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**INTERVIEW WITH KARL UNTERMANN**

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent  
March 13, 1981

**INTERVIEWEE:** Karl Unterman (KU)

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

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** March 13, 1981

**TRANSCRIBER:** Marjorie Hoffman

CE: Today is Friday, March 13, 1981. Continuing the Oral History Program for the California History Room, this is Carla Ehat. Joining me today is Mrs. Thomas Kent and we are going to have the pleasure shortly of talking with Karl Untermann. He resides at 27 I Street in San Rafael, California, and is the owner of the West End Nursery. It's a famous nursery that has been functioning here in Marin County, in San Rafael, since 1909, and Karl has owned it since 1954. It's awfully nice to be here, Karl.

KU: Thank you, same here. Glad to have you.

CE: Well, tell us a little bit. I understand your uncle, Richard Lohremann, created this nursery.

KU: That's right.

CE: How did that come about, Karl?

KU: Well, he came to Marin County in 1904 and --

CE: From Germany?

KU: No. He was at that time from Elizabeth, New Jersey. He had been in California before, in the 1890s, and he worked at the race fields, where they were building the race fields at Palo Alto, and he couldn't stand it any longer than six months. It was so windy and all he did was count eucalyptus, so that he moved on. Anyhow, he traveled throughout the world before he finally settled in Jersey; Guernsey and Jersey, the islands Guernsey and Jersey, and he got married there. He was there, I believe, for two years. He worked for a countess there and then he went to New Jersey where he was foreman for the F and F Nursery for --

CE: That's where he got his first start in the nursery business?

KU: Well, actually he was a trained nurseryman.

CE: He was?

KU: Oh, yes. His father already was a nurseryman and head gardener for Bakerstate in northern Germany and he actually learned his trade in Lubeck. He worked four years for a big nursery and then he went from various places. In the olden days as soon as they had an apprenticeship they went out into the world and then they had their -- and until they became master. He worked in Denmark. He worked in Hungary and in Scotland and then from Scotland he went to Texas, from Texas he went to Canada. He was wiped out twice there, once with the melon crop -- the frost got them -- another time they had a crop and then the railroad strike broke out and they couldn't ship it so it all rotted. So he got disgusted and he went to Alaska. From Alaska, he didn't stay too long, gold hunting, wasn't interested. A friend of his started a nursery here, there, rather. He had a group; actually it was in a greenhouse. He had excellent success with that. From there he went to Australia and then he finally went back to Guernsey, I guess, where he got this job. He met Mrs. Loreman then in New York. She went back to Germany and then -- So, anyhow, they finally arrived here after -- He had met Rod McClellan, the builder of the Golden Gate Park.

CE: John McLaren?

KU: John McLaren, yes. He met John McLaren when they were planting for the race track down the peninsula and when he got to San Francisco he got in touch with John McLaren and John McLaren knew about the job then at A. W. Foster, the Foster Estate which is Fairhills now. So he started in 1904 there, just before the earthquake. At that time, A.W. Foster was in his glory and he had, I think, 40 to 50 gardeners under him planting all the eucalyptus trees and fancy waterfalls and lakes. They imported a man from Italy who built the fences for the bridges of the waterfall, for -- is still standing there and it looks just like gnarled wood. You really have to look close in order to make it out. Then the earthquake came along and that hit A.W. Foster and my uncle had, I think, only three or four people working for him then but later on then -- In the meantime of course, then he looked around and he saw this piece of property.

CE: That's what I was going to ask you. Why did he put the nursery here? But I understand, because of his association with the Fosters.

KU: That's right. He was living close by here, he knew the area.

CE: The climate.

KU: The climate. Everything was just fine and that was an old pear orchard at that time, when he bought it.

CE: Well, there wasn't much around here at that time?

KU: There was nothing, nothing.

CE: Maybe an isolated house here.

KU: This house was not here yet.

CE: No, but that one on Center, possibly?

KU: That's right, Miss Foster's place; that was there. This house was built in 1910.

CE: The one we're in?

KU: That's right. He bought the old nursery house in 1909 with a bond and everything, and he only bought one acre at that time.

CE: There was nothing on it except the pear orchard?

KU: Yes, that's right.

CE: How much land does your nursery --

KU: We have now two acres. In 1921, he bought the other side and the other side is actually part of the old Trumbull Seed and Nursery Farm. At that time when he started in there was nothing there except an old broken down greenhouse, some old pots, but there were no plants or anything. And the old Trumbull house is still standing on Center and J Street. So I think that was the only thing that was in that whole block there was the nursery house and the old Trumbull house; there was nothing else here.

CE: Tell me, Karl, how are you related to him? By your mother's side?

KU: No. My father's sister was Mrs. Loreman.

CE: Your father's sister.

KU: That's right, yes. My uncle, of course, married -- They had no children. They visited us in 1924. My mother was a war widow and things looked very bad in Germany so they wanted me to come to this country when I was finished with school. So when I was finished with school I still had to wait a year before I could travel alone, so I had to be sixteen. In the meantime I worked for a nursery for one year in Germany and then I came direct here and learned from my uncle.

CE: Was that a boyhood desire of yours, to go into this business?

KU: Yes and no. You know, when you're fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, you don't know --

CE: But you didn't want to go into the army. You knew that?

KU: That's for sure. My mother didn't want me to go into the army. First, when I was a small boy, we lived near butcher house so I wanted to become a butcher. When we lived on the harbor I wanted to become a sailor. I had a real desire to go to sea, but my mother wouldn't let me. So, then I came over here.

CE: Just for the record, to clarify, would you explain where Lubeck is?

KU: Yes, Lubeck is on the Baltic Sea. It's about 35 miles north of Hamburg. It's one of the old Hanseatic towns.

CE: Did you come directly here?

KU: I came directly, that's right. It takes two weeks. Ten days by boat and four days by train.

CE: What year was that?

KU: That was 1928, fall of 1928.

CE: Did you learn any English before you came or did you learn it here, Karl?

KU: I did have English in school. I had three years of English. I knew how to read and how to write. Of course, the talking is altogether different, especially listening. When somebody talks to you they talk so fast and it takes a little while. I always told people, "Talk slowly and I'll understand you," and they did and I got the drift of it. I went one year to high school here. I took English and I took Latin just for two hours in the morning and after that I went to night school and took up Business English, Citizenship of course, because I had to be here five years and learn all about the country before we could become a citizen.

CE: Were you initially pleased or surprised or -- What was your reaction to this country?

KU: I was pleased and I was surprised. Here are certain things you imagine altogether different, and when you come here I expected banana palms and coffee and cotton and everything, you know, but that's what you read in the papers over there, in the books,

anyhow. So, I was very much surprised to see trees just like at home and nothing really that much different except, of course, for the climate.

CE: How were you received, looking back, cordially?

KU: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

CE: All right, then your uncle said, "Karl you're going to come to work." Did you live with him?

KU: Oh, yes, yes. I lived with him for seven years, until I got married, yes. I had my room downstairs, not here, at the nursery. I had my room downstairs; they built a room there for me and I lived with them, boarded with them and lived with them, plus had meals.

CE: I heard you speak, giving the Latin name, to your son when he came in for identification of a plant. Did that help you, your studies, then?

KU: Oh, definitely. I took Latin from Miss Dufficy. I actually learned more English than Latin from her because it went right through the whole alphabet and everything that I had learned in school before all came back again, but it did help quite a bit. Of course, later on, after I had the Latin book with me and looked up certain things and certain verses that tied right in with the plants, so everything means something.

CE: Do you use the Latin names most of the time in your business?

KU: Yes and no.

CE: For the public maybe not.

KU: To the public, no, because it's all Greek to them and I feel if I give them the common name they're much happier.

CE: They're more secure.

KU: That's right. And if I come with professionals or so, or when people bring in plants, of course, all the Latin names are down and, of course, I can take off right from there, so there's no problem.

CE: Well, when you started, I guess it was an apprenticeship again, wasn't it for you?

KU: It was like an apprenticeship.

CE: You had to sweep out things, keep in order, move the dirt in the wheelbarrow and all the stuff.

KU: Oh, yes. Every morning at five o'clock in the wintertime I had to go and stoke the fire in the greenhouses. In the evening, ten o'clock --

CE: In those earlier days then, what form of heat did you have?

KU: We had coal.

CE: Coal?

KU: Yes, we had a coal bunker there. We got coal from -- My uncle bought five tons of coal from Schlosser. Schlosser was the old coal distributor here. So in the greenhouse we had a big water boiler, hot water boiler, and we had hot water pipes throughout the greenhouse, underneath the benches and above, and the hot water then kept the greenhouses warm. It heated up to about 150 or 160 degrees and that gave enough heat to keep the greenhouses at a good temperature so that nothing would freeze.

CE: During this apprenticeship period you became acquainted with the customers, I presume and --

KU: That's right, everything takes on gradually.

CE: You meet the public very easily.

KU: Yes.

CE: And you enjoyed that part of it?

KU: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

CE: It was a good mix, it was a good mixer.

KU: That's right because people -- You also find people that come to the nursery are very nice people.

CE: First of all they love what they're shopping for.

KU: They love the flowers, that's right. Then, of course, my uncle was well known; everybody knew him, and so when I came I was introduced to them, and so --

CE: In your judgment, looking back on your uncle, what do you think was one of his good contributions in this business, something unique he might have done?

KU: Well, he was very interested in dahlias and he created about, oh, at least 25 to 30 dahlias. He has got many, many prizes at the Fair in San Francisco, the old 1915 Fair. He had all sorts of bronze medals and gold medals and whatever. I think there's probably even in the county --

CE: He was very knowledgeable then?

KU: Oh, he was, he was, there was no one better than Uncle Richard. He was very knowledgeable.

CE: Did he have any sons?

KU: No, he had no children; that's why I came over here, that's why they had me come over here.

CE: Did you have a good relationship with him?

KU: Yes very good. One thing I feel that he did help, the old Mission Pear.

CE: Oh, yes, that was here in San Rafael.

KU: We used to have the Mission and the pear orchard down there and when the last of the pear trees were pulled out, Dr. -- He was a historian from San Rafael. He lived in the next block. He was a dentist. He asked Uncle Richard if he wouldn't graft some trees of the Mission Pear. And he did, and he gave that to them and gave some to the park, too, but we never did find out exactly what became of them but he did graft one of our trees here, too. This was in 1929.

CE: I see. Mrs. Kent is just smiling. Do you have something to add to this story, Anne?

AK: Everyone wanted to do that and Mr. Loreman apparently was the more successful, I guess, Karl anyway, and when we had the little Moya Library, that pear tree that's outside the window was brought to us as a gift and planted there by Karl.

CE: Karl Untermann?

KU: Yes.

CE: Oh, at the Marin Art and Garden Center.

KU: Yes. You see, afterwards, nothing much was said and done and all of a sudden I believe there was one last tree left that -- When the Water Company expanded on Fourth Street, that tree was torn out by Ghilotti Brothers and nobody thought anything of it and all of a sudden there was a woe and cry, that was the last tree, was nothing left, and they went out to the dumps trying to find it, of course. So I called up the editor of the -- Craemer, and I told him that it was not a lost cause because we still had a tree in the nursery and I would graft them over for the following year and then I would give them to various people. And I was successful. I think I grafted about twenty or so trees and I gave one for Mrs. Moya del Pino; one I planted in front of the Catholic Church. It's still

standing there. And one the Marston boy -- Miss Burchell was very interested in that. He lives in Marinwood; it's Homer Marston's boy, Dr. Homer Marston. It was actually -- Charles Marston was the --

CE: Marston?

KU: Marston. Old time people. And Miss Burchell was very interested. She was an old historian. She bought one and gave to her nephew then. And various others are planted out but I didn't lose track. But the ones that they planted at the parks or so were destroyed or broken whatever.

CE: Well, getting back to your uncle, in addition to the dahlias, there was this interest in having trees, certain ornamental trees, and saving those Mission Pears.

KU: That's right. And he also was very interested in new trees and he belonged to the Arboretum in Boston, and each year they sent him lists and he marked off certain trees that he would like to try and he had to keep track of those and give reports back on those. That's when, in 1947 or so, when the Meta Sequoia, redwood tree, was rediscovered and he received a hundred seeds from the Arboretum. He seeded those and I think 99 out of 100 he germinated. So he raised -- Another one of that crop is in the Marin Art and Garden Center, one of the better sequoias. That should be -- I think it bore seeds about six or seven years ago and that came out of the batch that Uncle Richard raised.

CE: I didn't get the first name of that sequoia.

KU: It's Meta Sequoia.

AK: Do you think it is one of the ones down nearest the gate? There are two there.

KU: Yes, that's right, that's Meta --

AK: They were marked for Mrs. Mary Courtright. When she died they made -- Moya made the garden all around them.

CE: Oh, I see, in memory of her.

KU: Yes. But that came from his original batch of seeds. Of course, since then now they have repropagated and it's not a scarce item anymore as it was at that time.

CE: Do you work with the California Academy of Sciences?

KU: No.

CE: In any touch with them?

KU: No, no. I don't do anything. I don't have the time.

CE: I wondered if you knew John Thomas Howell the former curator running it.

KU: No, no, I don't.

CE: I see also on our table you have some old photograph albums, and this one here in the leather cover shows the --

KU: This is from the Foster Estate and that is Uncle Richard's first car over there.

CE: We interviewed Martha Foster Abbott and she's a wonderful woman and she's --

KU: These are the waterfalls that the Italian made for them.

CE: Do you know who that Italian might be?

LU: No, no.

CE: Because there are some stones --

KU: That is the pavilion, I believe, that's still standing.

CE: And you say the pavilion is still there?

KU: The pavilion is still there and part of this is still on the main drive going out there.

CE: We'll have to look into that, Mrs. Kent. Then, of course, here is some destruction pictures of the great earthquake.

KU: This was my old family home, my -- This is actually my father's place. Those are pictures of Uncle Richard. But this, I think, has some older pictures.

CE: Well, tell us a little bit more about him. You just worked with him and learned as much as you could?

KU: This is looking down from the Foster place.

CE: Yes. We're looking at a wonderful old photograph album that -- It's hard to annotate these.

KU: This cottage still stands at the beginning of the -- Of course, they've remodeled and I feel they did a very poor job there.

CE: Well, we'll look at this a little later if we may.

KU: No he was a -- Uncle Bert was very, very knowledgeable and anything new or so to the garden, he was right there. Always, each year, he had two or three new shrubs that he introduced then in his catalog.

CE: As the business grew, Karl, I suppose you established accounts with people.

KU: Yes.

CE: A lot of your selling was on the books wasn't it?

KU: Oh, yes, yes. That, of course --

CE: Did he have pretty good response even during the depression?

KU: Yes. We did not notice the depression actually until after 1935, and the rest of the time while we didn't do as much business. 1929 was his biggest year ever, and after that it gradually went down but we still did not notice the depression like many other businesses did because people were still interested in gardens and still bought plants, while not as much, they still wanted beauty at home. In 1935, then, I went to Germany to visit my mother and I was gone about two months and Uncle Richard wrote to, "Come back we are busy. We need you." So of course, I had all of my arrangements made and so I came back.

CE: Was that the year you married Karl?

KU: I married in 1937.

CE: 1937. And your wife is Ann?

KU: That's right.

CE: And is she from home or from here?

KU: She was born and raised in San Francisco. Born in San Francisco, and they lived in Manor. When she was six years old they moved there.

CE: Manor in Marin here?

KU: Yes. Her father died and then her mother married -- You probably remember Mr. Cyple. He had the taxi stand in San Anselmo. That was her step-father. And they lived in Manor.

CE: Now, did your position change once you got married? I mean did you live then somewhere else?

KU: We built our house right near West End Station and lived there seven years and then we bought the house down below here, lived there seven years, then we bought this place 27 years ago.

CE: How old was Mr. Loreman when he finally had to give up? Did he work until --

KU: Almost, yes, almost

CE: Was he a good age when he --

KU: Yes he was 82 or so. No, no he was 85 when he finally agreed to sell out.

CE: And there was no doubt that you wanted it and there was no doubt he wanted you to have it?

KU: Well, of course he always knew that I wanted it but he just didn't -- He was an old-timer and that was it and he just was happy, had enough to live on --

CE: It's hard to let go.

KU: He was happy and had enough to live on. I felt that the nursery could be very much improved because --

CE: You were the younger generation.

KU: Yes, that's right, that's right, because the last ten years or so before I bought it he just wouldn't modernize. What was good enough 21 years ago was good enough today. If we don't have it we have enough other things that people can choose from. That was his attitude and so --

CE: I see. Mrs. Kent, did you know Mr. Loreman?

AK: Oh, yes. We all loved him.

KU: Yes. He was a wonderful man, really.

AK: Helped everybody.

KU: That's right.

CE: Well, then, let's get to when you took over, Karl. What did you envision had to be changed that would -- the world today?

KU: One thing that he and I never agreed on was keeping open, opening on Sundays. He never would keep the doors of the nursery open on Sundays and all the other nurseries did.

CE: Did?

KU: Oh, yes, oh yes, they did. And, of course, when Ann and I drove around and we drove by those nurseries and they were just jam packed full of cars and you know how you feel then.

CE: Was that a religious belief on his part?

KU: Yes, yes.

CE: That was a day of rest.

KU: That's right, that's right. He went to church every Sunday. He was a -- Originally they started the Evangelical Church here in San Rafael which was a German Lutheran Church and that was disposed of I believe in 1945 or so, there just wasn't enough people that were interested to support the church and then he joined the Presbyterian Church and he was an elder of the Presbyterian Church and he was very active.

CE: I wanted to ask something before we leave Mr. Loreman. During his early years here, did he also do any landscaping or any jobs?

KU: Oh, yes, yes.

CE: Tell us a little bit about that.

KU: There are so many. I do have a book of all the old -- wherever they went to and he did the landscaping of a golf club up at the Meadows.

CE: Meadow Club?

KU: Yes. He did that, that was his -- That was in 1927.

CE: Now what would he do, hire men or -- Would he take the contract?

KU: No, no, there was no contract. He never contracted.

CE: What, shake hands?

KU: That's right, that's right. So much a day; I still have the old books where it mentions two hours for this man at 50 cents or 75 cents.

CE: But he would draw the scheme and envision the whole garden and then get people to do it?

KU: That's right. He actually had his own people. In springtime he had --

CE: Well, when would they do this? I mean when would they find time to do this?

KU: In the spring, winter.

CE: But I mean, he wouldn't be at the nursery then, he would be out on the job?

KU: He would be there.

CE: Off and on.

KU: That's right. He would get them started and he had a foreman at the nursery and Mrs. Loreman was in the nursery but he was always back by 9:30, 10 o'clock or so. But he did quite a bit of landscaping. In fact, one time I remember we did the little strip in Tomales, in the center, the center island, and Caesar was the name of the man that drove and I went out there and we planted. It was all laid out with cedars and plants around there. It took two hours to get out there and then in the evening our truck driver, Caesar, was tired so he told me I should drive and I never drove before. This was on a solid tired Model T Ford truck. But I had a wonderful time and we got home all right. So he did quite a few --

CE: Quite a few gardens. Did he do any around the church or for the --

KU: No, no.

CE: For the town?

KU: Well, for the town he did all the street tree planting.

CE: He did?

KU: Oh, yes. At first with Mrs. Babcock and then later on Miss Winteringham took over.

AK: Who was the first?

KU: Mrs. William Babcock. They were very interested in trees, street trees. And then later on Miss Winteringham -- And then when I came and I was a little bit more knowledgeable; I drove with Miss Winteringham around from street to street and marked where they were to go and then the next day or whenever the time was we went and planted, usually around 200 or 250 trees each year.

CE: Well, if your uncle knew Mrs. Babcock, he probably then did a lot of work for some of those lovely homes in San Rafael on Dominican.

KU: Oh, yes, Mrs. Thayer and Mrs. Babcock was originally in Dominican later and then in Culloden Park.

CE: Yes. And Mrs. Thayer's beautiful garden.

KU: And for Mrs. Ord, and for all the old places -- Dr. Delancey, the first one there. No, he did -- and for the Liechtenbergs too.

CE: Oh, the Liechtenbergs. We went up to Santa Rosa to interview Elsa Lichtenberg Johnson, do you remember her?

KU: Oh, Miss Johnson, sure, oh yes, yes.

CE: And the Korbells.

KU: Yes.

CE: That is fascinating.

KU: And then Lutgens, too. He was the printer for the *Independent Journal*, Craemer's.

CE: That's right.

KU: So all those spaces he did --

CE: I notice, too, on your table all these pamphlets that were created and I see some prizes here.

KU: Oh, yes.

CE: Now these prizes on the Marin Art and Garden Center --

KU: He had nothing to do with that. Actually most of those are from my oldest son; he did most of them.

CE: Is that right?

KU: At first I started in --

CE: Well, we'll get to that effort in a minute. Your uncle, then, he really worked, built up the nursery and did these landscaping jobs and beyond that he didn't go in for creating a prize rose or whatever?

KU: No, no, dahlias was his only --

CE: Yes, that was his love.

KU: But he was always interested in new things but he never created any other things.

CE: Well, he founded this in 1909 and you bought out in 1954, that's 45 years he had the business.

KU: Yes. That's right

CE: Well, then I think we'll move on. Let's get to you. In 1954 you bought the nursery and you mentioned earlier you saw some things you wanted to do, and what were they?

KU: Well, of course for one thing, I wanted to open up on Sundays which I did and I wanted to open up a store. Because Uncle Richard was not interested in anything but plants, a few fertilizers and lawn seed, peat moss, some pots, but tools and that sort of thing belonged in a hardware store; that did not belong in a nursery.

CE: And you could see the advantage of having those items?

KU: Oh, yes. So, we opened up part of the garage, where the truck was, and opened up and made a wall there and had a bench there. Back when I started I didn't have any money, of course, with four children, so I borrowed from Uncle Richard \$500. I bought the business on a \$5,000 note and borrowed \$500 to get started with. So we had a friend, and old salesman that no matter what he did, come religiously, whether Uncle Richard bought anything from him or not. This was in the hardware, in the tools and that part. So he did come and he helped us and he said, "Well, now you need this," and he said we would probably want to spend \$200 at the most. So we got a shovel and we got a rake and a spade and anything we needed for the start and he said, "In two weeks I'll be back and we'll see how things go." So after a week or so we sold a shovel and Ann and I shook our hands and Uncle Richard said, "Karl," he said, "this is never going to take off; six months, mark my words, within six months you're going to close up." So he didn't see exactly eye to eye with what I was doing but we were getting along fine.

CE: How did the customers like this? They kind of liked it, didn't they?

KU: Well, yes, the few customers that did come. Then we did have another friend; he was the main salesman for Gaviota Company at that time and he liked me and he liked Uncle Richard, too, and when he found out that I had bought the business he came in March, I believe, and he looked around he said, "Karl, what you should do, you should

have an open house.” I said, “Fine.” And so he said, “Don’t worry about anything; I’ll take care of everything.” And he said -- I said, “All right, Saturday and Sunday,” and he said, “No, make it Friday, Saturday and Sunday because the ad is going to cost you so much and whatever you take in on Friday will pay for the ad; the rest of it then is -- ”

CE: Bonus, then.

KU: That’s right. So we did that. And he brought over salesmen, he came over a week before, ready, making big signs and everything and then they had music and they had prizes and they had a loudspeaker there and --

CE: Is this all in the first year?

KU: The first year, in April. And Uncle Richard wouldn’t come out, all three days. Monday morning he came out, “Well,” he said, “is the carnival over?” So we told him, “Uncle Richard, we have made enough money that we can pay you what you loaned us. We can pay you our first payment that we are supposed to be paying in June.” So, he was fine. After that he just left us alone, he came out and he loved to putter in the greenhouse and I told him --

CE: You didn’t want to deny him that.

KU: Oh, no, no, no. I told him, “You do anything you want.” And so after that he was very happy and then after that we picked up more business, of course; more people knew that we were there and we had a little more money then to buy more things and then things just started to go.

CE: Was that first carnival, as Uncle Richard called it, was that the first time you had advertised?

KU: Yes, that’s right. Uncle Richard used to advertise before that, he had a regular set week by week which was a prepared thing for what you did week by week; it had plates and everything else there, so he did a certain amount of advertising, but his catalog was his main advertising, really. But that was the first time I had advertised.

CE: And you have a whole stack of his catalogs. They go way back to the --

KU: Yes, they start from 1911 on.

CE: And how would these be distributed?

KU: They were mailed.

CE: To whom?

KU: To all our customers. We had our regular charge customer list. Actually, he had most people that came, charged. He had very little cash business; it was all charge, and so he had all the names and --

CE: And you carried on.

KU: I carried on, that’s right. I had taken up typing in school so later on I could type the envelopes with the addresses.

CE: Now I imagine you must have someone that does that all --

KU: Well, we do not distribute catalogs; we do not print catalogs anymore.

CE: No, but I mean billing. Does your wife help you with that or do you have a bookkeeper?

KU: No, I still do that. I do all the bookkeeping and --

CE: See, that’s a successful business, Mrs. Kent. He’s not above doing all these little things you’ve got to do.

KU: This way I know exactly what’s what, what’s going on. I know other people have bookkeepers and that, they don’t know what’s going on.

CE: They just know the figures and that's all.

KU: That's right. Because I have Tom now in business with me and he is wonderful.

CE: You have four children.

KU: I have four children.

CE: Would you name them for us now? Is Tom number one?

KU: No. Richard is number one and Dennis is number two, then Tom and then Jeannie.

CE: Are all of your sons in the business?

KU: No, no. Just Tom. Richard is a landscape architect and he teaches now at the University of Washington in Seattle. He's been doing that for ten years. He teaches landscaping and environmental design and city planning, so we're very happy.

CE: That must please you.

KU: Yes. Then he worked for me for about five, six --

AK: Where is he?

KU: In Seattle at the University of Washington. And Dennis worked for me for about six or seven years and he always wanted to be a teacher, so when he -- He married very young, so when his youngest one went to school, he decided to go back to school. So we helped him so he could manage the two years to get his credentials, so he has been a teacher at Redwood High all these years. Then, of course, Tom is in business with me.

CE: He seems very interested in his work.

KU: Oh, yes, he is, he's a very good businessman. And, of course, Jeannie never had any desire for the nursery business.

CE: Do you think Tom will take this business on some day? Is that a dream of yours?

KU: Yes. Oh, he has almost fifty percent of the stock. See, I incorporated it in 1970 and then I gave him -- At that time we could give him, each one \$30,000, so I gave him that much stock in the nursery and then each year we give them whatever we can to make it tax free, so that eventually he will have the whole business without paying the capital gains. We're paying enough the way it is, so --

CE: Do you still provide catalogs to your customers, as your uncle did?

KU: No we don't. I gave that up; that is very expensive. For a number of years I had the Ortho books and had our name on it and we gave those out but now that --

CE: It isn't necessary, is it?

KU: Montgomery Ward has the Ortho books; the lumber companies have the Ortho books, so --

CE: And people are more knowledgeable don't you think today?

KU: That's right, they really are. To a certain extent they know -- The public has changed. The customs have changed. Years ago, our season was from the middle of September to end of May, and from May to September there's nothing doing and we did not have plants in containers and everything was grown. So people came and picked out the plants and they were ready and they were willing to wait until winter until they were ready to go.

CE: Now it's different.

KU: Now people have an interest in their garden. You have to have the things for them. They're not going to wait. If you don't have it, they go somewhere else. So the public has changed altogether and --

CE: And they're more knowledgeable, too, don't you think?

KU: Quite a bit more knowledgeable.

CE: Aren't you asked more questions about plant pathology?

KU: Oh, yes.

CE: And they bring in more -- "What's eating my plant?"

KU: That, of course, yes, of course.

CE: And you have to tell them.

KU: We tell them, that's right. You have to have the knowledge there for them, what it is and what is wrong with them and disease.

CE: How many customers would you say you have?

KU: Oh, that's a hard question.

CE: Five hundred?

KU: Oh, more than that. It goes into several thousand.

CE: Is that a fact?

KU: They come from all over.

CE: All over Marin and probably some Sonoma?

KU: All of Marin and we have quite a few people coming from San Francisco and there's some from Sonoma; some out of Santa Rosa. Some people just drop in, but we have a lot of customers.

CE: Well, later on, if you can spare the time, I'd like to just walk around and take some pictures of your greenhouse. I mean your setup here, because the photographs are as important when this goes into the archives.

KU: Yes.

CE: Well, what -- You changed some things of your uncle. You modernized. What way -- You've got a store, you sold tools. Did you change the heating and all of that for the greenhouses? Did you go from coal to gas, or what? How did you heat the boilers?

KU: Well, we don't have a greenhouse anymore. We have a display and flower shop -- You might -- Not flower shop. We have pots and we have house plants. We are restricted in what we can do. We are in a first class residential area and because the business has --

CE: Now all of these homes have grown up around you over the years?

KU: That's right. The business has been there so nobody can do anything but we cannot do any new building.

CE: You have to keep a low profile?

KU: That's right. The area that we have now in stores or -- So we can -- We are doing it, little at a time. We are tearing one wall down and building a new wall. Like the barn; it's the original barn, but the floor is new. We put -- Lower floor, concrete floor; each year we rebuilt, the two by fours were rotted and rebuilt that. So that nobody really noticed and then we added a little bit on, of course. The thing with the greenhouse -- We had the greenhouse there and that was ready to fall down. We wanted to put in a nice, big sales house in there so we bought a lot of peat moss and put a big pile of peat moss in front there and built the other greenhouse so when that was finished, the boards were all pre-painted before, so nobody would know that.

CE: Very good. Well, has the Town Council been pretty co-operative in this?

KU: They have; they don't bother us one bit.

CE: And the neighbors?

KU: The neighbors are all fine because we have -- Before we knew that Tom wanted to come into the business, Denny was going to bow out, I wasn't going to just keep on

working and so we were looking to build a housing development there and Richard, our oldest son, had drawn the plans and everything, but when the neighbors --

CE: You mean give up the nursery business?

KU: That's right. Not completely, but in order to do something you had to have a plan of the whole complex. We had only wanted to put a duplex in back and a duplex on the other side. We do have three duplexes on there now, that nobody could do anything about it, but we were going to put one in back and one on the side there. But in order to do it in the back we would have had to have of the whole -- And so, of course, when the neighbors found out we were building high-rises and this and that and --

CE: They weren't happy with that. We want the nursery there.

KU: So nobody bothers us. Nobody says anything. The nursery is a nice thing to look at. It's quiet and --

CE: It's an attraction, really.

KU: That's right, that's right. So, nobody really -- Whatever we are doing we do quiet like and little at a time and so each year we have been doing, the last ten years.

CE: Well, now getting back to these blue ribbons I see on the table, you say your son has mainly been involved in this.

KU: My older son, Richard.

CE: These go back quite a few years, too.

KU: That's right, that's right. That started from the Art and Garden Show in Ross.

CE: 1947, '50, and so on.

KU: That's right.

CE: Well, what would you do, make a setting?

KU: Make a setting, that's right, the same as they do now.

CE: Did he keep a record of those, photographs of those?

KU: He has some photographs, yes, but not too many; I would really have to scramble to find them.

CE: That must have given you a sense of pride, that he was interested in doing this.

KU: Oh, sure, yes.

CE: Do you remember any of them, Mrs. Kent, particularly? That the West End did?

AK: Oh, sure, just perfect.

CE: Of course, Mrs. Kent's been involved in the Marin Art and Garden Center since they started.

KU: Yes, yes. And then, of course, when Rich was not here any more than Tom and Denny took over and then the last few years Denny, the one who is not in business, but he is the most artistic. It's a little extra money for him so he's interested in that.

CE: What is your wife's main contribution, other than being your moral support?

KU: Supporting me yes, yes.

CE: Does she have a specific duty in the business?

KU: No specific duty, but she is interested in pots, baskets and containers and anything new.

CE: Does she sell in the store?

KU: Oh, yes, yes.

CE: How many do you have helping you here?

KU: We have, actually Bill and Thomas and Scott, there's three, and Ted on weekends.

CE: So there's a half a dozen of you.

KU: That's right, that's right, yes.

CE: And you're able to --

KU: Oh, yes, yes, you just -- Certain days you just --

CE: And what did you do when problems come up like the drought of '75 and '76, just weather it through?

KU: That was a problem, yes. Of course, that was one I could see the handwriting on the walls so we drilled a well.

CE: Oh, you did? On the property?

KU: On the property. Water was always very reasonable so we never could see there was any necessity to drill a well. When Uncle Richard bought the property there was a well next -- where we have the fishpond now but that ran dry in late summer and so he just built the fishpond over it and --

CE: Do you still use the well for watering your plants?

KU: Oh, yes, sure. We were fortunate enough that we get about 1,500 gallons a day and we have a tank there and when we finished that, then we switch over to city water. But we always use that first because that has saved us. Because I figured out the time when we had it drilled that it would take about twenty years to pay for itself, but now with the water rate up so high I feel that it has already paid for itself and it's much better water, too, than the Marin Municipal water we get. There are no chemicals or anything in it.

CE: You might be interested -- On Tuesday we interviewed a man, Bob Brusatori, who had been with the water company for 47 years and 10 months and I asked him a question because a lot of old timers like Mr. Mailliard ask, "I don't think the water is as good as it used to be." And he said, "Well, he's right."

KU: That's right.

CE: He said we have to put all these things in the water today.

KU: Yeah, yeah, I mean, the state tells them you have to do this and do this. And they have to be careful, too, with all these suits that people bring up so that they really have to have nothing go wrong.

CE: Well, getting back to this drought period, you had the water but many of your customers didn't, so what did you do, guide them in native plants and things that needed less water?

KU: Well, the problem is, native plants are fine, but again it takes them three or four years before they are established, so it didn't -- We sold a lot of oleander, a lot of bottle brush, a lot of pyracanthas, because those are drought resistant as any native. Also, we had a lot of color in four inch pots and people where they used to buy a whole box or so, they always bought one or two; they had to have some color. So we got by; we didn't make much money, but we got by.

CE: They still kept coming in and buying something.

KU: That's right. And we had many other things, too. We had a lot of pots and we had houseplants, of course, and baskets, and of course in the store all of the utensils, everything that you need for the --

CE: Would you say over the years more people, from your judgment, more people are interested in plants than were before? The young people, for instance?

KU: Young people, yes, definitely. Of course, we have ever so many more homes here now and people are interested in their homes. I mean, people were interested in their homes fifty years ago, too, but you didn't have nearly as many lawns at that time as we have now. Now everybody has a lawn, just about everybody. Because at that time the water was quite high to water things with but a lot of people just had groundcover shrubs or so in those days, but people were always interested in gardens and, of course, we do have so many more homes there so everybody is very interested in keeping up. It took a little while. It took at least a year or so for many people that were accustomed to the drought garden to get back into gardening again. Because so many people just park their cars in front where the lawn used to be, and put gravel in and just didn't pay any attention to it, let the weeds grow up, but now within the last year or so people take much more pride in their garden again and are planting more.

CE: Have you been to Mrs. Kent's home?

KU: I haven't been recently, no.

AK: It's just as well.

CE: Oh, it's beautiful. It's beautiful. You'll come there in the summer because we give a reception every year to the people we interview, so you and your family will be invited.

KU: Oh, I see.

AK: Well, we have deer, you see.

KU: Yes, I know you have.

CE: Well, I have deer, too.

KU: We have deer, too. I have to fence my roses in right there. They don't nibble anything else, but the roses I have to fence in.

CE: Well now, Karl, tell us a little bit about your suppliers. You can't raise everything here.

KU: No we don't raise anything anymore.

CE: You don't raise anything? You don't start little seeds?

KU: No. Oh, for my pet projects.

CE: Buy you buy everything?

KU: That's right. You see, years ago we used to raise at least 75 percent of our materials so sometimes we either had feast or famine. You never knew what people wanted from year to year. Now, the suppliers come in once a week, sometimes twice a week, and you can get anything you want within a week. All you do is lift up the telephone and the truck rolls in at the end of the week or the following week and also you can have a much better uniform supply.

CE: I suppose there are many more suppliers now, too?

KU: Yes, yes, there are.

CE: Anxious for your business.

KU: Yes, quite a few more. Like this morning, yesterday already, three, four trucks came in this morning. Three more trucks came in, some with supplies for the store and some with --

CE: Do you do most of the ordering, Karl?

KU: No, no. Actually Tom does most of the ordering, Tom and Ann do the pots and baskets and containers. I do the ordering of plants sometimes when Tom isn't around and then we have the other one, Thomas Lindly. He does the fertilizer and peat moss, that sort

of thing, and Bill Walker does the color material. So, each one has a little something. It gives them a little authority too and I don't --

CE: You share the responsibility.

KU: That's right.

CE: If you're sick one day or something the thing isn't going to fall apart.

KU: This is it. It's much better that way because if I would do everything the others would be lost and I don't want to do everything.

CE: Tell me, Karl, do you ever go out in a consulting basis?

KU: Yes, I do. Well, it's not consulting basis. I have --

CE: Suppose somebody with a lovely garden or home said, "I need some judgment on what to do here." Will you do that?

KU: Yes. I go out on Mondays in the Kentfield, Mill Valley areas and San Anselmo and on Fridays, Glenwood and Terra Linda and Marinwood and I just make short calls; it's not long, and this is a service of the nursery.

CE: A service of the nursery, oh, my goodness.

KU: Yes, it's a service of the nursery. I feel -- I don't feel that I should charge.

CE: Can you imagine that, any other nursery doing that, Anne?

KU: I feel if I do charge I should spend at least an hour and I don't have that time.

CE: A customer might call up and say, "I've just put in a new terrace or patio or the pool and I need some counsel. What am I going to put around, the planting?"

KU: Yes, I go out. I tell them all the time that I do plants, is all I do. I do not do any planning for walkways, terraces, anything like that; plants, yes.

AK: Marian Hobbs is your greatest admirer. You went down to Tiburon, number One, San Rafael Avenue, and planted and everything looks so lovely and owes it all to you, she says.

CE: Another person I knew raves about it is Jack Bissinger.

KU: Oh, yes.

CE: He's crazy about it.

KU: Yes, he is a real old timer.

CE: You've been in this business so long and you know all these old timers. She asked about old man, A.W. Foster. What was he like?

KU: We was a very tall, stately man, very robust. "Hello," he said when he came into the nursery, "I want such and such." And the gardener that was there at the time when I came, I vaguely remember, he came running down and always asking Uncle Richard, "What shall I do now? What shall I do now? He wants this and he wants that." But --

CE: Did you ever see any of his Hungarian ponies he raised?

KU: No that I didn't. I think they were gone by that time. I think in the heydays Uncle Richard mentioned them and Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Kresiler, and I forget the others. They all had their own horse and buggy, always going up and down H Street.

CE: How about Mr. Dollar? Did Captain Dollar ever come in here?

KU: Captain Dollar yes, oh yes. Goateed. He actually -- His original house was on the corner of Forbes and J Street and then he moved into what is the Dollar place now and then later on --

CE: A lot of people think he built that house but it isn't so.

KU: Oh, no, no, no.

CE: They just lived there a while.

KU: They just bought that house. They rebuilt the house, of course.

CE: Did you know Louise Boyd?

KU: Oh, yes, sure. She was quite a character, too. She came in with a chauffeur, too, in her phaeton, and she was very robust. Almost like she could have been a sister to Mr. Foster; quite manly, yes.

CE: She went to Greenland and the North Pole. She was quite an explorer.

KU: Yes. I understand though that she died broke.

CE: Yes, isn't that ironic? Mrs. Kent could never understand that because she lived so lavishly.

KU: That's right, that's right. She must have just -- Some friends or so must have lent her money.

CE: Or sometimes you live as long as the money is there and then --

KU: That's right and all of a sudden it's gone.

AK: She wasn't spending it on herself, except for those hospital bills. She didn't do, after the exploring, she didn't really do anything extravagant.

KU: No, that's right, she didn't do much.

AK: I never could understand it.

KU: She had quite a garden in back; there was a greenhouse. There was an Englishman. He lived on the other side of the hill there. He was the gardener.

CE: Your uncle must have provided some gardening service then for some of those estates in Ross, too?

KU: Well, he did, although they had their own gardeners. Like where the -- I forget what the name was where the Buckner estate is now.

CE: Dibblee. Harrison Dibblee

KU: That's right, Dibblee, because there was an Italian gardener, and Caletti, yes, John Caletti, Joe Caletti, and he always came and bought the various bedding plants and a lot of vegetables. He raised a lot of vegetables in the back there.

CE: Well, that property now, all that Mr. Dibblee had, of course, has been subdivided, the Katherine Branson School's on part of it. Did the school get anything from you? Did they have a garden?

KU: Very little, very little. No, they don't do much planting, and whenever they do, if they do big jobs, that's contracted out. I think they did a lawn or two several years ago. They don't do very much gardening actually, mostly maintenance. It's an old place so there is not too much --

CE: That's true. There are just some curved driveways and some lawn and a few trees.

KU: Yes, that's right.

CE: Do you deliver? Does your company deliver?

KU: We do deliver. We have, again our areas --

CE: Certain days you go here or there?

KU: That's right.

CE: And a certain limit? You have to buy \$25 worth or something?

KY: Yes, that's right. And if there's a good size order, several hundred dollars or so, we'll deliver that same day that people have to have them, but otherwise we have our certain days. The same as when I go out, sometimes there's small things and I just throw them in and then --

CE: Throw them in the truck?

KU: Because delivery is an expense.

CE: What do you do with a dissatisfied customer who comes back a week later and says they're all dead?

KU: Well, if it's a week later we give them a new one.

CE: Do you really?

KU: Oh, yes, yes. But again, we look at the plant. It shouldn't be dead, but anyhow, I have many plants in the nursery that I give the people another plant or I put it in a container and --

CE: And you save it?

KU: Yeah, yeah. I tell them, "It is not dead."

CE: What is the worst thing people do to plants?

KU: Well, over-water.

CE: Over water, isn't it?

KU: That's right, over watering or planting too deep.

CE: Planting too deep!

KU: We always keep on telling everyone, "Be sure, don't plant it any deeper than the container. Do not bury the plant, plant it." The same on bare root trees, the graft above the ground. So many people --

CE: They dig a huge -- and smother it.

KU: Yes, I do many calls where people say, "My plants are not doing well, what's wrong with them?" So I stop by when I'm in the neighborhood and it's always too deep.

CE: Did you ever know that, Mrs. Kent?

KU: Had a call just yesterday. This man said, "Do you have any more black Mission Figs?" And I told him, "I'm sorry we're completely out but I could order a white Adriatic." "Well, I bought one a month ago and it's dead." I said, "How come it's dead?" "Well, it has no leaves on it." I told him a fig tree will be another four to six weeks before it has any leaves on it.

CE: So some are smart and some are still as --

KU: I had another one, too, last week. She had bought five plants last fall and now they're all brown; they're all dead. So I went out there, she didn't even know what it was. So I went out there. It was in one of the trailer homes at Santa Venetia, and these were the juniper baja and it was winter color. So I left a note there and so apparently she saw -- I left my -- We have little Ortho book with our name on it and I left a note inside. Well, she found the Ortho book and she telephoned then and she said, "Well, what's wrong with the plants?" I said, "Well, I wrote to you and wrote that they were not dead; this was winter color." Well, she didn't find it. So anyhow, I told her there was nothing wrong with those plants and to wait another six weeks and they'll all turn nice and green again. This is the beauty of the plants.

CE: Well, I tell you, Karl, it has been a delight to have you share with us this story and I'm so impressed with what you have achieved and carried on from your uncle, and I think you provide a service beyond the normal, and it's been a pleasure to meet you.

KU: Thank you very much.