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INTERVIEW WITH HELEN THOMPSON DREYFUS

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
February 20, 1979

INTERVIEWEE: Helen Thompson Dreyfus (HD)
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (C.E.) and Anne Kent (A.K.)
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 20, 1979
TRANSCRIBER: Marjorie Hoffman

CE: Today is Tuesday, February 20, 1979, and once again continuing the Oral History project of the California Room at the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat. Today we are going to have the pleasure of talking with Mrs. Benjamin Dreyfus. We are at the residence of Mrs. Thomas Kent at 131 Good Hill Road in Kentfield, California. It's a rainy day, but dear Helen Dreyfus braved the storm and came to see us and we are very grateful. It's a pleasure to have you here with us today, Mrs. Dreyfus.

HD: Thank you.

CE: Now you were a Thompson, which is a familiar name in San Francisco, certainly in the Bay Area, and your father was Frederick Thompson, one of six children of Josephine Moroney and James Alden Thompson.

HD: Right.

CE: Would you share with us today a little bit of the heritage of the Thompson family and what brought them to California, and that story?

HD: I love the story because my great-grandmother was a woman, Irish woman, named Kathleen O'Keefe who lived in Cork, Ireland, and her brothers made a match for her with an American sea captain, and she married him and he went right off to sea as soon as they were married in Ireland. But she came out to meet him in what was then known as the

Sandwich Islands in Hawaii, but by the time she got to Hawaii, he had vanished. His ship was presumably lost, and nobody ever knew what became of him. But she was - although young and a country Irish woman – apparently kind of a strong-minded girl. She wrote the Pope and asked that since the marriage had never been consummated, could she have a lesser period of time to presume death? Eventually, about a year later, you can imagine it took a long while, got a letter that allowed her to marry within three and a half years instead of seven. And she also wrote Lloyd's of London who said they had no record whatsoever as what had become of the ship, so she was fairly in the clear. And my grandfather, great-grandfather had been more or less, I think, sent to the Hawaiian Islands to get him out of the way because he was kind of wild. And he was - auctioned off the cargos of ships when they arrived in Honolulu. In those days, there weren't shops but the ships would come in, and he'd say here's yard goods or pots and pans or whatever, auctioned off. He was a very witty auctioneer and so forth. And finally he died, we were told, always been told that he died acting as a second in a duel, but we've always suspected that he was probably acting as a first. By that time they had two children, my grandfather and his sister, my Great Aunt Kitty. And my great-grandmother decided that there were altogether too many Protestants in the Hawaiian Islands. As you know, it was mostly settled by Methodist missionaries, and that that was no place to bring up children because they might marry Protestants! And so she took them off to Ireland. Imagine!

CE: She made that voyage?

HD: By way of China and Russia -

CE: Overland?

HD: By ship to China and then overland across Russia.

CE: What year would we be talking about?

HD: Well, this - we're talking about the middle of the last century, 1850, somewhere along in there. And got the family all home to Ireland and then didn't want to stay in Ireland and went back to Hawaii by ship with two little kids. And I believe it was on that trip that they were storm-strayed and the biscuits all had weevils in them and the children complained and their mother said, "Well, if you won't eat them with the candle, I'll blow the candle out, and you can eat them in the dark." Where you couldn't see the weevils. But then she didn't say in Hawaii, she came to San Francisco and ran a boarding house for many years, very successfully. She was a - really a very strong-minded woman. She did all her own shopping. She went down to the market every day with big baskets and sent the baskets home by Chinese boys to the boarding house. And I remember being told that she said to one boarder, "If you stir your coffee, Mr. Johnson, you don't have to put so much sugar in it."

CE: I love these strong hearted Irish ladies! Isn't that wonderful?

HD: I think that is just marvelous. My Aunt Kay had a lot of that, too. Kathleen. But then James Alden Thompson, the son, grew up and married Josephine Moroney, whose family came across the plains. They came across the plains and settled in Marysville. There were 13 children in that family; I don't think they were all born before they came

across the plains. They were supposed to have been in the same party that the Donner Party was in, but the Donner Party went off to the south and the party that the Thompson's were in came on through to Oregon and then down to Marysville. Another little story about my grandfather, which I've always loved, was that - of course, he was raised as a child in Hawaii - and later when he had two children of his own at least, he had taken my Aunt Kay and my Uncle Joe to the World's Fair, which must have been in about 1895, somewhere along in there. And at the World's Fair was a village of Hawaiians that somebody had imported, you know, one of those dreadful things. And the poor things - the person who had imported them had died, and nobody else spoke Hawaiian in the whole of San Francisco. And they were starving to death - they were helpless - because they didn't speak English. And my grandfather walking by with his two children said, whatever, a few kindly words in Hawaiian, and they all burst into tears and came and flung their arms around him and he became the patron of that little Hawaiian village for the rest of the Fair because he spoke Hawaiian.

CE: Certainly.

HD: Which wasn't a very and isn't to this day a very common....

CE: Was this the mid-winter fair, do you think?

HD: Well, it - my aunt was born in 1880 and I picture her as a child of about twelve, but I don't know just exactly how old.

CE: Where was the family home at that time, your grandparents?

HD: At that time the - my grandfather and grandmother built the house in Mill Valley which was known as Treehaven and is still there, what is now 123 Molino Avenue and they raised their children there.

CE: Although he came to San Francisco, his mother, and had the boarding house and they were raised there, it wasn't long before they relocated?

HD: No, after they were married they relocated.

CE: Relocated after they were married?

HD: Yes - well I think quite a bit after probably because my aunt was then eleven by the time they built that house. So they had their family all started by then. I don't know where they had lived in San Francisco.

CE: Well is a great deal of the early San Francisco period covered in your Aunt Kathleen Thompson Norris' book Family Gathering?

HD: Some of it is.

CE: Some of that in there?

HD: But nothing about where they lived - I don't know - I haven't read it for years.

CE: It's kind of fun to find those things out.

HD: Yes.

CE: Did any of them keep a journal? Did your great-grandfather or your great-grandmother - -

HD: My grandmother did.

CE: She did?

HD: Yes, and the youngest uncle, Jimmy Thompson, wrote a book later called Scenes of my Childhood, which he used her journal considerably as his data bank but that is certainly out of date.

CE: Is that book a private printing for the family only, do you know?

HD: No, it was published by somebody or other -

CE: It was published?

HD: Yes - the Mill Valley History Room has a copy of it.

CE: Would they have a copy of Family Gathering as well?

HD: I don't think they've got a hard cover copy, I think they have a paperback.

CE: Well, a paperback.

HD: That hasn't got the genealogy in it 'cause I just looked at that now to see if the genealogy was there.

CE: Oh it doesn't -

HD: There was one in the front of the hard cover book.

CE: There was a period in San Francisco, I know, when certain families would have private printings, maybe two hundred copies, of the story of their family and I'm referring to Mr. Leveson's journal and the Gerstle family and several private printings and I was wondering if that had taken place.

HD: No, we were never quite in that lofty a financial position, I don't think.

CE: Well, tell me, Helen - your grandfather came over here in 1890-what was it, did you tell me?

HD: Well, he came to Marin County, Mill Valley in 1891.

CE: 1891 - and he built this home?

HD: Yes. And that was the original lot sale in Mill Valley was in 1890 and they bought property at that time and then built and moved their family over.

CE: Did you ever hear your family talk about the Cushings?

HD: Yes - and I did an interview with Mrs. Jenkins - you've got her -

CE: Yes, yes, we do. And she's a wonderful, wonderful woman. All right now Josephine and James Thompson started to - any of the children born in Mill Valley or were they all born in the city?

HD: I don't think so; I think they probably were all born in the city.

CD: Now would you give us their names in chronological order if you can?

HD: Joseph Sexton Thompson was the oldest. He was named after his father, obviously, and then Kathleen Thompson, Teresa Thompson, and Frederick Thompson (my father), and then Margaret Thompson and James.

CE: What was your grandfather's occupation?

HD: He was in the Bank of California.

CE: Bank of California. All his life?

HD: Yes. He didn't last terribly long. I don't think he lived to see the new century. He and my grandmother both died within a month of each other in about 1898. They always said he died of a broken heart, and I wouldn't be surprised.

CE: Who broke his heart?

HD: His wife's death. She died at Thanksgiving, and he died at Christmas. It really ruined those holidays for the family for the rest of their lives. So they left six kids, the oldest about nineteen.

CE: Joseph was nineteen?

HD: Yes.

CE: When his father died and the mother - Kathleen, how much younger was she than Joseph?

HD: They all were about a year and a half apart - quite a real good Irish Catholic family. Six kids and the little spinster sister, Joe Thompson's - my grandfather's - sister Kitty Thompson, who never married. And so she kind of was the chaperone for the family. They moved to the city.

CE: Oh, they moved to the city?

HD: The kids all did because they all had to get jobs in the city. My father, I know, got a job as a night watchman in a warehouse, and he used to - his shoes had such big holes in them that he used to take lots and lots of cardboard and cut out soles that he kept fitting into them to keep his feet dry.

CE: Was there a so-called Thompson family home in the city that you could -

HD: Apparently not, no.

CE: Your father, at the time of this relocation, was quite a young man then, wasn't he? He was possibly twelve?

HD: Yes - or thirteen, fourteen, along in there.

CE: What was their schooling? As best they could do?

HD: They went to a school in - in the little school in Mill Valley. I know that the - what's the name of the people who had the ferryboat house up on the hill? I've forgotten. Anyway, there were six children in the Thompson family, or four of school age, and they had to wait until there were nine children of school age in Mill Valley before there could be a school. So the Coffin family finally moved in with four children or something and that jumped them over the mark. And there was a little tiny school down just off Throckmorton Avenue and then not long after that the school up on Summit Avenue was built, which was the Summit Avenue School.

CE: Well, did the family, after this double tragedy of losing the parents, did the children individually go off on their own?

HD: No, they stuck together, in an apartment somewhere in San Francisco -

CE: And there was a great family loyalty and support?

HD: Very strong family loyalty, yes. Everything centered around that family. But the result of the whole thing was that none of them had a higher education. Joe was already working, I guess, at the time his father died. My father never went through fifth grade, and none of the family ever got out of grammar school or much beyond it. But it was one of those families that does a lot of reading. There was a lot of sitting around the fire at night, reading aloud and discussing things, memorizing poetry. So they all were regarded as educated people, where none of them were in the normal sense.

AK: That's really [inaudible]

HD: Dad was the authority on Shakespeare at the Bohemian Club, and I don't think most of them knew he never went through fifth grade.

CE: Well, let's follow each of these children a little bit into their adult life. Joe, I happen to have known personally, of his many involvements and his contribution and that's more or less public record. Kathleen of course - tell us a little bit about when she started to write. Did you ever hear the story, was writing a part of her life always?

HD: Yes, I think it was. First thing she ever wrote was a book called Mother and she --

CE: She was just seventeen or so when her mother died?

HD: Yes - and a few years later she wrote this book, and she sent it to a number of publishing houses or publications and was turned down by all of them. And I'm quite sure, although I don't think I've ever specifically heard this, that my Uncle C.G., Charles

G. Norris, whom she later married, Frank Norris' brother, was a dynamo, and I'm sure that he took her over - -

CE: Took charge there --

HD: Because once she married him, she never had any trouble selling any of her books, and she wrote something like sixty. And he did all the dealing for her and made sure that it got the right kind of advertising. Mr. Bigelow of Good Housekeeping magazine told me once that her name on the cover of Good Housekeeping magazine would sell 50,000 of his magazines.

CE: A story in there - extraordinary!

HD: Yes.

CE: What was she like as a person? Lots of fun?

HD: She was so different from her books. I don't know if you've ever read any of her books.

CE: Oh yes.

HD: They're very straight books, nice decent girls that almost go wrong and then just.... She was extremely witty, and she could be very, very sharp and very, very critical, always in a devastatingly funny way. She was the kind of person that Noel Coward loved to be with, because they just sparked each other on. Terribly funny. It's hard to recreate that kind of humor.

CE: Would you describe her physique?

HD: She was a big woman with a big Roman nose and thick curly dark hair. As she got older she got better looking. As a girl she was homely. Really, she had this big nose and big bust and very slender hands and feet. And her father, this was in the book, but I'll tell it. Her father said that she was complaining once about being homely. Everybody else was prettier and he said, "Katie, the prettiest girl in the room has only got a twenty minute lead on you." And that was really true. By the end of twenty minutes, the prettiest girl in the room nobody would be listening to, and everybody would be talking to Aunt Kay. But as she got older, that all came into focus, sort of. It's all right for a woman of fifty to have a large bust and a large Roman nose. It just isn't very pretty on a seventeen year old. But she was a striking woman, bright blue eyes, and she had that Irish realism among other things. One of her sayings was, "People say I shouldn't speak ill of the dead." She said, "Keep peace with the living; speak ill of the dead." It's very useful sometimes.

CE: When you think of women today who are so interested in finding out what makes them tick, how they're going to fit in the strata of this new society and be sure they get recognized and find out who they are. It would be amusing, I imagine, if Kathleen Thompson Norris were to be alive today and - -

HD: She'd have little use for this kind of thing. "Get in and do it," and she loved cooking for a big group.

CE: Did she really?

HD: Yes, When C.G. married her, he said, "Well now, Kathleen. I love you dearly, and we're going to be married, but I don't want to marry your goddam family." The poor man, he never got out from under that family to his dying day.

CE: Sunday dinners and the whole - -

HD: Oh Sunday - they had a place in Saratoga for the whole family, went every summer, for the whole summer. There were fifteen or twenty nieces and nephews around all summer long.

CE: Sounds like the Kent compound -

HE: Brothers and sisters and brothers' wives, and he ran the whole family, too, lending money to this one and making a contact for that one. He was a remarkable man, Charles Norris. But she -

CE: Was she married to him at an early age or did they - -

HD: Yes, quite early - She was writing society notes for one of the San Francisco papers when she met him, I think, and she met him as a reporter at a party where he was a guest. He was at a much higher social level. He was entranced by her from the moment he saw her, and wore her down.

CE: Well, dynamic women are never out of style.

HD: No - It would never have occurred to her to wonder who she was or what her place in life was.

CE: Well, Mrs. Kent and I are continually surprised - Although I should say I'm more surprised than Mrs. Kent, but we've been going around interviewing families, very quietly the wives will come out when it's their turn perhaps to be interviewed and tell us about things they've done, why it's, you know, without any braggadocio at all. And what their mothers have done and we have come to the conclusion that women have always done remarkable things, they just didn't talk about it as much, they just did it.

HD: They just did it and didn't think they were so remarkable either. I mean, I don't think that Katie O'Keefe Thompson thought it was terribly astonishing that she crossed the Pacific a couple of times, crossed Russia in the middle [18]80's. I mean, she didn't go around boasting about it at all, you know. That was just what she did to get the kids home to Ireland. Do you know they used to send their laundry to China in those days from the Hawaiian Islands? Imagine how much laundry you'd have to have to be able to do that. Because it would be three months, I'm sure, that you'd have to have - -

CE: There are many interesting books written about the Sandwich Islands and one of them concerns Mrs. Kent, Roger's wife, the Cook Family. You probably read some of them. By Land and By Sea.

HD: Oh, yes.

CE: And that always startled me, this laundry business.

HD: Yes.

CE: But it was the cheaper way to go and effective way to do it. But do you know if your timing of that Trans-Siberian and Russian journey is correct, that must have been before the railroad.

HD: It couldn't have been -

CE: Well, then it must have been in the [18]60's -

HD: Must have been in the [18]60's.

CE: Just wanted to get that straight because railroads didn't come into being until the '60's.

HD: No - they certainly didn't do it in a droshky!

CE: So Kathleen then married Mr. Norris. Was he a local man? Was he a Californian, do you know?

HD: Yes. Yes. And they went to New York, and he worked for, I think, Scribner's for a number of years and possibly she did, too. But I really never knew him until the last summer of World War I when they had a - again they had a great big place in Mount Holly, New Jersey. Charles Norris was at Fort Dix, and they took this big old marvelous Victorian house out in the country near Mount Holly and invited all the family, of course. So Fred and his wife and his two kids came, and Teresa and her husband and her three kids came and Markie and her husband and two kids came, and there were about four maids of all types of race: one black, one Irish, one German, and it was just a marvelous summer. This great big house and a big barn but full of relatives and children and poor Uncle C.G. My father used to tease Uncle C.G. by calling him Charlie, so I'd always heard him referred to as Uncle Charlie. When I first got out of the car, and I said, "Hello Uncle Charlie," he said, "Goddammit! Don't call me Charlie!"

CE: Well, after their marriage did they spend most of their time, though, in San Francisco, would you say?

HD: No, I think they moved to New York for a few years.

CE: New York -

HD: New York and then Port Washington -

CE: Was that where her publisher was?

HD: Yes -

CE: Was Scribner her –

HD: Doubleday was.

CE: Doubleday was her -

HD: Doubleday then and then I think, later, Fair and Rhinehardt [?]. But they lived in Port Washington. She had another baby that died. They adopted an older boy who was the son of - oh, I don't know, the maid or somebody who lived with them most of their lives. And her sister Teresa moved out to Port Washington with her family, too. There was another family scene.

CE: But Kathleen Norris had no living children?

HD: She has one.

CE: One.

HD: She had a son, who is four or five years younger than I am.

CE: Is he still alive?

HD: Yes, he's Dr. Frank Norris in San Francisco.

CE: Frank Norris. I suppose he has a complete library of his mother's works -

HD: Oh, I imagine he has. He gave a box full of the paperbacks to the Mill Valley Library so I imagine he has duplicates of all of them plus all the hard covers.

CE: Kathleen lived to be what age would you say? Eighty?

HD: Pretty close to ninety.

CE: Was she living in New York when she died?

HD: No - they moved out to - first they moved out in the summers to Saratoga, and then they built a house when their son got up to be college age and he was going to Stanford. They built a big house in Palo Alto that Clare Boothe Luce later bought. A very nice house. Then after my uncle died, she moved to San Francisco.

CE: Uncle Charlie are we talking about? He predeceased her?

HD: Yes, by seven years.

CE: And she moved where?

HD: She moved then to San Francisco to the house up on Twin Peaks and lived there for a few years and then was beginning to get pretty old and went into St. Mary's Hospital and finally moved to her son's house out on Pacific Avenue and died there.

CE: As you grew up over the years, whenever she came, did you have in your judgment a fairly close relationship with your aunt?

HD: Yes. She was a very easy grownup to be close to because she liked kids and she was funny, and she didn't make a lot of rules. She just --

CE: Took you as you were -

HD: Went along the way I'm painted [?] because it was so much more fun to go that way. She didn't have to make rules.

CE: Well, she had quite a few nieces and nephews by this time.

HD: There were fourteen, I think.

CE: Fourteen - and she shared with you all?

HD: Everybody.

CE: Was she interested in the pursuits of you children as such - to a degree?

HD: Mildly - not of us had very interesting pursuits.

CE: But she didn't set certain standards that she hoped --

HD: No, she just hoped we would do well. But she herself had a great many pursuits. She spoke up and down the nation for the Volstead Act, for the ratification of the Prohibition Amendment. She was an ardent platform speaker for peace and spoke for peace organizations anywhere. The interesting thing about her relation with the Prohibition Amendment was that she was all out for Prohibition. She had seen one of her uncles become an alcoholic. All the while she was out for Prohibition and all during Prohibition when she was strongly for it, my uncle was a dedicated drinker. He was a gentlemanly drinker, but he'd never thought of having a dinner without having liquor. Aunt Kay would sit there with all of us drinking, not, I suppose, the little children, but with her husband drinking, and wine and a lot of conversation and cocktails. Then she'd go off and make a speech about the Volstead Act. And neither of them ever suggested to each other that one or the other should stop whatever it was they were doing.

CE: Well, before we go on to the other members of the Thompson family, is there anything else you'd like to share with us further about Kathleen?

HD: Well, I'll tell you a kind of a funny little story. She spoke at a Community Chest luncheon in San Francisco one time and invited all of the cousins to come and hear her. We had a table, and it was a luncheon and it was very pleasant. And she was an unrealistic woman in some ways, and she said thanks to the Community Chest, she said, there was really no poverty left in America anymore. She said, "Even destitution in America isn't as bad as it is in some places." And one of my bright, darling cousins was sitting right across the table from me, Teresa's oldest child. I said, "I thought destitution was a word like zero," and my cousin Rosie took a pencil and paper and started writing right away. A minute later, she handed across the table a poem that said, "There is

poverty in London. There is poverty in Rome, but we have democratic destitution here at home. There is misery in South Hampton and they make no retribution. But we are happy, proud and gay. We raise our banners high and say, 'We're happy in the American way with American destitution.'

CE: Oh, I love that -

HD: And she did that in a minute. And another thing about Aunt Kay, speaking of writing poetry in a minute, she developed a habit of going to Tiffany's or to that silver store in San Francisco,

CE: Shreve's?

HD: Shreve's, yes. And ordering a very pretty silver bowl and then standing there at the counter and saying, "Let's see. That child's name is Richard," and writing charming poems that were then engraved around that silver bowl. And everybody who has those silver bowls just treasures them. At one time I tried to collect all of them to make a present to her, just to - . I couldn't get them all. There were just too many.

CE: What a thought.

HD: But they were delightful bowls.

CE: An imaginative thing for her to do.

HD: And each one was tailored to the child. She said to Markie Thompson, to this daughter on her bowl, she said, "Well mannered children and sedate, may eat from off a china plate, but for a child as wild as you, this useful silver bowl must do."

CE: Well, Helen, let's continue with the Thompson family. The next one is -

HD: Teresa. And Teresa was a wonderful woman. Among other things, she had total recall. She could remember pretty near anything she'd ever read - exactly. But she also wanted to become a nun, and she became a Little Sister of the Poor when she got along to be I suppose about 23 or 4, (I don't know exactly when) and she became very sick and had to leave the Little Sisters of the Poor, and then she decided she would become a Carmelite in London. And she went off to London to become a Carmelite Nun and she - she really was an extremely devout young woman, but life with the Carmelites was too much. For instance, she said one day to one of the superior nuns how much she liked the nice big, black buns that they got for lunch and they never had them again, because you're not supposed to like buns. You should spend your time liking Jesus but not buns. And she said at one time there was a little weed growing in the courtyard where they exercised and the girls all loved that little weed, but none of them ever mentioned that - that they loved that little weed because they knew it would be torn up. They'd admire it as they went by it and there it's getting bigger. Well, finally this became too difficult and my Aunt Teresa in her novice's habit went to the Mother Superior and said that she didn't feel that she had a true vocation and she wanted to leave and the Mother Superior said, "Very well, Sister. If you want to leave, you may leave now."

CE: Right now?

HD: "Right now. This minute. If you don't want to leave now, you will stay, but if you want to leave, leave now." And Aunt Teresa in her novice's habit got up and walked out of the room and into the streets of London.

CE: What courage.

HD: Yes, what courage.

AK: This is Teresa?

CE: Yes, this is Teresa, Mrs. Kent, yes.

HD: And without a penny to her name or anything but - of course I won't say that she wasn't quite as brave as I said because she did know that the family knew a family that lived in London.

CE: She had a contact.

HD: She had but she didn't know where they lived or where she was.

CE: And she probably had no money.

HD: And she had no money. She found the family. The family was all away, but the housekeeper of the family wired my Aunt Kay, just said, cabled her, said, "Teresa Out".

CE: Two words. Succinct.

HD: One of the things that the Carmelites - My Aunt Kay had rather large handwriting, and she wrote pages of letters to her sister and they would only let her have one page, all the rest of the pages were thrown away. So she reduced her handwriting to a perfectly beautiful little copperplate handwriting. If you've ever seen her handwriting, it's beautiful, but it's tiny, so she could get pages onto one page. Carmelites don't put Thompson's down very easily.

CE: All right, how did she get from London then back home?

HD: I don't remember the details.

CE: Did she work in London or did she -

HD: I don't think so. I think this was a well-to-do family in London and they probably shipped her home.

CE: Shipped her home -

HD: Yes. It was another big Irish family that I don't know how they knew.

CE: They're like unofficial consuls all over the world.

AK: That's right.

CE: All right, you mentioned earlier she -

HD: She came home, and she worked at Paul Elder's.

CE: Oh, she did - She was fascinated being around books.

HD: Yes.

CE: As a matter of curiosity, did she ever assist your Aunt Kathleen as an amanuensis or anything?

HD: I don't believe so. No, I don't think Aunt Kay needed that kind of assistance. Her writing just flowed. One of the editors of Good Housekeeping magazine told me once he had been sitting in her room while she was typing, working. He was talking to my uncle, and she was writing and one of the children came in and said to Aunt Kay that nobody could find a swimming suit for somebody or something and she got up and went right out of the room. And while she was out of the room, the editor of the Good Housekeeping, whose name I now forget, went over and looked at her typewriter. She had started a word that began with "wh," and when she came back in the room, she just sat right down and finished it and went on. She didn't look a bit and, "What have I been saying?" She knew that she had "which" started and she just went on and finished it.

CE: But she used the typewriter, that was her way -

HD: Yes, by the time I knew her she did. She may have started by hand. I guess she probably did.

CE: I know we said we were going to move on to Teresa but for just a moment, did she have any schedule that you knew as a youngster growing up, was she a morning writer or stand up writer or a - ?

HD: She was a morning writer -

CE: Morning person -

HD: But she - the whole life of the household went on and in and out -

CE: She didn't have to be secluded in the privacy of a study and the certain -

HD: No, everybody - the kittens were born, and the kids brought them in, and children brought their fights in, and she settled them. Uncle C.G., on the other hand, was a "Don't bother me!" writer and he went up to a special cabin about a quarter of a mile away and worked terribly hard all morning. And he worked just nine to twelve. But she worked only in the mornings as far as I can ever remember, but she did a lot of other things, too while she was working. Nobody ever thought that they shouldn't bother Aunt Kay.

CE: All right. We have Teresa, now, at Paul Elder's.

HD: Which is where I believe she met William Rose Benet and that was another romance. But they were not married very long. She died. Goodness, yes. She was not a

child when she met him. She died in the flu year 1918-19, leaving three children and a widower.

CE: Are any of the children in this area?

HD: They - two of them are. Her oldest boy is James Benet, whom you may have seen on News Room. He was sort of the education specialist on News Room, when there was still a News Room. And her daughter Rosemary, who married a young man named Dawson many years ago, and she lives in San Francisco. Those two both live in San Francisco. The youngest daughter died of a cerebral hemorrhage about ten years ago.

CE: But their marriage was short because of her early demise?

HD: Yes - they were married about six years, I think.

CE: Another woman of courage.

HD: Yes.

CE: Well, now we come to your father, their brother, Frederick. Where was Frederick raised? In Mill Valley?

HD: Frederick was the businessman of the family. Yes, he was raised in Mill Valley until the parents died, and then they went to the city. But he was - the earliest story I really know about him was that his father came home from the city once and passing the cigar store, which was in front of the pool hall, he stopped to buy a cigar and looked over the counter and saw his eleven year old son playing pool. He said, "Freddie, where do you get the money to play pool?" And Fred said, "Well, the thing is Dad, I play for the house." He was so good by that time. And he went on playing pool and billiards and poker and supported the family sometimes - -

CE: Enterprising young man -

HD: Yes. And - not his family but mine - when we were children. There were times when it was kind of slow going and Dad would -

CE: Can't you see today when you're submitting your resume to, say, the Bank of California and you say, "Where were you educated and what did you do?" and to see - "Well, my goodness, he hasn't gone very far in school - in a pool hall!" Isn't it strange, we're so impressed today with the education first -

HD: And yet, the really successful don't always have it.

CE: Well, look at the experience, what he learned, in that environment about men, about human nature. About the risks.

HD: Yes, that's right. And so he became a very successful salesman, and a very successful businessman in his later years, and I'm sure that it was partly because, as you say, of the very down-to-earth experience as a small boy. But that was one of the reasons he quit school, because he was playing pool.

CE: Enterprising.

HD: Yes.

CE: When did he meet your mother and what was her name?

HD: Her name was Helen Meigs, and he met her brother first. They both lived in a boarding house in San Francisco, and then Mother lived in Santa Barbara. He came to visit, and they fell in love and married. That was slightly romantic because he - -

CE: Well, let's hear it.

HD: They were attracted to each other. I guess possibly engaged when he went to El Paso and came down with diphtheria and Mother went out to nurse him in a convent or a religious institution of some kind, and then her mother went out and then they got married. They were married in the hospital there. And that lasted quite a while. And I have a younger brother named David Thompson.

CE: Two children?

HD: Yes. Two children. Mother and Dad lived in Mill Valley most of their married life. There were a few times out for Dad's business affairs.

CE: How did your mother fit into this large Thompson milieu -

HD: She fit in very well. The in-laws all fit in very well. Aunt Kay was a great one for gathering people in. She could say savage things about people, behind their backs or to their faces, but it didn't destroy the relationships somehow. We all would say terrible things about each other.

CE: But that's family - -

HD: That's the way it is - we're level.

CE: There's a richness in that. I wonder if it's disappearing.

HD: I don't think in close families.

CE: Not in close families.

HD: Of course, the families aren't as big anymore.

CE: That's true. That's true.

HD: That was a family of six grownups, and they all had children, and so there aren't many families that have six kids anymore. But those that do are very close. I know one family with six children, and they're in and out of each others' lives a great deal.

CE: Are there any distinct philosophies among the men in the Thompson family that are similar? For example, between Joe and Frederick (your father) and James.

HD: No, they were all very different. Joe was a happy, inventor kind. He told me he never invented anything, but he put things together in ways they hadn't been put. But the result was he had many patents and was very successful but he was no businessman and my father was a very good businessman. And Jimmy shouldn't have been in business at all. He was totally lost in business and didn't like it. He should have been, I don't know what, maybe a writer. He tried all his life to write.

CE: Well, before we get to James, let's go to your father's - move along here to Margaret, another daughter.

HD: Margaret, we always called Markie. And she married into the Navy. She married a young man named Hartigan who wound up as an Admiral in the Navy, and she had two children. And lived in Peking in a compound with something like fifty servants at one time. They had chit boys, a hired person who only carried your messages around. And she always traveled with several cats and several dogs. She was a great beauty.

CE: All of the children must have been intrigued with her.

HD: Yes, she was a great beauty and she was also a darling and funny woman. But not only were the children intrigued with her, practically every man she ever met was intrigued with her, because she was just so darling and lovely and pretty and funny. Then they lived for several years in Rio. He would be sent places with the Navy, and so that her daughter still has a slight Portuguese accent.

CE: From the years in -

HD: Yes. You know, that sort of international accent that some people have. It isn't quite an accent, but it's just almost - Bunga would use expressions that were really Portuguese in flavor many, many years.

CE: It sounds like he possibly had Naval attaché duty, did he?

HD: Yes, he was a Naval attaché in Peking and, I guess, in Rio and then he later had the Relief, the Hospital Ship Relief.

CE: He did?

HD: I remember going to a nice party he gave on that once, and my great aunt, my grandmother's sister, Mary Moroney, (who was an odd one, too), she said, "Now this is the sort of place I'd like to live." We were on the Relief out in the middle of San Francisco Bay. "Flags and bunting," she'd say. Really, who wouldn't, you know? She was one of the family characters, and I know nobody ever talked about her. She was a fine concert pianist and an absolute fat head.

CE: Her name was Mary Moroney?

HD: Her name was Mary Moroney, and she later married a man named Thompson. But, for instance, Chaliapin admired her playing, so he asked her to accompany him while he practiced. And she did for a month, and then she sent him a bill for "coaching." Chaliapin crossed out "coaching" and wrote, "accompanying" and sent her her check.

And she crossed out "accompanying" and wrote in "coaching" and sent him back his check, and that was the last she ever heard of Chaliapin. Can you imagine being such a fool? But then she was the one that thought she'd like to live in sunshine, flags, and bunting.

CE: On a boat -

HD: Well, she didn't say on a boat, she just wanted the atmosphere. My Aunt Kay was driving her down from the Fairmont one day and went into a frightful skid and skidded about half a block sideways. My Aunt Mary said, "Kathleen, what is skidding?" She thought she might - would like to find out what skidding was - this might be it. But far from screaming - "Kathleen what is skidding?"

CE: How long did Margaret and her husband Hartigan live?

HD: Admiral Hartigan died some years ago, fifteen years or so, and Margaret only died a couple of years ago. She was one of the younger ones. She died in an absolutely entrancing little tiny house in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., that had at one time been part of the Thomas Jefferson estate, and she had restored it into sort of a mint condition. And she did that; she must have restored at least six houses in Georgetown. She was one of the very first middle class families to move out to Georgetown way back at the time of World War I, when it was mostly darling old brick houses that were gone down to the working class and black population. And she, being an ingenious, young, impoverished Navy wife, bought one of these old houses, which was called the Gun Barrel House because the front fence was made of Civil War gun barrels and just made it into a showplace, and then people began buying and doing that to other houses in Georgetown. But she was one of the first.

CE: She was in the vanguard then?

HD: She was way in the vanguard. And I remember her saying that, walking to church one terrible snowy morning, she had to walk past a group of men that were standing on the corner, all very rough-looking, working class men. And she kind of nerved herself to go past them. And as she went past them, she heard one of them say, "I was up walking that little kid the whole night long." Nothing to be afraid of in this group of men. Never was afraid of her neighbors again.

CE: Going back to your father a moment. What year did he die?

HD: Oh dear, he died about eleven years ago, [19]68 something like that.

CE: He was how old?

HD: He was about eighty.

CE: Well, Helen, we've taken care of most of the Thompson children except James. He was the baby.

HD: Yes, he was the baby, and therefore he was the one who was closest to our age and we all just adored him because he was terribly, terribly funny. He was just a darlingly

funny man. Just as an example, one morning at the grove, at the Saratoga Ranch, there was a lovely redwood grove, and we had breakfast there in the mornings. There were big tables and a beautiful range. I mean outdoor barbecue and things and Aunt Kay said, "My, it's a lovely hot Sunday. What can we do that would be exciting for the kids today?" and Uncle Jimmy said, "Put an alligator in the pool." That was the kind of funny that he was, and we adored it.

CE: Tell us a little bit about the Saratoga place.

HD: It was a - we considered it heaven on earth. It was an old prune ranch, so that there were still a good many prune trees. And the Norris' took over the house, and then they built cottages all around.

CE: For the overflow?

HD: For the overflow.

CE: Did it have a name?

HD: Yes, it was called, La Estancia, The Place, The Ranch Place.

CE: La Estancia.

HD: And it had a gigantic croquet lawn with lights and with one of the first remote control music situations I've ever heard. You could play the records from the redwood trees at the foot of the lawn. And a pool, it had a tennis court. It had this grove where we ate, and eventually practically every family had their own cabin. There would be Markie's cabin and Frank's cabin and the boys' cabin.

CE: Were there certain rules, like you must be in at a certain time for dinner or -

HD: Uncle C.G. made rules, yes. "You must be in for breakfast at eight o'clock in the morning." And in order to insure that, he would put extraordinarily loud band music or something on the phonograph and blast it over the entire area.

CE: Sounds like camp for children -

HD: Yes. One morning I woke up to a frightful noise. He had gotten somewhere a crowd record of an angry mob, and it sounded as if the cavalry were on our very heels.

CE: Well, that was one of the rules. Everybody -

HD: On time for meals, that was absolute, and that was about the only real rule I should say that we had.

CE: Well, may I ask you in all frankness, was it up to your aunt and your uncle to feed you all or did you have some individual responsibility to contribute to the mess? (When I say "mess," I'm using the Navy term.)

HD: Yes, that's right. When we were up at the grove, and we ate a great many meals there as years went by, we all worked at it. We either did dishes, or we chopped lettuce or whatever, but they supported the whole thing.

CE: Did they have a staff to -

HD: Oh yes. They had a cook and a butler and a good many gardeners and a couple of maids - all kinds of staff. But my Uncle C.G. was an organizer. I can still see him in the hot, hot sunshine counting the laundry on Monday before it was sent out - 642 napkins or whatever. The laundry room was a giant room. It was a wonderful place - the whole family.

CE: Was there horseback riding there?

HD: There were no horses. There were some donkeys, but nobody paid much attention. But the great thing about it was that everybody played. Everybody did everything. If we played sardines at night, everybody played sardines at night, hid in the dark, and - from the little kids to the old. And if we were doing charades, everybody was doing charades, so that there was never any feeling that there was an age gap at all in that family.

CE: There was no generation gap.

HD: None, none. It wouldn't have occurred to any of us that Aunt Kay or the baby weren't just as useful in a charades game.

CE: Would your Aunt Kathleen do writing then, or by that time had she sort of - oh, she published to the end, didn't she?

HD: Oh, she published - yes, very close to the end, I think the last year or two she - Oh, she wrote right along. It was as easy as talking to her.

CE: Well, I understand the Saratoga place, La Estancia, was for the family, but would she often use it for entertaining other people?

HD: There was always other people there.

CE: But the family were never excluded?

HD: No, no. The other people were just extra. But there were all kinds of other people there. Alexander Woollcott and Harpo Marx and Frances Parkinson Keyes.

CE: Good Heavens.

HD: Since I don't think this is going to get wide publicity, I'll tell you that we all disliked Frances Parkinson Keyes extremely.

CE: Why?

HD: Well, she was very arrogant. She had a son who was foolish and he was like 22, and she treated him like a five year old, and we didn't like it. So that we kept calling her Mrs. Keyes, and she'd say, "No, no dear; eyes with a K, eyes with a K." I can still see the day

she left, all of us standing on the porch saying, "Goodbye, Mrs. Keys" at the top of our lungs.

CE: Naughty!

HD: But there were endless guests. People like Templeton Crocker and Charles Caldwell Dobie. Oh, I couldn't remember them all. But never just for the guests. One funny thing happened once. When the men went to the Bohemian Club, their remaining ladies would all go down to the ranch with the family ladies of whom there about seven or eight and they would continue to dress nicely for dinner and sit around and play bridge after dinner and three or four of them were very pretty. One summer they were all down there on their grove weekend and two women's car - were driving by and their car broke down at the foot of the road and they could see the lights up the hill and hear the music so they came up to ask for help and indeed, they received it. They phoned the garage, and the garage man couldn't come till tomorrow and apparently here they were in a house, a very handsome house, with eight women in evening clothes all sitting around apparently without men, waiting for something. These women apparently assumed that they were in a rather fancy house of ill repute and they became more and more nervous and sort of clasping their things, I'm sure, and there was nothing for it but they should spend the night. There was no place else for them to go. So they went nervously down to a little cottage set off from everything else. And then the next - see they arrived at nine o'clock at night, or something like that, and the kids were all in bed. The next morning they got up, they were told that breakfast was at eight, they got up and here were all these women in Chinese pajamas with masses of little children around, and it wasn't at all what they thought. And they said it was really funny to see them relax and suddenly - "Well, now that's a dear little boy, isn't he?" And the feeling that they'd spent this terrified night, thinking that any minute a whole lot of drunken men were going to arrive. Too funny.

CE: It seems that material for stories sort of followed your Aunt Kathleen and the family. It was such an exciting -

HD: It was a lot of fun -

CE: A fun family.

HD: But she - her stories were all made up in her head. There were quite a few such situations in our family life, but anything was grist that came to her - anybody -

CE: Well, getting back to James just a moment, you told me earlier before we started the interview that he had written a book Scenes of my Childhood I believe was the name. Is that his reminiscences of the whole family?

HD: Just when they were little children in Treehaven.

CE: In Treehaven, now tell me about Treehaven again. That was the home that your grandparents built?

HD: That they built in Mill Valley in 1891.

CE: And was that kept then even though the children were raised after their parents' demise in the city? They kept Treehaven?

HD: Yes, they kept it and then, I believe, they sold it at one time and then they must have bought it back. They sold it for something like \$2,100 when they were - just after their father died and they had no money. And then they must have bought it back, because later my Uncle Joe lived there with his wife and child and then my Uncle Jimmy lived there for a number of years. But I just ran across a reference the other day to the fact that they had sold it for \$2,300 [sic].

CE: And it's in the family now?

HD: No, now it's not. Jimmy Thompson finally sold it to some people named Theiss, who live there now.

CE: What occupies James Thompson's life?

HD: He worked all his working life for his older brother Joseph, who had a thing called the Federal Electrical - Pacific Electrical Manufacturing Company - switch gear, and as I say, he was the treasurer. But he no more belonged in that business since setting ...

CE: Well, he's the boy who aspired to write, didn't you say?

HD: Yes, and he wrote a book with great pains about Count Rumford, who was a sort of a peripheral relative somewhere. He should have written really, Jimmy, but he didn't get started at it young enough, and he married quite young. The family married him off, sort of, because he was down in Panama and having a lovely time. I don't know what he was doing, (he was working). They decided that he should marry and married him off to a kind of driving Irish Catholic girl named Margaret Carrigan of the Dunham Carrigan and Hayden family, and they had three beautiful daughters and had a perfectly happy life, but he had to support the family and I guess that was all he could do. Are we through?

CE: Well, Helen, I certainly want to thank you for sharing with us today your reminiscences of the James Sexton Thompson family. As President of the Mill Valley Historical Society, they are indeed fortunate to have you. With your rich heritage of Mill Valley in the vanguard there, and I know it's been a great source of interest to you. I hope sometime we can meet again and go into greater detail about anything relative to Mill Valley but we don't want to usurp the efforts of your own group but we are most appreciative of sharing the James Alden Thompson story with us.

HD: Thank you. Thank you very much.