to come in, walking from the bay along Mission, loaded down with ducks, and we would walk out and buy ducks from them at twenty or twenty-five cents apiece. This was back about 1908.

CE: Well, now you said earlier you were born in Grass Valley, but your father was born in Ross.

HD: Yes, that's right.

CE: I see. Now, how did you come to be born in Grass Valley?

HD: Well, as I mentioned, my father went up there thinking he was going to be a mining engineer in the silver mines and then he decided after a year he was not going to be a mining engineer. He came back to Marin County and lived here ever since.

CE: What was his profession?

HD: Well, he did almost all kinds of things. He grew some orchards, he developed some orchards and he was in various things of that type.

AK: Well, we got him off the track; we want to get back to Bolinas.

CE: Yes!

HD: Well, I can remember going over to Bolinas in the old horse stage, and of course at that time there wasn't a paved road in Marin County, and it took about four hours to go over there.

CE: Where would you catch the stage?

HD: Down on Third Street, I believe it was. I don't remember, on Third Street somewhere. There was the stable there.

CE: Six horse stage?

HD: No, there were two to four horses depending on the load. But the interesting part about it was at that time, if you went to Bolinas you didn't go over as you do now (drive over in 45 minutes). It was about a four hour drive.

CE: Had to go over White's Grade.

HD: No, no, we went over the old Ridge Road, past where the Meadow Club is now. And the road then went down to the canyon, that's now covered by water (where the Alpine Lake is), and then up over the ridge and down. The only other public transportation at that time was the schooner. It ran from San Francisco twice a week.

CE: Did you ever take that?

HD: Yes.

CE: Is that the one called the Owl?

HD: The Owl came later.

CE: The Owl came later.

HD: The Jenny Griffin was the first schooner, Captain Petar. And if you stayed there at all during the summer, you didn't go over for a weekend, you'd stay two or three weeks, or a month, or whatever it was, and either rented a house or you generally stayed with Mrs. Gilfillan, who had the popular boarding house at that time. And the fathers would generally come up on the schooner on a Friday night and everyone would go down to meet the schooner. The schooner would come in and they'd meet the fathers, then they'd see the fathers off Sunday night, at the last high tide. One thing that might be of interest is that the schooner carried freight of all kinds, including livestock. From time to time it would have a load of pigs, which would be on the forward deck, and all the nasty little boys would be delighted because they knew the pigs would be sick and their fathers would be sick on the rear end of the boat. But in any event, those were the two means of transportation and it was an isolated spot there, and an attractive spot.

CE: Did your family have a place over there?

HD: No.

CE: You'd just go over and stay.

HD: My aunt bought a place there after the first World War and lived there ever since. The maiden aunt that was the friend of Bay Emmet Rand. But Bolinas then was quite different.

CE: Do you remember that inn there at the top of the grade, before you went down towards Bolinas? Somebody was telling Mrs. Kent and me (I think it was Judge Martinelli) Summit Inn wasn't it called?

AK: I have a picture of it.

HD: I think that's the one on the Mill Valley Road. Over there, yes, there was an inn over there. It was on the Crookedest Railroad in the World. It went up Mount Tamalpais and at the point where it went down there was an inn. Now, I don't think there was ever an inn at the top of the Bolinas Ridge.

CE: Well, this judge thought there was.

HD: Judge Martinelli?

CE: Yes, he can remember hanging his hat on a peg there and Mrs. Kent had a picture of it one time.

HD: Well, I'd like to see it. Incidentally, Judge Martinelli has our house in San Rafael now.

CE: Is that right? That beautiful home.

HD: In Mill Valley. I believe this also might interest you then. You would remember this, Mrs. Kent. The time Almer Newhall was over there we built the tennis court and he put up the money and we all went to work and we built the tennis court down there and took care of it for years. Also every year we had Clean Up Day and the whole town would turn out to clean up, pick up any messes that were around, and the people would provide trucks. They'd go all over picking up everything and then we'd have a buffet lunch on the tennis court that all the wives would bring down. And we had quite a community at that time. There were no hippies.

CE: No hippies. Well, Mrs. Kent, can you think of some things you might like to ask him?

AK: Well, I just wonder now when you're talking about that, I just wondered about Peppers. You know, Marin [?] was living then, and we have not gone to get any of her family. But I am just wondering when we do go, do you know who would be in Marin's [?] family?

HD: The only one I know of, Charlie, is there, Charlie Pepper. They've all moved up to the mountains. Charlie Pepper is there and Jack Pepper is still there. And, incidentally, if you mention pictures, if you want pictures, the best collection I have (and I haven't had a chance to go through it all, by any means) is the one that Betty Family Finley - she was Betty Schmiedell then, and you know E. G. Schmiedell and the beauty of his pictures were, he took many of them. Not only here but down in Santa Barbara and all over, but every individual in the pictures is named, which is---

AK: You think Betty has that now?

HD: Well, I know she had it and she offered it to the California Historical Society to copy and they did not have the staff to copy it there. That's where I saw it. I saw a lot of it. And so she took them back with the idea of giving it to them later when they could probably handle it. But there must have been a thousand or two pictures and every individual in the pictures is named.

CE: Extraordinary.

HD: That is extraordinary because when my aunt died and I found all kinds of pictures in family boxes, we had to throw them all away, no one knew who anyone was.

AK: That's true, you don't know---

HD: But this thing would be of interest to you. I know that I found a picture of my grandmother and grandfather Davidson on the porch of the old Hotel Rafael. There was a group taken there at that time.

AK: That's great.

HD: So you could - Doris Schmiedell would know.

CE: An article I read somewhere said that this boat that your grandfather brought with him around the Horn was that used in the---

HD: A boat?

CE: There was a boat he was supposed to have brought with him, a little 35-foot boat.

HD: Well, if he did I don't know about that. I know about the house.

AK: It mentions about a house and sailing boat.

CE: I wonder if that sailing boat could have been used in the Corte Madera River [?]?

HD: Well, incidentally, as I understand it, your father and my grandfather together owned some of that property down what used to be Ross Landing.

CE: Ross Landing, yes.

HD: They each had joint interest in---

AK: They each had a bathhouse, I've seen that picture.

HD: Yes and they sold that - oh, well, in the last twenty years I think, wasn't it?

AK: Yes, that's right.

CE: Do you have a collection of pictures in your family of Early Ross, by any chance?

HD: Yes, some pictures. I have a picture of the old Fernhill house.

CE: Oh you do?

HD: And then I have the pictures taken from that hill on the south of it, which shows the house and the barns and the orchard, and all the way up to Red Hill, and all of Ross Creek. There's hardly a tree in that area, there wasn't a house, there was nothing. And then there's another picture---

CE: Could we sometime, if Mrs. Kent made an appointment, could we see those?

HD: Certainly, certainly. There was another picture taken about the time that the seminary was under construction, about half built.

AK: I've never seen that.

CE: And that's over a hundred years old now, isn't it?

HD: I guess so. And then there was a picture taken from about Red Hill looking back the other way, down at the San Anselmo intersection. There was nothing there but a little shack, and the road down to Ross, and the road going off the other way.

CE: Just imagine Fernhill Drive though, being the private driveway, into this estate, Fernhill.

AK: Do you know there's a piece of the original fence still there at the entrance?

HD: Yes, down the gate was originally there.

CE: Mrs. Kent was showing me. She has an original 1909, I think it is, map of Ross. Do you want to show that to Mr. Dibblee?

HD: That might give that area I was trying to describe. I don't know.

AK: This is the main highway, this is the garden center, over here now.

CE: Here's Fernhill.

HD: That's Fernhill Drive, yes.

CE: And then Glenwood. This is where the Katherine Branson School presently is, so this is all part of your acreage. It went from Bolinas---

HD: Yes, and that's where my grandmother built.

CE: Your grandmother built there.

AK: I think they owned the water tanks up there somewhere.

HD: Well, they did, they had two, they had two---

CE: Springs?

HD: They had two springs. One of the springs went with the Branson School property.

AK: I see.

HD: I believe they still get water for the garden from that. They had a tank on this hill. It was just south. The water runs up into there, the other one they kept for this property and that spring---

AK: And this one went to the Branson School?

HD: Well, I don't know which two, but they kept one and they let one go. The one here, plus a well they had down on the road going up here, gave my aunt and uncle all the water they needed, for the house and garden, almost all the time, excepting on a very dry year, and then they'd turn on the county water.

CE: Isn't that something?

AK: You know there's something I never get straight. I never remember now just how the Dibblees, the Kittles, and the Coffins all got---

HD: Well, I can help you a little bit. The only direct connection is my Uncle Ben married Isobel Kittle. The Coffins, Mrs. Coffin, I think, was a sister of Mrs. Kittle.

AK: That's right. The two old ladies were sisters.

HD: That was the way that worked.

AK: So that Natalie Green was the cousin. Let's see, Natalie Green and your Aunt Isobel were first cousins.

HD: Yes, they called her Cousin Natalie.

CE: Well, it's interesting to me, Mrs. Kent, looking at this map, which you say is dated 1909, and if I remember correctly from Mr. Dibblee, his grandfather sold his property - - Oh, didn't you tell me he died in 1895?

HD: Yes, but my grandmother sold it later. I think she sold it in about 1900.

CE: But here, in just a few short years, it soon became subdivided.

HD: Yes.

CE: See, look how quickly these properties broke up.

AK: Yes, and the first one went to the Griffiths, I guess.

HD: I think so. All these things up here here went.

AK: You see where Carla lives is right over here.

CE: I live right here, across from the Branson School property. Well, Russell Smith lives there [inaudible] But right in here---

HD: Well, that's the old Brown house isn't it?

CE: Yes, right next door.

HD: My wife came out here to be Miss Branson's secretary, after she graduated from Smith, and that's where she stayed, in the Brown house.

CE: Right next door!

AK: Well, her little sister was the French teacher in the Branson School and that's why she came---

HD: Well, when was that?

CE: Well, she was there from 1958 until '68.

HD: Well, you see this was back in the '30's.

CE: Well, she taught prior to that at the Hamlin School in San Francisco.

AK: Harrison, while we're talking about all of these things, can you tell us where we might find out more, or where future students will find out more about your grandfather?

HD: Yes, my grandfather's business papers were all turned over to the University of California and are in the Bancroft Library. I'm told by somebody who has checked them

recently that they are in very bad repair because they have been used so much, and they should have something done about it. The other papers, the letters, which were more family letters discussing the ranching problems, the cattle, the problems on the ranch, the buying of ranches, and so on, I turned over recently to the California Historical Society in San Francisco.

AK: I sort of think that the figs down south were something that either - - you or your family had something to do with those.

HD: My father started that. In fact, he founded the town of Granada. And it was a real estate development in the sense that he was developing fig orchards for sale. It didn't work out financially for him at all because it came just before the 1929 crash and nobody had any money. So my Uncle Ben bought up the bonds, which had been issued on it, at low prices, because nobody could get anything for them, and he took the whole property over. And during the war it became very valuable because figs were then selling for about - rather they were making about one thousand dollars an acre and he at the time owned about ten percent of all production in the United States. But after the war, the whole fig industry was killed because there were rules and restrictions on Mediterranean figs, which were brought in at half the price they could be raised here, and furthermore they had no health standards at all, so they put the local fig business out of business.

AK: Oh, that was terrible. They were especially wonderful figs, as I remember. I remember a couple of things they said about them, they were very large figs and they were also having fig trees that were pruned quite low so they didn't have that enormous---

HD: Yes, they kept them low so the pickers could get at them and they were largely the canning figs too, the Kadota figs.

CE: Oh yes, those are wonderful.

AK: What we need. Too bad. Another idea: it seems to me when we take the short cut to go through San Rafael to Vallejo, it seemed to me that Uncle Ben had something to do with that too. Did he?

HD: That was built, I think, by the Golden Gate Ferry Company- what was it called? It was a toll road.

AK: Yes, it was a toll road.

HD: And he was in that too. He was a director of the Golden Gate Ferries and therefore of the toll road which was later separated and, of course, the bridge put the ferries out of business completely. He was also, incidentally, a director of the Crookedest Railroad in the World, the one that ran from Mill Valley to the top of Mount Tamalpais, which you remember probably.

AK: That's right, I remember.

CE: You certainly rode that.

HD: Yes, I did.

AK: I hear that they had a hand in a great, great many things. They were a great family, I think. Now, another thing---

HD: Oh, incidentally, he was - he and Dolly Blithe created and built the Russ Building, which was at that point the biggest building on the Pacific coast. And that was built around 1928 and had a little problem. It was in the 30's, the early 30's. It came out all right.

AK: Yes, yes, that was just at the wrong time. This other thing that I'm thinking of is totally different. Now we had a man doing just what you're doing today, telling about the Marin artists, the whole bit, from the beginning to the end. And he had a page, a rotogravure page of pictures that had been in one of their first shows.

CE: 1927, yes.

AK: Among them is a picture, a beautiful picture, of Anita Dibblee's. And I never had known that she exhibited pictures.

HD: Well, she is the one, as I mentioned, that studied in Paris with Bay Emmett Rand, and we have some of her pictures in Bolinas now.

AK: I hope so.

HD: But she never attained the ability or standard that Miss Rand attained.

CE: Probably they were very severe on themselves, the criticism---

HD: Speaking of that type of thing, this is a little bit changed, but my father wrote two or three books of poetry and a lot of them were about Bolinas. Nobody thought very much of them, but my son, Tommy, who is quite fond of everybody in Bolinas, and seems to be involved in every group over there, tells me that there is a poetry group over there now, headed by one of the leading poets in the United States. Now I wouldn't know who that was but they have been reading my father's poetry and were all very excited about it. So there you have it.

AK: That's nice. I must tell Marty because she's interested.

HD: Yes.

AK: Well, one of your family also wrote one of those books on the birds of Bolinas, I think. Maybe he put it in poetry but I don't think so.

HD: If he did it was in poetry.

AK: No, oh, is that so? Well, that's pretty nice. The little town of Bolinas, you see those poor little hippies, they don't know what they had there.

CE: Do you go there now quite often, or do you have a summer home there?

HD: We have a house that my aunt bought, called the Horvard Cottage, which was next to the Nun's habit, and they moved to a larger place, and she was afraid she would have

undesirable neighbors. And she bought it and used to allow all of her relatives to stay in it. And then when she died, I bought it.

CE: Whereabouts is it in Bolinas?

HD: Do you know Bolinas?

CE: Yes.

HD: Well do you know Terrace Road?

CE: Yes.

HD: Just after you get over the water, there's a sharp turn to the right, a little ditch that goes up there, right top of that ditch and looks back, and it is the oldest house in that area of Bolinas. I know that, because it was mentioned in one history of Bolinas, and also I've seen pictures showing that whole area of Bolinas without a house in it, excepting this house. And the house was built not later than 1884, and it might have been earlier than that, I don't know. But things don't change, particularly with the Pacific Gas and Electric Company and we've owned it for 30 years now, I think, or 25. My aunt owned it for twenty years before that, and it's still listed as the Horvard Cottage.

AK: I wonder why.

HD: I don't know.

AK: I wonder why, because [inaudible] and the business name was Horvard.

HD: Well, according to the book that I saw, Horvard was at that time the Mayor of San Rafael, and he built it as a summer cottage.

CE: I see.

AK: Well, that is news to me. I never knew about that.

HD: I didn't either.

AK: I know Dolly Jenkins has many, many lovely pictures of Bolinas, but we never have gotten to her yet.

HD: I was going to suggest, I intended to suggest, that she has all kinds of pictures of Bolinas, and of the old Bolinas stage, and then later the stage to Mill Valley, and of the Owl and the Jenny Griffin.

CE: Wouldn't it be wonderful, Mrs. Kent, for this bicentennial coming up? Mrs. Kent is on the heritage committee, the bicentennial committee, and they're trying to think of ways to display transportation, for example. If we could get something up the Corte Madera River, like the old hay scow or something, some of these railroads, wouldn't it be---

HD: If you could get it up to our concrete canal---

AK: Isn't that a shame!

HD: And they want to put it right through Ross now.

CE: They're going to put it, I guess.

AK: Yes, a bulldozer will be there any day.

HD: Nothing you can do as far as I know. Of course, I don't vote in Ross.

AK: I don't either, but I think there was something ---

CE: In Del Mesa, is that a Kentfield address, sir?

HD: Del Mesa, curiously enough, is in the Ross School district, but not in Ross otherwise.

CE: So you have a Kentfield post office address.

HD: Well, we use the Ross post office because our children went to the Ross School, and we went down there every day (and that was right next to the Ross School), to pick up our mail. Parker Edwards has a very good picture of the Owl and the Jenny Griffin at the Bolinas wall, when the Jenny Griffin was being decommissioned (or was going to be), and the Owl was taking over.

CE: Oh, I see. Now this is a painting?

HD: No, it's a photograph, and a very good one.

CE: And you mean prints are available of it?

HD: Well, you can get a copy.

CE: He would probably lend Mrs. Kent a copy of it.

HD: Yes.

CE: Well, that's a delightful thing, and in this work we're doing we have seen a couple of interesting photographs. And one woman gave us a photograph of herself and her six sisters, in this longboat that they used to go on every day after school to Sausalito, and take it out, and row around Angel Island, and it is just precious. But we'd love to come up and see your photographs and your paintings.

HD: Well, I'd be delighted to have you any time you want. I'll show you a picture, too. You were asking about older pictures.

CE: Yes, older pictures.

HD: About California. But my grandfather had a portrait done of his mother.

CE: By whom?

HD: I forget. I have the name up there. I think it's Doyle, but I have to look it up. When she was back in Kingston and he was out here, and he had the portrait done and sent out, and my aunt and uncle had this portrait. And they thought it was (at least my aunt, my uncle died in '45) my aunt thought it was done by oh, an itinerant painter and no good, and she wouldn't do anything about it. She had all the other pictures taken care of. We have a Sulley, one of my aunts, but not this. And I liked this. I thought it was very good. So when I got it, I checked it out with the Legion of Honor where my son, Tommy, now works, and was told that this man had done the best known portraits of Clay, Webster, and Calhoun. So he was no novice at all.

CE: Oh, here's the photograph, I mean the painting, the print. And that's called the Witch of the Bay.

AK: Oh, that's nice.

CE: Mr. Dibblee, isn't that a handsome face?

AK: Where did you get it?

HD: Well, Mrs. Kent, I got it down at the "Scrimshaw," I believe, and then had it framed recently.

AK: Isn't that a nice one?

HD: It's a dandy.

AK: Isn't that a nice one? You know, Harrison, this is a load of hay ---

HD: Yes, that's a hay scow.

AK: And that man has to be hiked up above the hay in order to take it across the bay. Now how could he do that?

CE: Oh, they come all the way down from the delta with that hay.

HD: Sure.

AK: Oh, did they?

CE: And Judge Martinelli said he remembers off-loading one of those scows. They used to evidently ply up the canal once in a while. But do you remember your grandfather talking about any water traffic?

HD: I never knew my grandfather. He died before I was born.

CE: That's right.

AK: Or your father?

CE: Or your father? Did they ever tell about any of that?

HD: Here you mean?

CE: In Ross Landing?

HD: No, no.

CE: That didn't come down through the family?

HD: No, no.

CE: We were trying to find out a little bit more about that. Everywhere we go we're interested in transportation, you know, and we got from Mrs. Allen in Belvedere quite an interesting story of the arks that were floating in Belvedere Cove at the turn of the century.

HD: Going back to Bolinas, I don't know whether this will interest you or not but they had characters there in those days, as they probably do now. There was Chicken Charlie and Holy Joe. I don't know whether you remember this.

AK: Oh, Holy Joe, he was still existing ---

HD: And Holy Joe built a house there, largely from brick, but the house is still there.

CE: It is?

HD: It's covered with shingles now but it's still there. And he had the reputation of rowing to San Francisco every year in a rowboat. Once a year he'd go down there. Well, Peter Evans did it last summer. It can be done. Anyway, he did it. And Chicken Charlie, I don't remember. I remember Holy Joe because he used to bring the baggage up from the schooner. He'd go down and meet the schooner and he'd have a pair of wheels and a ladder across the wheels and he'd balance the baggage on the ladder and push it up the main street, bring it up to wherever you were staying. Chicken Charlie I don't remember but there was one story they used to tell about him. This man was walking down the street, I don't remember the name, one Sunday morning and he said, "[Charlie], I want to introduce you to my wife, Mrs. Smith." And [Charlie] said, "Well it ain't the Mrs. Smith you introduced me to last Sunday."

AK: We've got to get over there and talk to some of these Bolinas people.

HD: With all your -- Roger and Alice having that nice place there -- you ought to get over.

AK: Yes, we have to find out --Oh Mr. McClure -- we've got -

CE: Rose Briones, who's 92.

AK: Do you know Rose Briones is still living but we haven't been able to get her yet?

CE: She's a great-great-great-granddaughter of the original Briones.

HD: Well, you ought to read my father's poem, "The Epic of Bolinas," that takes in all the Briones and all the rest of them.

CE: Does it?

HD: Yes.

AK: Then we'll have to.

HD: If you can find it. I was looking for one the other --- I may have a copy, but there was a copy in the Bolinas Library, anyway. That's the only place I know of.

AK: Well, the library should have it, that's right.

CE: Well, Mrs. Kent hasn't been too well for a month or two, so we're getting her on her feet again and we're going to go out and hit the road, aren't we?

AK: Yes, we will.

HD: You do that.

CE: And Boyd Stewart, who has the ranch out there in Olema ---

HD: I know the ranch. I don't know him. Big ranch.

CE: Big ranch, yes.

AK: You should see that house.

CE: He has given us quite a few names of people out at Point Reyes Station. He said, "Now you've got to get these people soon, they're getting along in years."

AK: They'd love to show you their house.

CE: Oh it's a beautiful house.

AK: Yes, it's an old, old house that they bought from somebody else, and they have pictures in there that were pictures that belonged to the people who built the house. And it's very funny, one day a man came to the door and he said he'd like to see the house. And the wife of this man was very proud to show it so she just said, "All right, come in". And she took him through the house, and when he came down the little crooked back stairs, when he came to the bottom of the stairs, he said, "Yup, it's just the way father made it." And they didn't know who it was until that moment, you see. And so he became their great friend and spent many summers with them, and gave them all sorts of things that belonged to the house.

CE: Memorabilia.

AK: Oh, yes. And they fixed it up very nicely without spoiling it. They have added to it and have it very livable, but they also kept that original front door and front porch.

HD: Well, if you come to Bolinas we'll show you our house. It's not that old but it's 90 years old.

CE: We'll go out to Mrs. Kent's beach house sometime and then give you a call. When it's convenient we'll pop over.

AK: Yes, I'd like that. I've lost track of Bolinas. I don't really know anything about it. I have never -- In fact, when Aunt Elizabeth lived there, where Alice's house is, you know, we used to go over and stay sometimes. But actually, I have never been inside of it since Alice lived there. Just never have.

HD: Doesn't Alice own it anymore?

AK: Yes, she owns it, she owns it. Sometimes her children go. Sometimes she lends it to people.

HD: Well, during the War they used to be over a lot. Alice stayed over there. I remember when she was sick one time and she stayed there. We used to see a lot of her there.

AK: Oh, she loves to go.

HD: But since then we've hardly seen her over there at all. Occasionally on the Fourth of July, when they have a big celebration.

AK: I think she's been doing some writing and maybe she just goes over there and closes herself in, and that's a very good place to do it, you know. Bolinas is an author's and artist's place you know.

HD: Oh, very good.

CE: Well, tell me, Mr. Dibblee, do you have interests similar to your grandfather? Do you enjoy gardening? Do you like to be ---

HD: My wife is the gardener. She is an excellent gardener.

CE: Well, I imagine your home in Del Mesa must be lovely, too. What are your hobbies may I ask? Do you like to read?

HD: Yes, I read quite a bit. Since I've retired I've taken up painting, like Winston and Ike.

AK: Oh, good for you.

CE: Wonderful, wonderful.

HD: That keeps me busy a little bit.

CE: They say it's the most absorbing hobby in the world.

HD: Well, it's fun.

CE: You just get lost in that, I imagine.

HD: Yes, if it goes right you do.

CE: What medium do you use?

HD: Oils

AK: Isn't that nice? That's very nice.

CE: Have you been retired long, sir?

HD: About eight years.

CE: Eight years. Did you have to commute as so many of us did?

HD: I commuted all my life.

CE: Do you remember? --Or, you're not old enough to have taken the ferry from San Quentin.

HD: No. Oh, incidentally, I don't think I mentioned that my grandfather did and he used to commute---

CE: How would they do that, now tell us.

HD: He would drive with a team into San Rafael, take the train to San Quentin, and then the boat to San Francisco. And I'm told that he was generally late at the train and the conductor would look up Fourth Street and see if he could see him racing down Fourth Street with his team to make the train and he'd hold the train until he got on board and then off they'd go.

AK: Oh, isn't that wonderful?!

CE: Well, now though, it seems shorter to us to go down Sir Frances Drake Boulevard today. There was no way to get down to San Quentin that way, I presume, you had to ---

HD: Well, there was no way to get the train. You'd have to drive all the way to San Quentin.

CE: I see. All the way.

HD: From San Rafael you took the train.

CE: I see, you just took the train.

AK: Do you know something else about trains and your grandfather? Like so many people, when the train came through (in the early [18]70's, I guess it was) they said they needed the property and your grandfather said, "All right, you can have a piece of property, but you must stop the train here at the beginning of Fernhill, at the entrance to Fernhill." That's why the cattle guard is there and it's still there, I guess, I'm not sure, and the little fence. So the train would stop and Mr. Dibblee would get off and went up to Fernhill and his carriage would be waiting there.

HD: Those properties all reverted there when the trains turned over.

AK: Oh yes, think of that!

HD: But that was like the Hollister Ranches, when they put the Southern Pacific down there, their ranches were north of Santa Barbara. You know where Goleta is?

AK: Yes, surely.

HD: Well, north of that, Gaviota. The big main ranch started at Gaviota and went up the coast for about 15 miles. Southern Pacific ran right through it. And to put it through, the Hollisters insisted they should be able to flag down a train whenever necessary. And they would get out and flag down the fast train and it would infuriate the Southern Pacific, but they had to do it. And in the winter, that was the only way to get into Santa Barbara, because that was a clay road, and when it rained, they couldn't get anything through, so they'd go out and flag down the Southern Pacific.

AK: Oh, how wonderful. [break in the recording]

AK: Mrs. McGavin was such a wonderful help.

CE: Who was Mrs. McGavin? Was she a Marinite who has always lived over there?

HD: I should know and I don't. Wasn't she a Baker? She was a Baker and she married Rummy McGavin. And she did a great deal. She ran the rummage sales; she did all that kind of thing. She lived right next door to the Jenkins, whose place they called "Broadacres." I remember that. It was about fifty feet wide.

CE: How long has it been since you've been going over there? You said thirty years you've had this house, and before that ---

HD: I think, first time I know, I was there because there was a picture of me in an awful suit, in Bolinas, on the Fronetta porch, dated 1908. So I know I was there then. And at that time I remember they had the garden that went all the way down to the beach. Which, now, there is no garden at all and the house is propped up on piers.

CE: Well, now, you must have been a boy of about eight or nine?

HD: I was eight. I go right with the years.

CE: Is it within your memory to remember those hotels? The Flagstaff was it, that was on the water there?'

HD: No, that went in 1906.

CE: That was the end of that.

HD: I've seen pictures of it.

CE: But they never restored it, I see.

HD: There was Lamottos, I think was the name of it, and Bolinas Villa.

CE: Well, at that time were they still doing any lumber business out at Bolinas, or did all that disappear?

HD: No, there was still some hay and things of that kind coming out, and pigs as I mentioned, coming out of the Olema Valley, but that was all.

AK: Was Captain Petar, whatever they called him, was he the captain of the Owl?

HD: Yes, both of them. He owned and ran them.

CE: The Owl and its predecessor?

HD: The Jenny Griffin.

CE: The Jenny Griffin was strictly a schooner, she wasn't auxiliary motor driven ---

HD: Yes, she had some auxiliary too. The Owl had just one mast and practically the entire power. You hardly ever used the sails. The Jenny Griffin used the sails as well as the power.

CE: Did you ever make a trip on the Owl?

HD: No, I did on the Jenny Griffin.

CE: You did? You were a young boy then?

HD: Yes.

CE: I bet it was a big adventure wasn't it?

HD: Oh yes, it was very exciting.

CE: Would they avoid the potato patch or would they kind of go through it?

HD: They went right through it.

CE: Right through it.

HD: If you got sick, that's where you got sick.

CE: You know what the potato patch is?

AK: Yes. And now when they came to the city where did they land? I never did know that.

HD: I don't remember. I think it was not too far from the Ferry Building.

AK: Oh.

CE: Then that was a regular run, wasn't it? I mean a person could schedule that thing, plan.

HD: Twice a week.

CE: That ship would leave.

HD: Right.

AK: Maybe it could have been the old Meigg's Wharf. I've always read something about Meigg's Wharf. I don't know where that is.

HD: I don't remember.

CE: You know we can probably find that information out from the San Francisco Maritime Museum.

AK: Yes. Have you been there, the Maritime Place? It's very nice and very interesting.

HD: A long time ago.

AK: It's very interesting and one of the men who runs it lives right down here in the Woodlands. They have nice things there except they have to share their building with the senior citizens' meetings and things at the other end which I think is a little bit too bad, but they have some very good models and very good pictures. And downstairs, he says, they have quite a library, which we have not seen.

CE: Yes, and they're getting an Oral History Library as well.

HD: Well, the old days were exciting days. It must be extremely difficult because I know --at least I found out, my grandfather would send three copies of his letter on different ships because it was very important which got there first, you see, or if they got there at all. So they never sent just one copy of a letter, they sent three copies or two at least.

CE: Did your grandfather keep a journal when he was a young man, say, coming around the Horn?

HD: Well, no, but he had letters, which were very interesting.

CE: And these letters are at the San Francisco ---

HD: Yes, and he had letters from sea captains and it was amazing the number of ships that just disappeared. They wrote, "We haven't heard from Captain So-and-so since he left Tokyo," or something like that, "and that was six months ago, and he's presumed lost." And that kind of thing went on all the time.

CE: Would you hand me that little pamphlet, Mrs. Kent, about the reminiscences? There's a mention in there about his grandfather that I wanted to ask him if he ever heard. They talk about, here, that many of the trees and shrubs at Fernhill were sent from eastern nurseries. But the oriental varieties were brought to Mr. Dibblee by his great friend Admiral Shoefeldt.

HD: He was a relative.

CE: He was a relative. When he says Admiral, I presume it's Navy?

HD: Yes.

CE: Is this the Admiral Shoefeldt who is famous for having opened Korea and under General Grant was minister to that country?

HD: Well, I didn't know that, but I did know, as was mentioned in several of the letters, that these sea captains would bring him plants. Maybe the Admiral sent them by sea captains, something like that, I don't know.

CE: Could be. Well this Admiral evidently was a constant visitor to Fernhill and he and Mr. Dibblee used to sit on the front steps in late afternoon, early evening, and count the variety of trees planted in the grounds, which at that time totaled 168. [break in recording]

CE: Well this has certainly been an interesting afternoon, hasn't it, Mrs. Kent?

AK: Indeed it has.

CE: And we want to thank you so much, Mr. Harrison Dibblee, for coming over this afternoon and sharing with us the warm reminiscences of your remarkable family and we look forward to going to visit him, don't we, Mrs. Kent, and seeing your collections of old photographs.

AK: Very good.

CE: Thank you so much for coming.

HD: Thank you very much.

CE: This is Carla Ehat signing off for the interview today, January 13, 1975. This is another one of the interviews for the Library at Civic Center for their Oral History Program. Joining us today was Ann Thompson Kent, who has graciously offered her home for this interview. We thank again Mr. Harrison Dibblee for his time today. Mr. Dibblee (75 years old) resides at 40 Poplar Drive in Del Mesa, Ross, California.