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Anne T. Kent California Room

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Anne T. Kent California Room
Marin County Free Library
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San Rafael, California, 94903

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MACPHAIL

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
September 24, 1979

INTERVIEWEE: John MacPhail (JM)

ALSO PRESENT: Carol McPhail, John McPhail's wife (CM) and Ruth McPhail, John McPhail's mother (RM)

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

DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 24, 1979

TRANSCRIBER: Marjorie Hoffman

CE: Today is Monday, September the 24th, 1979. And continuing the Oral History project of the California Room at the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat. And joining me today is Mrs. Thomas Kent and we are at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. John MacPhail, Jr. Joining also is John's mother, Ruth. We're at number 16 Manderlay Road in San Rafael. John is going to share with us today, and possibly also his wife Carolyn and Ruth, reminiscences of his family. The MacPhails have been here, third generation, I presume by now, possibly into our fourth, and we are going to have John tell us a little bit what brought his grandfather Neil MacPhail from Prince Edward Island in Canada, eventually to San Rafael. Good afternoon, John.

JM: Good afternoon.

CE: We were talking a little earlier -- It's always been of interest, and it will continue being of interest to anybody doing research in Marin as to what brought these families to Marin. Why did they pick Marin County as opposed to some other places? Now, would you recap for us again a little bit about your grandfather Neil?

JM: Well, he was a Scotchman. And as you know the Scotch initially came -- left Scotland at the time of the Clearings about 1830, and he came with some of the

rest of the relatives to Prince Edward Island, and they settled there. I'm sorry, his parents came. He was born in Prince Edward Island and he --

CE: Would you tell a lay person where that is roughly? It's up near Newfoundland, isn't it?

JM: It's Eastern Canada; it's the province known as Nova Scotia.

CM: No, it's a separate province.

JM: Excuse me.

CE: Okay, but it's on the Atlantic side, way above Maine, there somewhere?

JM: Yes. Off the coast of Maine, off from Halifax. And he came out here, as best as we can tell, about 1884 after having worked for a while in Seattle, had a restaurant which was burned out in one of the numerous fires they had in the Seattle waterfront. He worked in Santa Barbara. He ended up in Oakland with a relative who was a dentist and started to study dentistry; did not like dentistry, I understand; got involved in the livery business with a cousin, Franklin K. Lane, who later became The Secretary of the Interior under Woodrow Wilson. He liked the livery business but wanted to work for himself and ended up in San Rafael. He had a livery stable on Fourth Street and a couple of locations, one where Casa Marin used to be and Callan's Jewelers is now, one further down Fourth Street near Lincoln and then eventually at the location where our store still is, at the corner of Third and C Street.

CE: How would you define a livery stable?

JM: He rented horses and boarded horses and also had available various types of wagons, livery's --

CE: For hire?

JM: For hire. I understand that at one time had about ninety wagons and --

CE: Ninety?

JM: Ninety wagons and horses available. One of his accounts was PG&E in town -- telephone company and also the Hotel Rafael. In fact the reason why he moved, I understand, further down on Fourth Street was to be near the Railroad Station, when the people came in he provided transportation. He had a wagon that ran over to Bolinas, Stinson Beach. He used to hire out carriages and horses. For example, C. D. Robinson, the painter, used to obtain one for traveling to Yosemite to paint for the summer.

CE: Well, you mentioned earlier that this artist lived with your grandparents. Did I understand you correctly?

JM: Yes, C. D. Robinson -- The family home was on Clark Street. In fact, where San Rafael Avenue runs into Clark Street was the house that they eventually ended up living in.

CE: And where is that? Is that near Gerstle Park?

JM: That's right across the street from Gerstle Park. Like many other artists, he liked to drink, we understand; I never knew him personally. His daughter was a member of the WCTU, I think. She was very anti-drinking, and she would kick him out of the house, and my grandfather's house was half a block away on his way home and he would end up there. He actually, I understand, moved in and lived for a while and as a result the family got one or two paintings from that.

CE: As a thank you.

JM: As a thank you, eventually. We understand that most of the bars in town had his paintings as payment for his bills.

CE: Due bills at the bar.

JM: A fact that used to infuriate his daughter.

CM: Who was a music teacher in San Francisco.

JM: Yes, who had studied opera and traveled to Paris and was a very prim and proper lady.

CE: What year are we talking about when all this took place?

JM: He died, Robinson died , in '33, I think about 1933, and so we're talking about -- The fire was in '27.

CM: '21.

JM: '21. Their main house burned in 1921 which is just up the block from where they ended up living and they had to move to a much smaller house. So somewhere in that period, I think when his fortunes declined, he lost a lot of paintings in the fire; he was having problems drinking, paying bills and I think it must have been in that period, '21 to '33, that he must have lived with my grandparents for a while.

CE: May I ask a question? Is this what created an interest in art for you, this exposure as a young person, or is that a fair question?

JM: Well, I think it certainly started it. It wasn't that exposure. Of course I heard the stories. His daughter still lived in the house. She died in 1963 or '64. I was a guardian for her. But we had known her for a long time, and she was quite a character. She used to give us sermons, really, would stand out on the sidewalk and give us sermons, and I think the whole neighborhood would hear them, but a very nice person.

CE: Well, your grandfather was the one who started this friendship. Is that correct? Or was it your father?

JM: My grandfather, with Mister --

CE: All right, did you know your grandfather?

JM: Yes, yes. Well, not at the time.

CE: No, no, but did you know him before he died, your grandfather?

JM: Yes, grandfather died about 1955, I think.

CM: Well, he lived longer than your father, because he never knew that your father died, you see.

CE: Well, he must have been a good age then.

JM: Yes, he was about 92.

CE: All right. Your grandfather then founded the livery stable, and I know that we've talked to some early San Rafael families like the Foster descendants. Now most of those families of affluence had their own rigs, didn't they?

JM: Yes.

CE: But maybe on occasion they would have a gala or something to acquire more horses.

JM: I think that's probably true. I can remember the wagons were stored upstairs at C Street when -- I don't remember the date, but upstairs there was a wicker one that was a -- It must have been a special, all wicker ---

CM: The pony cart that they used to take out to Mrs. Kent's when they had the Grape Festival

CE: That's interesting, that's interesting.

JM: And they had a couple of very ordinary two seat -- two seats, front and back. But there was a Tallyho that he had that was quite large, and four or five rows of benches, it was pulled by four horses, and is in the Dearborn Museum now. It was made for my grandfather. It had a tallyho trumpet in it. We have a picture of it.

CE: Have you a photograph of that?

JM: Yes, with various local people in it, mostly which are identified: the Mayor and some of the early time families.

CE: Well, where would he keep the horses, in the livery stable or were there other acreage where the-- When you talk about ninety horses --

JM: When he had that many, I don't know where he kept them.

CE: He must have had quite a staff of grooms to take care of them, and -

JM: He had the stable where Callan's is on Fourth and B Street. They said the horses were kept upstairs so that -- That's a sloping lot and that the -- I don't know why the horses would be upstairs and the rest downstairs, but anyway they said they kept the horses upstairs.

CE: Well, maybe it was easier to get them in, it might have been on the floor level when you enter from the back.

JM: That's true.

CE: Well, horses gradually were replaced by the horseless carriage, and I suppose that changed your grandfather's business considerably, and it evolved into something else then.

JM: My father graduated from high school in 1921 and a half at just about the time that he started, although he had had several jobs before going in with my grandfather. It still was about 1921, 1922 that they started together on fire wood, coal and by that time, I think, the horses were pretty well gone.

RM: Your father used to go down to water them, I know, and he was going to be very happy when there were no more horses because --

CE: Well, by that time, 1921 and a half, Franklin Lane then was long gone, wasn't he?

JM: Well, yes, he hadn't -- My grandfather was in Oakland with Lane, but my grandfather came over here by himself, so he started here in, I'd say about 1884, we think.

CE: When was your father born? Was he born in San Rafael?

JM: In 1902, and he was born in San Rafael.

CE: 1902.

JM: In the house where we lived?

RM: In the house next door where Katy now lives.

CE: Where who lived? Who was Katy?

JM: A cousin

RM: A cousin.

CE: What's the address?

JM: 11 Marin Street

CE: 11 Marin Street. Were there other --

JM: Grandfather lived at 3 Marin St. Father built a house after he was married, and we lived there at 7 Marin Street, and my cousin, rather his cousin, lived at 11 Marin Street.

CE: Did your father, grandfather Neil, and Mrs. MacPhail have any other children other than your father?

JM: They had 3 children. There was Graham; he was the eldest, then Belle, middle. My father was the youngest, so there were 3 children.

CE: And your father's deceased. And your uncles?

JM: My uncle is still living, and so's my Aunt Belle.

CE: Aunt Belle. Did your father become involved in any sort of civic efforts? School board --

JM: He did later. I guess he was appointed to fill out a vacancy on the school board, then ran and ended up being president of the board 10 or 12, 16 years -- quite a while.

CM: Until he died. He resigned a few months before he died.

CE: But he didn't seek any elective office?

JM: Other than the school board? No.

CM: The Historical Society.

RM: The Historical Society.

JM: He belonged to the Historical Society. I guess the Masons started, too, the chairs or whatever --

CM: He was --

RM: He was --

JM: Going in to the school board, and the same would have been true for the city council and some of the other political offices. Possibly even at that time there were concerns about conflict of interest. In other words, in order for him to go onto the school board, our company had to stop delivering oil to the E Street grammar school and to the other schools, and oil, and --

CE: Oh, dear --

JM: That was a decision I remember him talking about because they were good accounts.

CE: Certainly they were good accounts.

JM: And, ah --

CE: Let's talk a little bit about your company. It has an excellent reputation. Anybody who's lived in Marin County at least fifty years -- There's only one company, MacPhail's, and I found this out myself when I needed a new refrigerator last month. But, tell us a little about the founding of the company. Now you told us earlier it evolved from this original livery stable business, then into firewood, cordwood, and taking orders for coal. When did it become a company to distribute oil, to market appliances or was that all a gradual evolution?

JM: Well, let's see. In the beginning, as far as my father's participation went, it would be about 1921, 1922. He started initially with firewood, and then coal. I don't know if they were done at the same time or started firewood. By his own account in the paper one time, he talked about firewood first and then coal, and then in about 1926, my uncle, Graham, came out of the army. He had been in the First World War, had gone back to college, and then came out of college, had gone on a sailing trip with my great-uncle, I think, Captain Neil Murchinson, had been in a shipwreck, had come back, and went into business with my father at the time that

my father added oil, heating oil, and Graham had taken a course in salesmanship and diesel mechanics, had been, in fact, a diesel mechanic for a man called Durant on his diesel yacht. So had some background on diesel fuel, so they added heating oil.

CE: Well interrupting just a minute, John. Did your father ever tell you where he got the wood? Did it come from this county?

JM: Yes, I used to go with him, later of course, on buying. He bought it from the valley, San Geronimo Valley.

CE: San Geronimo.

RM: And before that --

JM: Yeah, you went on buying trips. Where did you go?

RM: Up at Ukiah, and there was a widow up there who had wood, and he used to get his oakwood in Ukiah.

CE: I see, and a great deal of it came from right in this --

JM: When I went with him, he was buying in San Geronimo.

CE: Would you deliver wood? Or just collect it, and people would come to the store?

JM: No, we delivered it.

CE: You delivered it.

JM: I delivered a lot of it myself. It wasn't too heavy, fortunately. So, in '26, 1926 about, they added oil, heating oil, and in the 30s, in fact I think it was 1930, he bought into Grady Building Material, and in the, 1939 about, they went into the ready-mix and the -- guess we poured the bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge.

CE: Those big supports, underwater? The concrete?

JM: I don't know about the underwater part. We poured the parts of the piers that are on the land. In fact, they built the special bunkers down on the water so we could bring the aggregates by barge, and we poured --

CE: That's a big operation.

JM: For the tunnel. First tunnel up there on the Waldo Grade, and we poured for the gun emplacements up at Forts -- whatever the forts are.

CM: Cronkhite.

CE: Cronkhite?

JM: And in fact, we built, they built a special plant at Manzanita, which is just at the south end of the Richmond Bridge to deliver materials.

CM: Richardson.

JM: Richardson Bay Bridge. Down by Marin City.

CE: Well, I'm a little confused. You say, "We built, we did this." Would your father, involved in the supplying of the material or in addition the contracting? Did he have the contract to do it as well?

JM: No, we were, and still are, a ready-mix supplier, supply material.

CE: Where do you get the aggregate? Or is that a state secret?

JM: No, not at all. The current time comes from the Russian River, and there are a couple of main suppliers there, the one we deal with is Basalt which is owned by Dillingham. Previously they got some material by barge, and sand which would come even dredge out of the bay or from the Delta and some of it barged down from Petaluma, but it would be transferred, because I don't think the material itself was available from Petaluma.

CE: Well, you're the largest supplier of that in Marin County, are you not?

JM: Ready-mix. I think we're about on a par with our main competitor, Shamrock, I think the two of us are about equal.

CE: But you have been in the business longer?

JM: Yes.

CE: Is this today -- Jumping ahead a moment, is this account for any appreciable percentage of your business, thirty, forty, fifty?

JM: The ready-mix and building materials accounts for about forty percent.

CE: When you say building materials, are we going into wood again, lumber?

JM: No. One of the main building materials we don't handle is lumber. When we talk about building materials we're talking about cement, sack cement, we're talking about sand and gravel, talking about exposed aggregate stepping stones, fir bark, decorative rock .

CE: No bricks or --

JM: Oh yes, brick, blocks, even --

CE: You know we've heard so often that there were so many brick kilns in Marin in the early days, before McNear came down, along Corte Madera Creek. Do you get your bricks locally or do you manufacture?

JM: No, we don't manufacture. We get our bricks currently all from the McNear's. Quite frequently we're confused with McNear's. People get the names confused and think we're the brick people. We have never made bricks. We have always bought bricks from McNear's, but in the past we have also gone out further a field and bought bricks from Sacramento, and we're buying bricks today from San Jose. In fact the brick is very scarce nowadays; it's on allocation. Like a lot of things.

CE: All right, continue.

AK: I wonder if they're equally good - brick from different places. We found out that the ones at Fort Point, for instance, I'm always looking at that kind of things, I found out that they came from Marin, but where in Marin? It said about eighteen miles from San Quentin.

CE: And that fort was built just before the civil war wasn't it? About 1860.

AK: It was built before that one, just outside of San Quentin, came into business.

JM: The Remillard Dandini.

AK: I thought they just might have made a mistake in the distance, but the time is different.

CE: All this stuff that you're selling weighs a lot, in these building materials.

JM: Yes, yes, heavy.

CE: Is it barged in? trucked to you?

JM: It used to be barged. We used to have our building material yard was located on the canal side of 101, which is the stretch between 101 and the canal, mainly because we brought out products up by barge. In fact we had big sand bunkers sitting off on the canal edge. We also brought oils, all our heating oils came up by barge.

CE: Where would the oil come from?

JM: Standard mostly, various refineries around the bay. Then the canal started to get silted up, and also there were more pleasure craft, and the local yachtsmen did not

like the commercial barge traffic and would not always move out of the way. The timing would be very critical for the barges; they had to get in and out in high tide. The pleasure craft people were not co-operative, and finally it got to the point that every time a barge came up to deliver oil, we'd get a claim for oil spills and cleaning of the boats. So finally the barge people said they wouldn't come up anymore. It was ironic because the keeping of the canal dredged was really based on it being a navigable stream used for commerce.

CE: And then the Army Engineer has the responsibility.

JM: Yes. So when they shut us off for a while, they wouldn't dredge the canal anymore. As you know, now they redesigned it as a navigable river, and the government dredges it, but there was no more commercial use of it that I know of.

CE: The whole complexion of the canal has changed. I have a photograph showing a hay barge coming up there and --

JM: I understand they used to come all the way to practically A Street, where the Safeway is. Our sand bunkers collapsed, and we have a picture of that. So, all and all, we stopped.

CE: I'd like to ask, before we get out of oil, is there still a market for that in Marin County?

JM: Yes. It's a very, very minimal market. And although the name of the company was initially the MacPhail Fuel Company, based on I guess that was the first name of it, firewood, coal and heating oil, and then in 1946 we incorporated it and just went to MacPhail's, Inc. That's not really true, I think for a while we even were MacPhail Fuel Company, Inc. and then, somewhere along the line we had a name change to MacPhail, Inc. and dropped the Fuel Company.

CE: Well, they keep talking on the east coast now with the energy shortage and this oil crunch, about the price of that commodity going up. Do you remember as a young man entering the business with your father, what heating oil was going for in those days?

JM: We don't have to go back that far. We can go back just last year when we were selling oil for fifty cents a gallon - fifty something - fifty two, fifty three cents a gallon and this year, one year later, our customers will be paying over a dollar a gallon for it.

CE: Would most of your customers be commercial houses?

JM: No, most of our customers are residential, so it really is hard on them.

CE: You mean there are still houses that have not converted to gasoline?

JM: Yes, true. Some of our customers think that oil heat is the best heat.

CE: And you are able to supply them?

JM: We are able to supply them. As the furnaces, the oil furnaces, were heavy duty furnaces, and they lasted very well, and there was no need for people to change. At least some of them simply won't change until they have to replace the furnace. At which time, they are much better going to, or at least were up to a year or so, change to natural gas.

CE: Well, is it fair to say in this transition of this energy then from original firewood, the company then evolved to coal? We didn't touch on coal too much but coal was the next source of heat that you utilized?

JM: No, no, we sold fireplace wood up until about four years ago. We found it too hard to get and too expensive for us to handle with our union help. The non-union person can handle fireplace wood much easier than we can. We still sell coal, but we don't sell it.

JM: Well, I used to deliver klinker coal to the Dollar Estate, the Dollar house on Fifth Street. Mission.

CE: For heating purposes?

JM: They had a coal furnace, and it had an automatic stoking coal furnace, and we used to go over and get special klinker coal and deliver --

End of Side A

CE: Nowadays you sell coal to people who use it still in their fireplace. Is that correct?

JM: Yes, we still sell one or two rail cars of coal a year, and people still burn it in their fireplace. We burn it here. It's a great way to stretch wood, and I don't think you can beat the heat from coal fires.

CE: Has coal gone up appreciably as all other --

JM: Well, it has gone up, I guess, but it's still so inexpensive, at least I consider it inexpensive compared to wood.

CE: What does a sack of coal cost?

JM: A hundred pound sack might cost you four or five dollars, but the coal lasts a long time. There's a lot of coal in there, that's right. Some people, including ourselves, have tried to box coal into little more manageable packages, and we have cardboard boxes of twenty five pound coal that you can pick up and carry. It cost a little more to package that way, but it's more convenient.

CE: Where does the coal come from, John? Where did it used to come from? Ruth?

RM: Well, he used to get carloads of Rock Spring coal from --

JM: Utah and Colorado.

RM: And it would come down unsacked, and there was more than one date that he was unable to keep with me, because he was having to unload the coal and get it sacked so he wouldn't have to pay the marriage on the car.

JM: That's when we used to have one of the -- What did we call them, 'knights of the road'? Shorty?

RM: Shorty. He would help sack, yes.

JM: My father had a couple of rooms upstairs in the loft, and there were two men who lived up there. One of them fairly steady, who turned out to be an oil driver eventually and worked fairly steady, but the other man was called Shorty. He was a German who was a hobo, and he would work for a while and then would disappear, and then he would show up again, and he would work, and one of the thing he did was to sack coal. In fact, I have a picture of him standing in back of the coal sheds and he worked, I guess, until he and my father got into an argument, and then he'd take off.

RN: He'd leave a note on your father's desk, "Dear John, you don't appreciate the work I'm doing. I'm leaving." So he'd leave, and then he'd return.

CE: Well, continue John. You have some more notes there?

JM: Well, the other part of the business that is important to us is appliances, and that is about forty percent. There's no real date for appliances, I think, when we started.

CE: Well, when you took over, Grady Building Material was just building material, no appliances?

JM: No appliances, no. It really comes from the fuel business. When you sell fuel, you eventually are going to sell room heaters; you're going to sell hot water heaters; you're going to sell wood stoves, cooking ranges, and you gradually find that you're in the appliance business.

CE: Whether or not you like it, you're in the appliance business.

JM: So in the late thirties, I think, we were in the appliance business, because we had opened this store in Petaluma, and we had opened one in Santa Rosa, and those stores both had appliances. In fact, we opened in Santa Rosa in 1938, and we opened in Petaluma, a store, in 1946. Both those places had a display of appliances, and currently we're one of the largest appliance dealers in Northern California, largest independent appliance dealers, that is, to distinguish ourselves from somebody like Sears or Macys or the Emporium.

CE: Do you still have those outlets in Santa Rosa and Petaluma?

JM: We closed the one in Petaluma for a while; the one in Santa Rosa is still there, and has always been there, and we went back into Petaluma about 1970. So we still have the three locations, and we now have a builder appliance outlet in Sacramento, which has been there now for a year, opened just a little over a year. That's an important part of our clients' business now, builders' appliances, selling to contractors.

CE: What do you mean when you say builder appliances

JM: Selling to contractors and remodelers for new homes and remodeled projects.

CE: A similar kind of appliance that you would sell in your retail stores or something different?

JM: It's basically the same type of appliances, although sometimes the builders are looking for different models.

CE: Like they want to put an all-electric kitchen in, dishwasher and everything; they just buy it to put into a new home or new remodeling of a kitchen. Is that what you have in mind?

JM: Yes, we would supply them with the drop in range or cooktop and oven and the dishwasher.

CE: Do you envision that expansion in Marin at some time?

JM: Well, we started here, we are in builder appliances here.

CE: You are? Is that operation out of San Rafael, your main store?

JM: Basically operates out of the Petaluma store although we have salesmen in Marin County operating out of the San Rafael store and Sonoma County, which is our main territory, and I think that pretty well covers what we're in.

CE: How large a staff do you have in your company today?

JM: We have about a hundred and twenty five people, more or less. The business is not too cyclical. I think Mother mentioned initially, although it may not have gone on the tape, that the business, when it was started in the '20s, was basically a heating oil and fuel business and was very cyclical, and there was not much activity or not much business in the summer time, and that was the reason why she couldn't get married at the time, because there wasn't enough business, and why he went into building material. Why my father went into the building

material business was so that he would even out the workload and have some money coming all the time.

CE: Take care of those lean months.

JM: And it has worked out that way, and it has worked out real well.

CE: This personnel of one hundred and twenty five, that's in the three locations plus Sacramento?

JM: That includes all the locations.

CE: Are you president of the company now, John?

JM: Yes. I've been president since 1977

CE: 1977. Are there any other members of the family in the company today? You mentioned Uncle Graham, of course. He is gone, isn't he?

JM: No, he's still active, He's Chairman of the Board. He comes in every morning and opens up the switchboard. He works from about seven to eight o'clock, when the switchboard operator gets there. And my brother is in the business, one of my brothers, Bruce, who is manager of the building materials and ready-mix department and that's the extent of the family members. There have been others. We found that it doesn't work well to have all the family members in the business.

CE: Well, your company has a reputation for service and cordiality, and it's always a pleasure to do business with your company, and I think that's a rare thing today. Not many companies fall within that framework, do they Mrs. Kent?

AK: No, and it's a very nice thing to be able to call someone that you knew, and knew the father, and know that they know you and will come.

CE: There is a tie, a tradition, don't you feel, that's important?

JM: Yes, I think that came from my father. Unfortunately, I never got to work with him in the business.

CE: Were you in school?

JM: I was at school, and he died in 1953. That was the year I graduated from college. When I graduated from high school, he said that he would send me any place I wanted to go, he'd send me to any college I wanted to go, but he suggested that I just come into the business and work with him, that he would teach me everything I wanted to know and probably better than the schools could. In fact , he did not go to college himself; he only went through high school.

CE: Where did you go to school?

JM: San Rafael High School, and then I went to the University of California Berkeley, and then the year I graduated, about the same month, June, I think, he died. So I never did get a chance to work with him. And he was right.

CE: Was there ever any doubt in your mind that you were going to go into business with your father?

JM: I think there was initially. I can't say that I was too enthusiastic about the thought of going into business, although I had grown up with the business, it was constantly discussed in the family. We always lived the business at breakfast, lunch and dinner; we always talked business. I can't say that it had an overwhelming appeal for me.

CE: But now you're in it, and you feel the challenge of it, and you can --

JM: Yes, that's right. And getting back to the attitude, I think that it was my father's attitude that the service was important, and that we were always available. The

phone was always ringing, , night and day and weekends, people out of oil or having problems, and we were available, and that's the way we grew up. I think that's still important. I know a lot of our long time customers object very strongly to our computer. That they don't like the numbering system; they don't like being a number, and I don't blame them.

CE: Well, explain that a little bit. When did you put a computer in?

JM: Oh, we put a computer in maybe ten or twelve years ago.

CE: What for, to handle your inventory, your items?

JM: We have probably over ten thousand customers, and we simply couldn't keep up with them in the old type system, and so our customers got converted to numbers. Unfortunately or not unfortunately, it's a fact that there are people who don't like being numbers, and I don't blame them at all, it's --

CE: What do you mean, if they call and say I'm Mrs. So-and-So, you say no, you're not, you're number twenty thousand and fifty two or give us a minute to look?

JM: No, we have people would call up and say, "We've been buying from you for fifty years, and I want to buy something, and the girl in the credit said they never heard of me."

CE: Oh, that's the trouble.

JM: And, that, "I have to fill out a credit application, and, after all, I've been here for longer than you have. I knew your father when and your grandfather."

CE: I've been buying here longer than you've been alive.

JM: And, I'm not going to fill out a credit application. I don't blame them you know. We do have the flexibility to take care of them.

CE: Well, you must have somebody with diplomacy handling that department when those things come up.

JM: That's usually my department, but I think most of the people are well aware of the policies. In any event, it is amusing sometimes. I think that the old time customers, the people who knew my grandfather, for example, and dealt with him and used to stop by and talk to him, they're diminishing. There are fewer of them all the time. You used to walk down Fourth Street, and I have done it with several people, who at times in the past, and they would know simply everybody on Fourth Street. Everybody would stop and say hello.

CE: Take you two hours to walk to the bank. You'd never get there!

JM: Yes. Well, between our place on C Street you'd go down to San Rafael Joe's, for example, is maybe half of Fourth Street, and nowadays you can walk it and not see anybody you know, or you may only see a couple of people. It has changed; the county is like that. We have -- Carolyn and I used to belong to a couples' club in church, and in the beginning of each year they reshuffle up the membership, and you'd have the first meeting, and you'd all introduce yourselves. Carolyn and I would say, "We're so and so, and we've lived here all our lives," and everybody would say, "Oh my, we've only been here one year. We've been here two years. We've been here three years," and we'd be the exception. There would be nobody else in the couples' group that would be natives or would have been born here, and many of them would be one year or two at the most.

CM: And off again.

JM: Actually Carolyn and I were talking, both our families go back over a hundred years in the county.

CM: Yes, but that's not MacPhails; that's on your side.

JM: No, not MacPhail, but nevertheless it's family.

CE: Your mother's family?

JM: Yes.

CE: What was her name, her maiden name?

JM: Her name was Jenkins, but it would be the Ables of Tomales.

CM: Tom Ables of Tomales.

CE: Well, maybe your mother would tell us that story sometimes on the tape, would you?

RM: Yes.

JM: And your mother, which was my grandmother, was Postmistress in Tomales. We have her certificate.

CE: You have, good. Have you ever thought of running for office? I'm not being facetious.

JM: I ran for office in -- I was appointed to fill a vacancy, Mr. Herup, on the Marin Municipal Water District Board. At the time I was asked, Carolyn and I talked about it, and I felt it was quite an honor. It was a board that had a low profile; it had run the District competently and had done a good job. There was no public furor about any of the policies of the Board, and so I said, yes, I'd be honored, and I went down and was the youngest one on the board at the time. I went down -- how many had applied? I don't know, there was about ten or twelve people that had applied, and they had selected me. As a condition of being appointed to fill a vacancy, I had to agree to run, and I did run and got re-elected. By the time I finished my elected term. I was on the Board for six years. There had been so much furor, and it had changed so much, that I decided I don't want any more public jobs. I had a problem which was -- I was called a landmark case for the -- what is it called? FPPC. I have a conflict of interest because I do business in the county. My decisions on the board affect, which would affect moratoriums, in a round about way, would affect my business. But, that can be applied to anything I do, any political office I hold; the economic health of Marin County affects my livelihood.

CE: Well, there are people on the Board of Supervisors today who have, in my judgment, a little conflict of interest, but it doesn't seem to bother them.

JM: Well, I think that the ruling, strictly interpreted, would prohibit all business men from being on political boards.

CE: No, but my thoughts being, here you have a family, your roots are here so long, it would be refreshing for somebody to get on the Board of Supervisors who had a knowledge of the county, a love for it, and see some of it's problems from the prospective of time.

JM: Well, I leave that to others.

CE: Well, John, we've got the business side pretty well capsulated here. I've got to find out how you and Carolyn Burns got together. Your wife is here today. When were you married?

CM: 1958.

JM: We got together by the efforts of my aunt and other relatives. I don't know really how many of them were involved but --

CE: They thought it would be a good idea.

JM: They thought it would be a good idea, and our family, that Carolyn's family, the Burns' and my family and various relatives of my family have known one another for years and years and that is back practically to the grandparents.

CE: Well, Carolyn, your brother Franklin, who we met, now his father, perhaps, was a good friend of your father.

CM: No, our mothers' families were very good friends, going back up to Santa Rosa about 1900 when your Aunt Maggie Quarick and my grandmother were very good friends.

JM: Anyway, they've known each other for a long, long time. I think Carolyn came down a few times to the family home on Marin Street, and we went up there to their house a couple of times. But, when I came out of the army --

CE: Oh, we didn't get that story. Was that something you agreed to do or had you taken ROTC at UC Berkeley?

JM: I didn't have any choice. Yes, I graduated in 1953, and that was the ending of the Korean War. The armistice was signed that year, and I had to serve two years. So I went in until 1955.

CE: Where did they station you?

JM: I served, after going to basic at Fort Ord, I went back to Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis for -- Well, they tried to teach me shorthand and typing, and then they shipped me off to Korea and ended up at the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission, UNCMAC, just north of Seoul, the demarcation line. It was interesting.

CE: Interesting experience. But you wouldn't want to make the service your career?

JM: No, that's true. They keep trying to talk you into becoming an officer, and all I wanted was to get out. In 1955 when I got out, I went to work for MacPhails, in October 1955 I think, and then Carolyn and I met and were married in 1958.

CE: Would you give us the names of your children from the first born.

JM: The first born is Katherine Ann --

CM: She's fifteen

CE: All right, Carol, you do it.

CM: Katherine is fifteen, and she's a sophomore now at San Domenico. And James is thirteen and in eighth grade.

JM: At Santa Venetia Middle School.

CE: The two youngsters?

JM: Two.

CE: And does Katherine want to play the flute?

CM: Yes.

CE: I notice you have a beautiful organ in your home, also. Is this part of whose family?

JM: That's my grandfather MacPhail, came around the Horn I'm told, and won a prize back at the World Fair in Chicago and was in the parlor of the old house which has been torn down. It was actually given to my brother, and I coveted it and finally managed to swap him out of it.

CE: Well, I think you have a feeling for old and lovely things and I want you to interject what you didn't put on the tape about the Tallyho that your grandfather had. You and your mother were talking about it a -- In fact, Ruth, would you like to tell the story about when you visited Dearborn?

RM: Well, we had stopped at Dearborn to pick up another car and to go on to Prince Edward Island for the summer, and while we were there, we went to the car exhibit, and Pa MacPhail came to gather us and he was so excited, he wanted us to come and see what he had done. We went back --

CE: When you say Pa MacPhail, are you talking about --

RM: Neil MacPhail, the grandfather, Grandpa MacPhail. He took us back and pointed to a sign which said, "This tallyho was made for Carolyn's daughter, the railroad man." Pa said "They're crazy, that's my Tallyho" and he took us behind the back of the Tallyho and painted on the back was an oval sign which said "Made for Neil MacPhail, San Rafael California" so he stood beside it and his son, John, took a picture of him, and then the children got up with permission of the curator there in the Tallyho, and their picture. You and Neil had the picture taken.

CE: Do you remember, Ruth, how it came about that the Tallyho was offered to the museum? Did you ever hear that story?

RM: I have no idea. I think Pa was surprised to see it back there. He didn't seem to know how it got back there.

CE: Do you know if the Tallyho was made out west here?

JM: I don't know where it was made. As I mentioned, some of the carriages and buggies were still in the building that we're currently using on C Street. I can remember Jordan Smith coming and getting them, my father getting rid of them and Jordan taking them out to where he was living at the time in Fairfax. I have seen one of them in the last ten years or so, in a parade, and I have been meaning to get hold of Jordan and see maybe sometime we can get one of those back, because it would be nice to have one of them.

CE: Well, I just wonder if there was a historically minded person in San Rafael because, as you know, the facade for the butcher shop in Olema was taken and given to the Smithsonian Institute. It seems as a typical false front western building. Somebody must have put these people together. I think it's kind of nice when you think of the Eastern attitude about everything being so old there, we do have some things that are of interest and unique. Well, John, it's been a pleasure talking with you today and with your mother Ruth and your wife, Carol. We feel very appreciative of the story you shared with us about the MacPhail family, and you are now part of the archives of the California Room. Thank you.

JM: Thank you.