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Anne T. Kent California Room

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INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA FOSTER ABBOT
by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
January 27, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: Martha Foster Abbot (M.F.)
ALSO PRESENT: Margaret Calhoun (M.C.)
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (C.E.) and Anne Kent (A.K.)
DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 27, 1977

C.E. – Today is Thursday, January 27, 1977. Continuing the Oral History program of the California Room at the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat, and today we have the privilege of being at the residence of Martha Foster Abbot, Mrs. Samuel Leonard Abbot, at number 501 Via Casitas in Greenbrae, California. And joining her today is her sister-in-law, Mrs. Paul Foster, also of Greenbrae. Martha Foster Abbot is one of nine children of Louisiana Scott Foster and Arthur William Foster. One of her brothers, Paul, married Margaret Calhoun, who is here with us today. The ladies have agreed to share with us some of their reminiscences of the Arthur W. Foster family and describe life at Fairhills, the estate of the Foster family in San Rafael.

The life and achievements of Arthur William Foster have been recorded in many books, magazines and newspaper articles. Today we would like, however, to embellish these records with the personal recollections of two members of his family. Arthur William Foster lived 80 eventful years, 1850 through 1930, and during his lifetime he achieved many successes. To name a few, he was a successful businessman and broker, a philanthropist, a founder of the Bank of San Rafael which subsequently became the Crocker Bank. He was President of the San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad. He was a regent of the University of California for 27 years, and he was the originator of the idea to have a University of California campus at Davis.

M.F. – He was one of the originators. He worked with Phoebe Apperson Hearst on that.

C.E. – Thank you, Martha.

M.C. – He also worked with the Carnegie Institution.

C.E. – And also, he was one of the founders of the Mount Tamalpais Military Academy, and an art collector. It is nice to be here with you this afternoon, Martha. Good afternoon.

M.F. – It's delightful to have you here.

C.E. – Tell me, Martha, I understand that your father was born in Ireland in 1850. Do you know what brought him to the United States?

M.F. – He was sent to New York first to correct a situation that had gone wrong. I do not know the details. But he came back knowing that he wanted to return and to live in this country.

C.E. – He was in New York about 1870, and then when did he settle in California, Martha, about 1876?

M.F. – Before that. They were married in 1876. It must have been around '72, 1 or 2.

C.E. – Now I understand that he was working for a broker in New York and came west and liked it so much that he stayed. But he brought with him a letter of introduction to a Dr. William Anderson Scott. Do you have a story on that, Martha?

M.F. – Well, the thing that is interesting to me that in those days, if you went to a new place and you wished to know the people who were important, you allied yourself with the church. So his letter to Dr. Scott introduced him to his daughter, and they were married in 1876.

C.E. – You remember about your maternal grandfather, Dr. Scott?

M.F. – That he was a dynamic person and that he was with Mr. Muir on one of the trips into the Yosemite Valley. It was his writing of it, when he returned, his enthusiasm, that was one of the factors that led to the dedication of the valley.

C.E. – Isn't that an extraordinary story!

M.F. – Yes, he was asked to name one of the falls. I think it was Vernal Falls.

C.E. – Well now, your mother's name was Louisiana and I presume she was born in that state.

M.F. – Yes. No, she was born in New Orleans.

C.E. – New Orleans, Louisiana. Your father married her in 1876 and they had nine children.

M.F. – They lived in San Francisco.

C.E. – Initially they lived in San Francisco. Where did they live, do you recall?

M.F. – Well Bush Street, and then later further up. I don't remember. I can't tell you this minute.

C.E. – Bush Street.

M.F. – But they started coming to San Rafael for the summers and then purchased what was the Mailliard Family, and I think moved over in 1885.

C.E. – I see. Now that's Adolph Mailliard who built the house that you now refer to as Fairhills. He purchased that land and built that home in the 1860s. And there was another owner in between.

M.F. - Yes, Mailliard sold to Butterworth. Butterworth sold to Mr. Foster.

C.E. – Would you name your brothers and sisters? I understand your parents had nine children. Is that correct, Martha?

M.F. – Billy, Mary, Arthur, Anna, Rob, Lou, Paul, Martha, Ben.

C.E. – Now, were all of you children born at Fairhills?

M.F. – No.

C.E. – No. You were though, Martha.

M.F. – Yes, I was born there.

C.E. – And when were you born?

M.F. – In 1891.

C.E. – What is the birth date?

M.F. – April 8th.

C.E. – April 8th. Would you at this moment describe your parents for us? Would you describe your father first? Your earliest recollection of him.

M.F. – Well, my childhood recollection of him was a person who demanded great respect. He did not play easily. Mother was the open door for us children, she played beautifully on the piano and was gay at heart. But always quiet, never took part in any of the women's organizations of early days. Seems to me that she was home all the time.

C.E. – Well, as the years rolled by and your father offered your estate for the Grape Festival, your mother didn't partake in that either?

M.F. – Oh well, she was in that; she was helping in that. The first meeting of what later became the Grape Festival. It was not known as Grape Festival now, it was an orphanage.

C.E. – Yes, the Presbyterian orphanage.

M.F. – Yes, the Presbyterian orphanage was in San Rafael at that time. I remember the building. And then they moved out to San Anselmo. As I say, the garden party given up on the hill, in the garden at Fairhills, was not a practical place. The road up was narrow. And it was after that the Kent's so generously took over, and it became the very famous Grape Festival when it was on the Kent grounds.

C.E. – Joining us today also is Mrs. Thomas Kent of Kent Woodlands. Anne, what is your earliest recollection of the time that the Grape Festival was held on the Kent property?

A.K. – Well I wasn't here.

C.E. – I know you weren't here.

A.K. – But I hear about it. And just as Martha said, it moved down from the San Rafael, down to -- And I suppose it was in that time part of the Presbyterian Church.

M.F. – It had been backed by the Presbyterian Church. It's a history of Presbyterianism that very often they back things, and when once started they would withdraw and turn it over.

C.E. – I see, dear, I see. It have a photograph here of your father. He was a handsome gentleman.

M.F. – Very impressive.

C.E. – Very impressive. A little awe-inspiring, a little foreboding.

M.F. – And yet kind and generous. The tragedy of his life was that he wanted to give all the time. He wanted to provide and to give to everyone everywhere, and that impoverished him.

C.E. – I would like to quote from a book, if I may, and it's from Jack Mason's *The Making of Marin*. He describes in a short paragraph in 1906 about your father, and I quote: "San Rafael was refuge to hundreds of victims of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. A shed 200 foot long was built in Foster Park, behind the Hotel Rafael, along with 200 tents that Arthur Foster put up. A regular Tent City the Marin Journal called it, with telephone, electric lights and sewer connections."

M.F. – I don't remember that at all.

C.E. – Well, you would be a youngster.

M.F. – It was the Army that set up tents and took the Coleman Tract. It was known as the Coleman. Father bought that with the idea of giving it to San Rafael.

C.E. – But he did it, he did it according to the books. Your father actually underwrote that and arranged it.

M.F. – I didn't know that.

A.K. – On his property.

C.E. – Yes, on his property.

M.F. – Well, on the Coleman, yes. But was the Coleman Tract, did then belonged to him. It was not on the Fairhills property.

C.E. – No, no. We know this is near Dominican, back of the Hotel Rafael. What was your mother like? You said-- Do you resemble your mother?

M.F. - I don't think so.

C.E. - No. You said she was accomplished and quiet and was a homemaker. And the father was the dominant, forceful one.

M.F. – Yes, he was very dominant.

C.E. – Was he away a good deal?

M.F. – No, he was back and forth.

C.E. – Where were his headquarters, in San Francisco?

M.F. – In San Francisco he had an office on Sansome Street. And all of his records were burned there at the time of the fire. Every record, every account of anything of his career in San Francisco was burned.

C.E. – You said earlier over luncheon that you and your daughter visited Ireland, and you were trying to trace some of the history.

M.F. – Of the Nicholson family.

C.E. – And you found out once again, records were destroyed.

M.F. – Yes. Outside of Belfast when we tried to find the Foster records, they had been destroyed. And there is a very interesting man, a cousin Willie Cleary, who was captain of what resembled, of what would be compared to our National Guard, who met and knew all of these men at the time of the war. The landing field taken over by our Air Force adjoined the property where my grandmother was born.

C.E. – Well, we have some photographs here, Martha, of the house on Fairhills, and it's a beautiful home. What was the lifestyle there? Can you describe? You had a staff of help naturally, to maintain this beautiful home and grounds.

M.F. – We had so much help that it seemed perfectly natural. There was never any strain. We had two butlers, two in the kitchen, two maids upstairs, aside from the gardeners, and laundryman.

C.E. – Chinese help?

M.F. – Oh yes, Chinese kitchen help, Japanese butler and helper. But there was a complete sense of accord and great courtesy. I was fond of all of them.

C.E. – Was your household run on a fairly tight schedule, would you say?

M.F. – No. I don't know anything about it.

C.E. – Did you get up early, or did you have to be --

M.F. – My father demanded that all his sons be at the breakfast table at seven in the morning.

C.E. – How about the daughters? Just the sons.

M.F. – No, he gave up. I never had any bringing up. And dinner was always started with a blessing. It was always formal. Not according to dress, particularly, except that we be neat and clean. And so there was that type of formality. That's why I spoke in these notes of a solidity of home. I used that word.

C.E. – Yes, we will get to that with our conclusion. Now, there are various references to the size of Fairhills. Some books say it was 180 acres, some say 135. Do you have an opinion?

M.F. – I thought it was 640. I thought it was a section.

C.E. – All right, that's good to know. Now, I have here a photograph, Martha, of some charming Hungarian ponies. Was this something your father became interested in?

M.F. – Yes, he bought a band of Hungarian ponies. I don't know where. They originally came from Russia. And they were a small type, more beautiful than the Shetlands, and with white mane and tails. Well, I'm glad you have that picture.

C.E. – Yes, this is -- Margaret gave us that.

M.F. – We were very proud of them and the band was kept for a number of years. And we brought into it a Manila type which gave a little more desired height. But the ponies were beautiful and high-spirited.

C.E. – Did any of these ponies find their homes within the confines of Marin? Did you sell them to other families in Ross Valley, for example?

M.F. – Oh yes.

C.E. – Well, I have here also a photograph of the beautiful barn on your property. Did you have your own saddle horse?

M.F. – Oh, later years. We lived on ponies as long as we could.

C.E. – Live on ponies. All right.

M.F. – This is a side view of the barn that was built. It was a hexagon.

C.E. – Yes, and here is a carriage.

M.F. – Yes, it was a Phaeton.

C.E. – That was the Phaeton. Beautiful!

M.F. – It took 15 minutes to drive to the railroad station, you see; they'd have to leave at least 15 to 20 minutes from Fairhills to get down to the station.

C.E. – And your father would then take the train and go down to Sausalito and then take the ferry.

M.F. – No, Tiburon.

C.E. – Tiburon, excuse me.

M.F. – Narrow gauge was Sausalito.

C.E. – Right, and he bought out the line that was the Donohue’s that ran to Tiburon. That’s correct.

M.F. – I never knew he bought the railroad.

C.E. – He was president of it, he controlled it.

M.C. – He owned it.

C.E. – I’d like to read into record, if I may, a little bit about that. There is a book entitled *Redwood Railways* by Gilbert Kneiss, published in 1956, and it says that, “In February, 1893, the Superior Court of Marin County ordered the 42,000 Donohue shares of the San Francisco North Pacific Railroad, which then ran from Tiburon to Ukiah, to be sold at auction in the administration of the state. Mr. A.W. Foster had been watching carefully for this announcement. And Mr. Foster, who had worked for a New York Brokerage House and first saw California when he was sent after an absconding fellow employee returning the offender to judgment, he had come back to stay. Now, in addition to his San Francisco Brokerage House, he owned three large Sonoma County ranches and with Sydney V. Smith... and Andrew Markham...he formed a syndicate and entered the successful bid. Except for Mr. Smith’s connection with the San Rafael and San Quentin Railroad, which was known as the Bobtail Railroad, none of the three had any previous railway experience. The court awarded the SFNPR to Foster, Smith and Markham on March 23, 1893” and Foster became the president. It says further, he was a quite demanding boss. “Economy became the slogan” and “there was grumbling but times were hard in the ‘90s.” And continuing further, “To Foster... belongs much of the credit for opening up the Russian River country as a vacation land.” Summer homes came to his mind. And the first sub-division was Mirabel Park, then followed with Camp Vacation. And you gave it another name, too.

M.C. – Rio Campo.

C.E. – Rio Campo, The Russian River Heights, Rio Nido, and Summer Home Park.

M.F. – I don’t remember Mirabel Park or Rio Nido as being connected.

C.E. – And this writer concludes with this little paragraph that I think is charming; he says: “Soon hundreds of city families boasted vacation homes” and “Guerneville converted itself from a hard-drinking, bull whacking lumber camp to a village of parasols, mandolins and ice-cream sodas.”

M.F. – Do you know, I suppose that Miriam is too far gone; the McNear’s were connected with that development along the Russian River.

M.C. – And Rio Campo wasn’t a real estate thing; that was his home place.

C.E. – Right. Well, let's get back to you, Martha. Now, you've been raised on these ponies around the property and then it's about time for you to go to school. Where did you go to school?

M.F. – Miss Stewart's Private School.

C.E. – And where was that located?

M.F. – A converted stable on 5th street.

C.E. – Where the city hall is today?

M.F. – Yes.

C.E. – Who were some of your classmates? Do you recall some of their names?

M.F. – Beatrice Howitt was one, Sarah Coffin, Marisha Mencher, Dolly Jenkins, Bernice Alexander, the two Boyles, oh we can't go into all these angles. The Boyle family was an exceedingly interesting family, but I can't get into that.

C.E. – And you went to the Stewart school for how long? What grade did it go through? The 12th?

M.F. – I don't know that we had any regular grades. And later on my sister, all my sisters, went to Miss Morrison's in San Francisco. But Miss Morrison had given up her school by the time it was my time, so I went to a boarding school in Santa Barbara. Blanchard Campbell; I was two years there.

C.E. – Oh, wonderful.

M.F. – It was up near the Mission. And that was before the streets were paved. We used to ride down to the ocean on Santa Barbara Avenue, on the dirt roads.

C.E. – At luncheon Margaret mentioned that her earliest remembrance of Fairhills in San Rafael was that Fourth Street wasn't paved.

M.C. – Muddy in the winter.

C.E. – Muddy in the winter. Now what year would we be talking about, Margaret?

M.C. – About 1908.

C.E. – 1908. So you came out after the earthquake.

M.C. – I finished school in New York, 1908. I came out to San Francisco and met the Fosters at once.

C.E. – Well, let's get back to your vacations. Now your father had these ranches. One was at Hopland and I don't know where the others were.

M.F. – He bought lumber outside of Willits. He invested in a Redwood Company. It was developed and it was a cause of his financial distress; at that time they lost money to it.

C.E. – But would you spend most of your vacations on one of these ranches?

M.F. – At Hopland.

C.E. – At Hopland.

M.F. – Yes, Hopland was our favorite place.

C.E. – And what was at Hopland? Cattle and timber?

M.F. – We had a pear orchard and access to the River and hill land.

C.E. – All of you children go there every summer?

M.F. – Yes, we all went there.

C.E. – And bring some of your classmates? Live in tents?

M.F. – Yes, there was a main house, but we slept in tents.

M.C. – Did you take your ponies along with you, Martha?

M.F. – Oh yes, the ponies were all -- I don't know how they got them up there.

C.E. – How did you get there? On the train?

M.F. – Yes, I think they were put on the train in a boxcar. And we had complete charge. Up there we had complete charge of our pony. The care of the stall, everything about them.

C.E. – The grooming of them and the taking care of the tack?

M.F. – Oh, yes. We used to ride down to the river for swimming in the afternoon; the Russian River was a lovely place. Claire Nichols was one of the, no, Claire was one that associated with the Jewitt School.

C.E. – Was her father the Bishop of San Francisco?

M.F. – Yes, Bishop Nichols.

C.E. – The Episcopalian Bishop.

M.F. – Claire is still living, but is very hazy in her mind. She is living over in San Francisco, at the Sequoia's. She has faded out gracefully, quietly. She was a most vital, loving young person there could be.

C.E. – Dolly Jenkins gave us a beautiful photograph of her and your sister, Louisiana, in a two-seater trap over in Bolinas. It's a charming photograph, have you seen that?

M.F. – Well, they're in those pictures there. And Lou ran the Lodge at the Yosemite for awhile. She went up there and lived there at the Awahnee. She went to the Awahnee and then took charge of the lodge in Yosemite, and later on the tavern up in the big trees, the Wawona. She was an amazing person.

C.E. – Did she ever marry?

M.F. – Never; she had more beaux than you could count and wonderful men. They had a very happy young group; they used to have awfully good times together. I was sort of a hanger-on. I was four years younger than she was, and I trailed along. But they had a very large group, Marg knows that group too.

M.C. – Oh yes, it was wonderful.

M.F. – Very much part of it.

M.C. - Dolly Class, Sarah Coffin.

M.F. – Marisia.

M.C. – Well, she came in later.

M.F. – Yes.

C.E. – Did you go over to Bolinas often?

M.F. – Oh yes. We rode or drove.

C.E. – Rode your horses?

M.F. – Oh yes. In the early days there was a stagecoach, but I think we usually drove or rode our own. There were barns there that we could usually put them up in. Dipsea was a delightful place to go. There are lots of pictures of Dipsea here.

C.E. – Good, we'll look at those. Dolly gave us one or two. There's a charming photograph. I'll get it. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about Bolinas? Martha or Margaret. You'd go there on weekends instead of --

M.F. – Yes, we would go and stay often for a week or two weeks. And it was a very delightful place in those days.

C.E. – Did you have a home there?

M.F. – I didn't have a home there, but we had houses that we could rent. The Almer Newhalls had that lovely place right down on the beach, at the end of the road as you go to the beach through Bolinas. The last place on the right was the Almer Newhall's home. Almer was married to my cousin Anna Scott.

C.E. – I see. Well, let's get back to the other side of the mountain and let's get the story of the seminary site. Now correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me that your father attended a land auction in San Anselmo in 1889 and purchased a 19-acre diary ranch which was known as Sunnyside; is that right?

M.F. – Yes.

C.E. – And about the same time the trustees of the seminary, then in San Francisco, were thinking of moving. Evidently your maternal grandfather needed more room.

M.F. – And he died, I think about that time.

C.E. – And your father then invited them to inspect his property, and they did. Is that correct so far?

M.F. – I'm not sure; I'm not sure just when grandfather Scott died. Whether he died before the move to San Anselmo or not.

C.E. – He did; he did die, according to the book. But in a book called *Old Marin with Love*, published in the bi-centennial year, there's an article in there written by Clifford Drury and he says on September 16, 1889 the trustees of the seminary went over and saw the land. And your father then said, well, I will donate the land if the trustees would make improvements which would cost at least \$25,000 within two years. And they accepted the gift of land and the considerations, and then your father then was made a member of the board in 1890. Is that pretty much as you recall it?

M.F. – I thought it was in '93, but I guess it was before that.

C.E. – Now, there was some land that was bordering on Sir Francis Drake that was subsequently sold.

M.F. – Well, they had to sell off. The seminary was in a dreadful financial state, and to be able to maintain it and to develop it they sold off the flat land between what was then the railroad and the hill.

C.E. – I see.

M.F. – So you get all that tract that is now crowded with houses as far as Montgomery Chapel, was part of the original grant. And they went through many years of stringent financial need; many of the professors served without pay.

C.E. – There is a painting of the seminary done by Farnsworth, who also did a painting of Fairhills.

M.F. – Yes.

C.E. – I wonder if that painting is at the seminary.

M.F. – I don't know where it is.

M.C. – Downstairs in the Bensor house.

C.E. – The seminary painting?

M.C. – No, no, the home place. Farnsworth's big one of the home place. There is a little painting of the seminary by Farnsworth that hangs in the office over there, down at the seminary.

C.E. – I see.

M.C. – It's a small one, not a very big one.

C.E. – Well, your grandfather, Dr. Scott, died four years before this all took place; did your grandmother survive him?

M.F. - She came to San Rafael, and she died in San Rafael, not long after him. She lived with mother. I never saw her; she died before I was born.

C.E. – Well the buildings, Scott Hall, Montgomery Hall, Montgomery Chapel, and the whole setting of it is beautiful.

M.F. – Well, Mr. Montgomery's money did most of that. He was a man that grandfather Scott persuaded to be interested in Presbyterian development. And he gave the money that built those buildings. That's why one is Montgomery Hall up on top of the hill.

C.E. – But your father was the one who had the foresight to give the land.

M.F. – To give the land. It is the most beautiful. I think in all Marin there's nothing more beautiful.

C.E. – Martha, we see it from our home. When you look, it's like a castle on the Rhine.

M.F. – Well, you look into every kind of country. It's the most beautiful situation.

C.E. – And we've interviewed a couple called Mr. & Mrs. Warren Landon; did you know that name?

M.F. – Oh, yes, I know them, Dr. Landon.

C.E. – She was telling us a little bit of the morning of the earthquake there; she was on the grounds and that was something.

M.F. – Yes, the old tower of Scott Hall collapsed.

C.E. – You mentioned at luncheon some names that I wish you'd repeat for me. You talked about McPhails's; was it a livery stable first?

M.F. – Yes, we had a livery stable.

C.E. – Is this in your notes? Then we'll save that then.
(end of Side A)

C.E. – Martha, I have here this lovely photograph of your home in Fairhills, and you're standing in front of it. Would you take us by the hand and walk us up those stairs, across that veranda and describe the house? What do you enter first, the vestibule?

M.F. You go into a hall that I suppose is 14 or 16 feet wide, that led down to a door that opened into the dining room. And on the left were, what were then called, the front and back parlors. They were over there. On the right-hand side was the billiard room and beyond that, my father's study.

C.E. – I see. And the staircase came directly down?

M.F. – The staircase came about midway in the first hallway.

C.E. – Was the house heavily carpeted?

M.F. – Well rugs, not wall-to-wall carpet.

C.E. – What was on the walls, do you remember?

M.F. – Yes, a red sort of damask.

C.E. – Red damask.

M.F. – I think the front parlor was blue, wasn't it Margaret?

M.C. – Yes.

M.F. – The back parlor was red; there were connecting doors. We had 52 at our last Thanksgiving there, family.

C.E. – All right, we'll get to that. Back of the study, moving forward in the house, what was back of your father's study?

M.F. – Later on the billiard room was moved to there and the former billiard room had cupboards where my mother's collections of Pomo baskets was housed. She had a marvelous collection of Pomo baskets which is now in the museum at Sacramento.

C.E. – Sacramento. And what was back of that room? Where was the kitchen in relation to all of this?

M.F. – The kitchen was back of the dining room; there was a pantry and a servant's dining hall, dining room, and then the kitchen. And beyond that, a second dining room for the men from the stables and all. And that was where, for a while, the laundry was there too. Later on there was a separate laundry room.

C.E. – Was the dining room back of the two parlors? Did I understand that?

M.F. – It was at the end of the hall; the two parlors were at the left.

M.C. – Right in the front door, you faced the dining room door, down at the end of the hall, with the big windows where the waterfalls come down when they ran the water.

C.E. – All right, then we go upstairs, and up this huge staircase and there were --

M.F. – One, two, three, four, five, six, seven bedrooms there and in the annex were the maid's quarters and bath. That was built out above where the kitchen was.

C.E. – How did you get your water in those days, do you know? Did you have a well?

M.F. – We had springs; I don't know where it came from. Margaret, do you remember? We had plenty of water.

C.E. – Do you remember your own personal bedroom and how you had it decorated, Martha?

M.F. – Oh yes, it had beautiful yellow roses on the wall and a large gilt mirror over the fireplace. Every room had its own fireplace, because there was no central heating plant,

except in very early days a white-tiled column that was built in the end of the hall. This was taken out and the flu from that found charred wood. It's a wonder the house hadn't burned down. But after that a furnace was put in, you see.

C.E. – But in the earlier days you had the fireplace. Was it one of the maid's responsibilities to light a fire every night?

M.F. – The men. The men brought up wood and we or the maids, or anybody, built the fire. I learned to build fires when I was a very little person. And we used to smoke corn cobs and puff the smoke up the chimneys.

C.E. – You're no different than anybody else. Was your bedroom on the front or on the side?

M.F. Yes, it was around this corner and towards the back. This one was my mother and father's room, and then there was a dressing room, and then I had the next room beyond.

C.E. – Well, what was on the second level?

M.F. – That was the second level. This is where I was, at the time of the earthquake, up here.

C.E. – Martha, this is such a beautiful home, large and spacious as it was, and Margaret, you certainly attended these functions. I can imagine that Christmas or Thanksgiving were festive occasions in Fairhills.

M.F. – Yes, very much so.

C.E. – Can you try to recapture one of those holidays for us?

M.F. – Well, in early days, gift giving was on Christmas Eve. And on Christmas morning we always lined up outside mother and father's bedroom door and went in, and there our stockings hung that were stuffed. And that's where the opening of them took place.

C.E. – In their fireplace? In their bedroom?

M.F. – Yes, around their fireplace. It was always a time of great excitement and it was desirable that the presents that we gave were made. We had very little money to spend.

C.E. – And you made gifts for your brothers and sisters and your parents and relatives?

M.F. – Oh yes.

C.E. – What would you make? Do you recall any of the things you made?

M.F. – No, I can't.

C.E. – Did you sew?

M.F. – Oh yes. I always sewed.

C.E. – When would you have the big family dinner; on Christmas Day?

M.F. – Used to be on Christmas Eve, and then it was the exchanging of gifts after that, and then the Christmas morning. The tree was at the end of the front parlor.

C.E. – Which was the blue room? All right. The blue room. Was it a huge tree?

M.F. – Yes, it reached to the ceiling.

C.E. – Was it lighted with -- How? How was it lighted?

M.F. – I remember when the candles were lighted on it.

C.E. – Now, how did they do that, Martha?

M.F. – Well, they would set little candles; you just punched them down through the branch.

C.E. – And it wouldn't be lit too long, would it?

M.F. – Well, I suppose not, no. We were very careful about it. There was a little disk at the bottom of the candle to catch the wax, and then you just pressed it into the bough. I only have one memory of that; it must have gone to electricity soon after that, because I can only remember one time, of the candles.

C.E. – Did you say your main dinner was on Christmas Eve?

M.F. – Yes.

C.E. – Would there be other members of -- In addition to your family, would there be other guest invited?

M.F. – Not outside guests, generally just family.

C.E. – I see.

M.F. – Isn't that true?

M.C. – There wasn't much room for anybody else.

M.F. – No.

M.C. – 52.

C.E. – 52 members of the family? Well that's right, with the brothers and sisters and their children.

M.F. – I'm only saying that the last Thanksgiving we had at Fairhills, we had long tables that went down between the two parlors, and there were three or four roast turkeys brought on, carved at the table.

M.C. – Tell them how you all took turns carving, Martha -- The girls --

C.E. – Yes, how would that be done?

M.F. – I had a very clever Uncle Eb; I have his picture in here, I'll have to show you later because it really is astonishing. He was an expert carver, and for some reason, we girls were trained to carve, not the boys.

C.E. – Isn't that interesting?

M.F. – And at one stage in my life, we, and all of us could carve pretty well. Uncle Eb would never use more than one stroke to cut anything. When it came to the wing, it was a slice in this way next to the body, one there, and the wing came off.

C.E. – Now, after the big meal, did the men retire with cigars and brandy as men often did in that era?

M.F. – No, there was pretty much a shut down on alcohol. Very little alcohol was used. We didn't serve wine at the table usually.

C.E. – I see. And there wasn't a separation of the men and the women?

M.F. – No, anybody did anything they felt like.

C.E. – Did the men go and play billiards in most cases?

M.F. - Well maybe we did, too.

C.E. – You did, too.

M.F. – There was no separation. I don't remember; do you Margaret?

M.C. – No.

C.E. – Was there any music in the home other than your mother, whom you said played the piano? Did any of the children take any musical instruments?

M.F. – No, she was the one, the center of it. I have a picture of her at the piano, in my bedroom. She could improvise. And She would take off different members of the family. She'd say, now here's Martha and she'd play one way; and here's Paul, and she'd play another. And so she was a very delightful person.

C.E. – Tell me, Martha, what was Easter like? Did you have an Easter hunt?

M.F. – We were very much tied up with the Presbyterian Church, wherever it was.

C.E. – Wherever it was.

M.F. – Well, in San Rafael, this would be, not in San Anselmo.

C.E. – In San Rafael, yes.

M.F. – San Anselmo was quite a drive, you know. And the railroad train, the narrow gauge, came into San Rafael at one time. It was extended to -- It used to -- its real course was up to Point Reyes, you see. But they did bring it in and it was disastrous if we were on the horses or ponies and had to pass a train on that road. My sister was thrown out of a surrey where her team climbed the bank when the train came along. I mean those things didn't matter. They were just that. We picked up the pieces and went on.

C.E. – Did you ride the train often when you were a young woman?

M.F. – Well, if we went to the city of course we did.

C.E. – Yes, but did you ever go out to West Marin on the train?

M.F. – No.

C.E. – No. You'd either go by your ponies or some other way. I understand from Margaret, didn't you say earlier there was a train, private train, a private car, that went back east with Mr. Foster?

M.F. – Yes.

M.C. – Oh yes there was.

C.E. – And when was this?

M.F. – That was in 1904. St. Louis Exposition.

C.E. – St. Louis Exposition?

M.F. – Yes, it was called The Louisiana Purchase Exposition. And we had a maid.

C.E. – He took the children? you all went?

M.F. – Yes, yes, and that's the time we came home via Canada, and we drove in a surrey to see Lake Louise, and the hotel was a little white cottage. And then we went from there onto Banff, and that was a big place, very grand and formal. Goodness, we were astonished at that.

C.E. – Can you remember that train ride? You were what, about 8?

M.F. – 1904, no, I was about 13.

C.E. – Do you remember the trip quite vividly?

M.F. – I only remember just those incidents. I remember a little of the fair, not much.

C.E. – But the train ride itself, crossing the continent?

M.F. – No, it all happened and we had the awfully nice darkies that were porters and dining room service and all. We were never surprised at anything like that and it never occurred to us we were doing anything any different than anybody else.

C.E. – Wonderful. Well you know Mrs. Kent and I have interviewed quite a few descendents of families that lived a gracious lifestyle in the 1870s and 80s and 90s. Ross Valley for one was a beautiful lifestyle for a few families, and they thought everybody lived like that.

M.F. – I know. We didn't know anything about the rest of the world or if someone did live differently we thought that was the way they chose to live. There was never a large system they were battling through, it never occurred to us. I hated church as a child. We went to Sunday school and church every week. The whole center pew of the Presbyterian Church was our family, you see, and I used to come home and cry, I hated it so.

C.E. – Why?

M.F. – I don't know. I didn't like the service. Dr. White was our minister; and he went to serve in the Second World War, and then we had one of the men from the Seminary come in and preach. We called him "Long and Dreary Day," his was Dr. Day. He was one of the great scholars of the day. I hope this isn't being recorded, is it?

C.E. – No. Well, Margaret, tell us if you will, how you came into the family. You were from Georgia?

M.C. – From Cleveland.

C.E. – Oh, excuse me, you were born in Georgia?

M.C. – Born in Georgia. Yes, and a great joke amongst the family about -- Somebody said, “You’re southerners, but three of you were born in the south, two in New Jersey, and one in New York, and two in ?.” We were eight, you see. The first thing I heard about the Fosters -- My mother came home and said that she had met a lovely woman, very jealous of her because she had one more child than she did, and her name was Mrs. Foster and that she had nine children. So then, Mother and I were walking down Van Ness after the earthquake, when the stores were all little wooden stores with flags flying, and down Van Ness came two tall people, a lady and her daughter, Lou, who was completely sunburned from having been at Bolinas. And one was Mrs. Foster, the other was Lou. And Lou became my closest girlfriend in those days. Lou and Claire Mills, whom we lived next door to in San Francisco, were my two best friends.

C.E. – Louisiana Foster, her sister.

M.C. – Yes. She was older than Martha. My husband was in the middle; my husband was two years older than Martha, and two years younger than Lou. Well, anyway, Lou asked me over right away, over to Fairhills, and my mother said I never came home except to pack my suitcase. I was either going over to Mrs. Griffith’s, or to Mrs. Kittle’s, or to Miss Coppey’s or to Mrs. Foster’s, and the Cushing’s in Blithedale. So, I just thought that California was out of this world, it was such fun. And while my father-in-law was, well, he became my father-in-law afterwards, was austere, all of his young people were allowed to have friends. And even when they went to the ranch, each one was allowed a friend for a week and then they could have another friend for a week.

C.E. – Well, what a wonderful thought.

M.C. – Yes

M.F. – Oh, it was a lovely life.

C.E. – And then when did you marry Mr. Foster?

M.C. – My husband was a sophomore when he proposed, and I’ll tell you where it was; it was out at the little golf course. Marin Golf Course. We went out opening night; we were spending, my sister and I, Martha, who was two years older than me, so Martha was in a great deal of this -- We had dinner at Mrs. Kittle’s and then we drove out from her house to this new little club that had just been built. And then of course, this was the center of many dances in the summer.

C.E. – Yes. When you said Mrs. Kittle, interrupting you, which Mrs. Kittle are you talking about?

M.C. – Mrs. John Kittle.

C.E. – John Kittle.

M.C. – You see, Jack Kittle, her son, was in our group; Alan was older, so he didn't go.

C.E. – Did you visit them at Sunnyside?

M.C. – Yes, that was one of the first places I went. And Mrs. Kittle herself, John Kittle. I have nothing but happy memories; everybody was so jolly.

C.E. – I think you came to California in the right time.

M.C. – We thought the middle west was so jolly, because after New York it was jolly, but San Francisco really was.

C.E. – Well, let's get back to the golf club. So you were there that night.

M.C. – There that night and then many, many nights. We went out to the dances, and it was there that Paul proposed to me.

C.E. – And what year was that?

M.C. – And he was a sophomore. I guess it was '09. '09 I guess. We were married in 1911.

C.E. – 1911.

M.C. – We came back and lived on the street just next to the Fosters. So my children were, they were all part of this group.

C.E. – Well, it sounds wonderful. Well Martha, you have written something that you very graciously read to us earlier.

M.F. – You don't have to use it.

C.E. – I wish you would read it into the record. It is a beautiful, beautiful statement of your feelings.

M.F. – One looks back on early days centered in Fairhills with gratefulness. We were given freedom and development of resource, mental and physical, and a sense of solidarity, home, a confidence, a sense of solidarity in home, and a confidence in guidance. San Rafael, a village, a precious cousin never used the word town. She gave us a delightful phrase when paving of Fourth Street was suggested: "Dear me, I'm afraid we're going to have a boom." Mud was often four inches deep; at corners long stones invited the hope of a dry crossing. I'm in no way competent to give a thorough picture of early San Rafael, our lives separate in so many ways. I remember Mr. McPhail, who had a livery stable on Fourth Street, a friendly and able person who would send a man for the

shoeing of horses and ponies, on the hill, in the barn on the hill in back of our home. Mrs. Hoover, precious to us, she would bring to us from her delightful candy store delicious ice-cream sodas to the trap, when we stopped there, with ponies restless to go. Thompson's Dry Goods Store on the corner of C and Fourth, a place exciting and inviting, with mysterious garlands hung on strips above the counters. This was bought by Mr. Albert who gave so much to our community in later years. The Hotel Rafael, a beautiful building with wide verandas, graced with high-backed rocking chairs. I remember a gathering of riders on their beautiful mounts, mingling with a large group that had come to see them all. The hotel had a thick cypress maze and two paved tennis courts with shaded grandstands; tournaments were held there. And inside the impressive gates, the road led to the hotel proper, half-way up a grotto, always a mysterious and spooky place to us. The Coleman Tract, now Dominican Meadows, a mecca. The army set up tents there to shelter the refugees from the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. The Armory on Fourth Street was a meeting place for those who wished to help. Borrowed sewing machines, bolts of cloth, I remember sewing cotton flannel nightgowns. Mounted patrols from the Tamalpais Military Academy were added to the police force. They were equipped with loaded rifles and rode as far as Corte Madera, because, of course, beyond the range, there were those that wanted to pillage. One looks back on these days of childhood, because to us who are experiencing this challenge of these many years, there are so many memories. They inspire an absorbing interest in today and a search for new values. I have found it has taken many years to begin to understand the source of past efforts and to be sympathetic to the materialism of today. Always a quest for adventure.

C.E. – Thank you. Martha, tell us, now I understand your mother was one of the women who started the San Rafael Improvement Club?

M.F. – Yes.

C.E. – Now, how did that come about?

M.F. – Well, it was a need. Now Mrs. Babcock and Mrs. Menzies, I would think, and Mrs. Winteringham, were very strong in that. She was merely of that group; Mother did seldom work anything outside of her home.

C.E. – Well the site for this Improvement Club was on your Fairhills property.

M.F. – No, not on Fairhills. At the end of H Street.

C.E. – I see.

M.F. – Where Fifth comes along, and there was originally a tennis court there and a bowling alley. And that property was given and the building was bought from the Exposition in San Francisco, and brought over to be the club house.

C.E. – I understand that was the Victrola building at the Pan American, the Panama Pacific Exposition.

M.F. – Yes.

C.E. – Well, it has been a pleasure this afternoon to meet with you and your sister-in-law, Margaret Foster, and to learn a little bit directly from you two ladies what it was like at the turn-of-the-century at Fairhills.