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INTERVIEW WITH NELLIE CODONI MCISAAC  
by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent  
January 8, 1976

INTERVIEWEE: Nellie Codoni McIsaac (NM)  
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (CE) and Anne Kent (AK)  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 8, 1976  
TRANSCRIBER: Marjorie Hoffman

CE: Today is Thursday, January 8, 1976. Continuing the Oral History Program for the California Room at the Marin County Library, Civic Center, Mrs. Thomas Kent and I, Carla Ehat, are in Novato this afternoon and we will be interviewing shortly, Helen McIsaac.

NM: Nellie McIsaac; they don't know me as Helen.

CE: Right. And Mrs. McIsaac is 93 years old and is presently living in Novato but she has lived most of her life at Tocoloma.

NM: All my life at Tocoloma. I was born and raised there and I've been here in the home how for about a year.

CE: Well, tell us about the ranch and tell us about Tocoloma, Nellie.

NM: What do you want to know?

CE: How did it come, the ranch, how did it come in your family?

NM: My father came from Switzerland and first he worked on the road between Olema and Point Reyes. What was the -- Wait a minute, I'm trying to think. I guess Shafter's owned it at that time, and he worked there.

CE: Was he a young man when he came from Switzerland, Nellie?

NM: I don't know exactly how old he was, but I don't believe he was twenty. In fact, I never thought about it. But he worked there on the Shafter Ranch for a couple of years and then he still had to do his military duty. See, in Switzerland he had to put in a certain length of time.

CE: Mandatory military duty?

NM: Yes. I've forgotten -- I think it was something like six weeks. He was still a citizen of Switzerland, and to do that he had to go back and do his military duty.

CE: Fulfill his commitment.

NM: Yes, put in his six weeks time and during that time he met my mother and married her and then they came to Tocoloma. And he already had -- I don't remember if he had already made a payment on the ranch, or what, but anyway when he came back from Switzerland he brought my mother with him and they settled there in the home where my son is living now.

CE: How large was the ranch at that time? Do you recall the acreage?

NM: Wait a minute, let me think, how much is it now? Oh, I think it was around sixty-odd acres, something like that. It was just that hillside in back of the house, you know. It went up from, well, let's say the Mazza Ranch to the Cheda Ranch. There's a creek there dividing on one side on the Mazza Ranch and another creek that divides it on the Cheda Ranch. I think that's the --

CE: Tell us, Nellie, give us the date of your birth?

NM: August 31<sup>st</sup>.

CE: And the year?

NM: I'm 93 years old so figure it out for yourself.

CE: She won't tell us. All right, your parents came to the Tocoloma Ranch; did it have a name at that time?

NM: Not that I know of. I don't know.

CE: All right, then you were born.

NM: Right there on the ranch and I went a long ways when I got married, all of six miles!

CE: How did you have the courage to go out in the provinces? Did you marry a neighbors' son?

NM: Well, yes. The McIsaacs were on that ranch over the years and he was born there.

CE: What was your maiden name, Nellie?

NM: Codoni.

CE: I see. Do you have sisters?

NM: No. Well, yes, I had a sister, but she died just before I was born. But I have four brothers and they're all gone. I'm the last of the Mohicans.

AK: Were any of the Codonis in San Anselmo related to you?

NM: In San Anselmo? I guess there are. There's some in San Rafael, I know, and I think possibly some of their connections are in San Anselmo. I don't see very much of --

CE: So there were several ranches right there: the Codoni, the Cheda, the McIsaac.

NM: Well, the McIsaac, yes, but McIsaac never lived on it. They owned it. I don't know just how come, but they lived on a ranch over in Nicasio. And I really don't know. I think that Mr. McIsaac must have bought that ranch before he ever married and moved over to Nicasio. I don't really know the details of it, but I do know that the McIsaacs never lived on it.

CE: How did you take care of your early education? How was that handled, Nellie?

NM: My education was just the grammar school there at the Jewells'.

CE: At Jewells'?

NM: At Jewells'. Yes, just a mile away, that's all the education I ever had.

AK: Was it called the Jewell's before there was a railroad or did it come with the railroad?

NM: Jewells owned that property years ago, across the creek from where the schoolhouse was, and I don't really know but what some of the Jewell people still own it. I'm not sure. But the Jewells owned that and that's why the place was called Jewells.

AK: And when the railroad came, then it was a railroad station called Jewell's.

NM: Yes, oh, yes. There was just a station, no building there or nothing that I can remember. I guess there was; it looks more like a woodshed than anything else. There was a family that lived there, I can remember that, by the name of Castro and they had quite a family. Some of the children I went to school with and I can remember a death in the family. One of their boys was killed by a freight train or something; he was playing out on the track. And he was killed there; I can remember that. That was a couple years ago.

CE: Well the railroad was in when you were born.

NM: Sure.

CE: 1870s, you were born after that.

AK: That's right, the railroad came in '72.

NM: It came in '72?

AK: That's right.

NM: I have no memory of any time that we didn't have train. I can't remember further back than that.

AK: Would Camp Taylor be the other station beyond Jewell?

NM: Well, Camp Taylor, there was a hotel there, a very prosperous hotel, beautiful, and they had a platform, a dance platform, and periodically they'd have big dances there. I remember going down to them and dancing. That was a couple of years ago.

AK: We have no pictures of a hotel but we have a lovely picture of the mill; none of the hotel.

CE: Do you have any photographs in your collection of memorabilia?

NM: I don't think so.

CE: Well, tell me, Nellie --

NM: In fact I haven't anything here. I don't know really what I have and what I haven't got. There may be some amongst -- Donald might have them. He's the only one that I can recall that might have any of the old pictures.

CE: Donald is your son?

NM: Yes. He lives there at Tocoloma.

CE: Well, before we get on further with your family, do you -- Could you tell us, rather, Nellie, what was raised on your family's ranch? Did you raise dairy, cattle ranch?

NM: Cattle ranch, dairy. I think my father went right into the -- I can remember many, many, many years ago when we used to ship milk in cans to San Francisco.

CE: Load them right there at the platform at Jewell or Tocoloma?

NM: At Tocoloma, oh yes, right at Tocoloma. That takes me back to --

CE: Then when you married, and the McIsaac Ranch was also a dairy ranch?

NM: Yes, but I never lived on the McIsaac Ranch. I lived over in Nicasio on that ranch that they rented but they always owned that. I'm just trying to think how they come to own that ranch. There's a story; there was a story. I'm just trying to think what it was, something about how Mr. McIsaac accumulated that ranch, over one night at a card game.

AK: There's much of Marin history like that. There's much of Marin history like that.

CE: And much of the history of the west that land changed hands over a gaming table.

NM: Yes, that's the story that I have a hazy memory of, that he acquired that a ranch at a -- He was a great card player. You know how some of those old timers were? They'd get together for two or three days and drink and play cards. And that's my memory of it. Of course, I may be wrong, but I don't think I am.

CE: Well, tell me, growing up, Nellie, on the ranch as a youngster, what are some of your memories of your life then?

NM: Nothing very exciting.

CE: Well, it may not be exciting to you maybe in retrospect; it would be of great interest to other people. Your mother was busy, of course, with everything, all the chores.

NM: Oh, yes, she had to milk cows and everything. My father was a great member of the Masonic Lodge in San Rafael and maybe once a year or once in six months or so he'd -- The folks down there would prevail on him. I can always remember Dr. Rodden saying that, "Nell," he said, "your father came here to that lodge room, you don't know the inspiration he gave me."

CE: Really? He must have been an extraordinary man. What are your memories of your father? Was he a robust man, was he full of life and --

NM: Well, yes and no.

CE: Was he strict?

NM: He wasn't very, you know -- He was strict with us, you know, we couldn't cavort around the way that -- My brothers were the same.

CE: But you loved him.

NM: Oh, did I? Oh my yes, idolized him.

AK: Did you all ride horses?

NM: That's all we had was a horse and wagon. I can remember in the courting days they used to come over with the horse and cart and take me out. We'd ride down from Tocoloma to Camp Taylor and back; that would be our evening program.

CE: That would be the program.

AK: That must have been a beautiful hotel. I wish we knew more about it now.

NM: What hotel are you talking about now?

AK: Camp Taylor.

NM: Oh, Camp Taylor. I haven't much memory of that.

CE: How about the hotel at Tocoloma?

NM: Tocoloma, oh that was a beautiful thing.

CE: Isn't that right across from the present McIsaac Ranch house is?

NM: You know where you cross the creek there to go up the hill? It was right there by the side of that. The Bertrands had been running the hotel at Camp Taylor for some reason or other. I think they went broke or something or they had a disagreement; I won't say what the reason was, but anyhow he came up and built

the hotel there at Tocoloma and you can imagine the crowds. I've seen that place. In fact one night they had such a crowd there they asked us if we would rent a room in our house to help them out.

CE: The ranch house?

NM: Yes. In those days of course there was no automobile and people would -- Schools would close in San Francisco and on Friday and about Saturday you would see the influx of people coming up and staying the six weeks vacation there at the hotel. It would be packed for the six weeks until school opened again and then after school opened, why then --

CE: What was the attraction at Tocoloma? I can understand Camp Taylor, they had the creek there and the water.

NM: Fishing. Well, they had the creek there at Tocoloma for fishing.

CE: Fishing?

NM: Yes, but at Camp Taylor of course they had a platform there for dancing. I don't know how often they had the dances, whether they had a band there all the time or not I don't know, I never went often you know, to any of the dances down there but I know -- And they had camps there; people camped all along the road from Camp Taylor all the way up to Tocoloma and even in our ranch there. There was tents in the ranch, along side of the little creek, there where my house is now. There were people that, the Sandines and the Yangvees and I don't know. It doesn't make any difference what their names were, but there were three families that would come up there for the six weeks vacation. That was a big thing you know for them to come out from San Francisco, even if it was only twenty miles. There was no trains; they had to come out with a horse and cart, I guess. I don't remember. There was no automobiles in those days. I can remember when the first automobiles came into the county. Oh, it was quite an event.

CE: Would you have occasion to go into San Rafael?

NM: Oh, once in a great while. I had some friends there and we were very friendly. My father was a Mason and periodically, once in a while, he'd go and I can always remember Dr. Rodden saying, "Well, Nell, it's an inspiration to me when your father comes into that hall."

AK: Yes, I think I met Dr. Rodden. Anyway, we hear a great deal about him and --

NM: Oh, Dr. Rodden must be gone a long time ago now. He was our dentist for years but my father was very, very, fond of him and I can always remember Dr. Rodden saying, "Well, Nell," he says, "when your father came here to that hall it was an inspiration to me." That's the way he talked about my father.

CE: Tell us, Nellie, what year did you get married? You can remember.

NM: I'm trying to think when it was. 1892? When was the fair in San Francisco? '15?

CE: 1915.

NM: Oh, I think I was married in 1912.

CE: 1912, just before the Panama Pacific Exposition.

AK: That's exciting, that's exciting. Then you went to the fair?

NM: Oh yes.

AK: We have never seen that.

NM: Well, you weren't born then, were you?

CE: No.

AK: I was but I lived in the east.  
NM: Where did you live?  
AK: On Long Island.  
NM: Where?  
AK: On Long Island, New York.  
NM: Oh, you're a long ways off.  
CE: Well, tell us, Nellie, how would you go to the city? Would you take the train and then the ferry? Was that the only way you ever went?  
NM: That's the only way I can remember going.  
CE: You never went over by stage to Bolinas and take the schooner?  
NM: No, no, never did that. And I don't remember that my -- Well, I don't know even the years ago before I was born, there was no train through there and I don't know how my father even came to this country. He must have come by stage, don't you suppose across the continent?  
AK: Oh yes, yes.  
CE: Well, he could have come that way. Nellie, he might have come by sailing ship around the Horn.  
NM: Well, no, not around the Horn, but he did come up through the Panama Canal.  
CE: That's another way, over across the isthmus.  
NM: Yes, and it seems to me that the first time he came he walked. And I think the canal was something like fifty miles, wasn't it, that they had to come? And I think that he was -- I know some of them did and I think that the first time that my father came he walked across the Panama, you know, canal.  
CE: Did you ever hear your father speak of Ennio Martinelli?  
NM: Who?  
CE: Judge Martinelli's father was raised out there at Camp Taylor, Devil's Gulch.  
NM: Oh, he was a very great friend of my father's, oh yes.  
AK: Your father knew him.  
NM: Oh, yes.  
CE: He's also from Switzerland, Martinelli was.  
NM: Oh, yes. Well, was Martinelli born in Switzerland though? I guess he was.  
CE: The grandfather was, but the Judge's father was born in Devil's Gulch, right in Samuel Taylor Park.  
NM: Oh was he?  
AK: And then when we talked to the Judge and asked him where he was born, he said, "Well, I was born in Boyd Park," and he was because their home was where Boyd park is. You know where the gateway is to the park?  
NM: Where's Boyd Park?  
CE: In San Rafael.  
NM: Oh, down there. I was trying to visualize a park around Tocoloma, Camp Taylor because I've never known Camp Taylor from anything but Camp Taylor Park.  
CE: Tell me, when you got married then and you started to have your family, how many children did you have?  
NM: I had three; I lost my little girl.  
CE: What were their names, Nellie?

NM: Well, my first little girl we named Helen Rose, but she just didn't live, that's all. She died the first day she was born.

CE: Was she born at home, also?

NM: No, no. I had all my children in a hospital. And my oldest son is Donald Joseph and the youngest one is named after the two grandfathers, Neil Kenneth McIsaac. The Neil is from the McIsaac and Kenneth happened to be the name that I liked. And Donald Joseph, my first son, was named Donald for his own father and Joseph for my father.

AK: That is nice.

CE: Now tell me, Nellie, does your son carry on at the ranch?

NM: Oh, yes.

CE: Which son?

NM: Donald, my oldest boy; he lives there.

AK: Is Ted Donald's son?

NM: Ted, yes.

CE: Is he there also?

NM: I guess he is, I don't know. I'm just trying to think, is he there? One of them works in the city, I know.

AK: Well, he answered the telephone.

NM: I don't know just what his job is in San Francisco but I know one of the boys is working in San Francisco.

CE: Have they made great changes in the ranch since the early days, do you know Nellie?

NM: Well, yes, they have a new home. The house is comparatively new, in comparison to what it was. The kitchen and dining room that's there now was the remains of the old house that they lived in, and then my father added those eight extra rooms. You know the big two-story? My father added that and just kind of refinished the kitchen and what is the -- Well, now it's all one room. They had a fire and burned the wall out so it's just one big room now, what was our kitchen and dining room.

CE: Do you know when that original home was built?

NM: No, I don't.

CE: It could be close to a hundred years old.

NM: Oh, I think so, awfully close. Well, I'm 94, 93.

CE: So it's over a hundred.

NM: I had my sister and two brothers older than I. So you figure that my sister should be about 100 years old now.

AK: And the house is over a hundred years old, easily, yes..

CE: When we talked with Boyd Stewart, his home Woodside is, of course, over a hundred years old, 1864, I think was the date.

NM: But he's living.

CE: Right, now in Olema.

NM: He didn't build that house of course; the Masons, I think, originally built it.

CE: Olds.

NM: Oh, Olds. Oh, I've forgotten that. I can think of the Masons living there. When I first knew the ranch the Masons lived there.

CE: Tell me, Nellie, did you ever get up to Point Reyes Station or up along on the way to Tomales?

NM: No, not very often. I remember years ago taking a train and going up. Once a year the Swiss people got together and had a Swiss celebration and I can remember going up once to that picnic that they had at Tomales.

AK: Was Armstrong Woods on that state line?

NM: Sonoma County, no.

CE: You went to the Swiss party?

NM: Oh yes, the Swiss picnic. They had that periodically. They have had it even in Bear Valley, as I recall.

CE: Nellie, tell us again, a little bit in greater detail about your courting days. What did you do?

NM: He'd come over with a horse and cart and we'd go as far as Camp Taylor and back.

CE: Well, that's less than a ten mile round trip, isn't it?

NM: Well, it's pretty near three miles.

CE: Did you ever go as far as Point Reyes Station?

NM: Oh, we never went in that direction, no. That was too exciting to go over the hill and go to Point Reyes. No, he and I would get in the old cart and go as far as Camp Taylor and then turn around and come home.

CE: How did he pop the question?

NM: Oh, I cannot remember. I do remember this: we were sitting on the Nicasio Church, on the steps of the Nicasio Church. I can't remember why or what the occasion was, but I can remember that D. McIsaac proposed to me on the steps of the Nicasio Church.

AK: Oh, that's cute.

CE: Was it a Sunday?

NM: I don't remember that. It must have been, though.

CE: Now, you mention Nicasio. You must have seen the old Nicasio Hotel before it burned down. Could you describe it to us?

NM: No, I couldn't except that it was a big two-story building. It had a big platform in there where they had dancing, you know. It had that, and it had rooms around. That's all I remember of it; that's a long time ago. And of course in those days I think it had already burned before I got married and moved over there.

CE: The church is still there, of course, the little church.

NM: Yes, it's still there but I'm just trying to think now. They've added to the church. They made changes, I know, in the church.

AK: And the schoolhouse, the little schoolhouse, was sold to a private family who -- And it still looks the way it did which is very nice.

NM: There's no changes on the outside; it's just as it used to be.

AK: Ah, that's so nice.

CE: It's beautifully restored. Do you remember any serious winter storms or unusual occurrences that isolated you or made the family kind of hole-in for a bad winter?

NM: No.

CE: Do you remember any bad rains?

NM: All the winters were bad in those days. You know with a horse and a cart you didn't get very far once the winter sets in. It was years before we ever -- I'm just trying to think what year it was that my brother-in-law lived with us, bought his first automobile. I was married in '12 and possibly in '13 or '14 he bought the first automobile that we had and that's when I learned to drive, with his car.

CE: Do you remember what it was?

NM: Studebaker, I think. I think it was a Studebaker, I think it was. I'm not certain.

CE: Then when you learned to drive, would you go into San Rafael?

NM: No, no.

CE: You'd drive around the country here?

NM: Just go either to Tocoloma to see my mother and father, I guess. He was still living then, or to Nicasio.

CE: Where were you living when you say you went to Tocoloma?

NM: Well, you know where Pacheco is, Pacheco School? I'm trying to think, is the school still there? No it isn't; they've moved the school. They've torn it down or done something with it there's just some cypress trees there now where the school used to be.

CE: Well how far are we talking about away from Tocoloma?

NM: Oh, that's about six miles I guess. They call it the Crossroads there. On the -- You go south to Nicasio, you go east to Petaluma and west to Nicasio; they call it the Crossroads.

CE: That's where you lived?

NM: But I lived in north there. There was a road leading off that place there and that's where I went when I got married. They called it the Crossroads and I was on the north side. Of course, that road was only used for the ranches; there were two ranches in there and I lived on one of them.

CE: Well if I understand you correctly, Mr. McIsaac didn't work on his own ranch there.

NM: On the ranch that he owned? No, they never lived there; I never knew why.

CE: Interesting. But your son now is there?

NM: No, he's on the Codoni Ranch; that's on my father's ranch.

CE: And where is that?

NM: Right there at Tocoloma.

CE: At the Crossroads there.

NM: That big two-story house there at Tocoloma.

CE: So that is not the McIsaac Ranch we were near, Mrs. Kent.

NM: No.

CE: That's the Codoni Ranch.

NM: My father built that house and I lived there all my life until I got married. I was born and raised there.

CE: Have you ever left the county for any trips?

NM: Well, not too far. I've been to -- Where did they have the fair? The Seattle Fair, I've been that far.

CE: Good for you.

NM: And from there we crossed over at -- What did we do? We went up into Canada and crossed over to Chicago I guess and went south and took the train home.

That was the longest trip that I ever took. I had planned, before I was married, a couple of friends of mine were going to Europe and my father was bedridden at the time so I gave up the idea of taking the trip with them. I wouldn't leave him not knowing, you know, what was going to happen while I was gone.

CE: Well, Nellie, the little you've seen of the world and it's been a good amount, there's nothing as lovely as Marin, is there?

NM: Well, nothing special.

CE: Did your father ever tell you why he came to Marin? Why Marin?

NM: Oh, why, why did they ever leave Switzerland? Oh --

CE: Well I know their reasons to leave Switzerland.

NM: I know they couldn't make a living back in Switzerland. They were living almost like rats, you know, living close to one another.

CE: But I wonder why Marin County rather than Sacramento Valley or Contra Costa County. He never mentioned it to you, did he?

NM: Not why, but he landed in -- Well, the first people he worked for were the Shafter people I'm quite sure, when he first came to this country.-

CE: And they had the big dairy ranches going then.

NM: Yes, they did.

CE: And the Swiss are dairy people, so the word gets around. The word must have gotten around, don't you think, Nellie, that there was work for people of his ancestry.

AK: I think because they had friends, there are so many different Swiss people who write home and say. "This is it."

NM: Our house used to be the rendezvous of everybody that left Switzerland. They'd land there and stay with us for a week or ten days or a couple of months until they got located someplace else.

CE: You ran a regular guesthouse.

NM: Yes. That's what it was.

CE: Unofficial embassy for Switzerland.

NM: Unpaid and all.

CE: Well, that was the early California pastoral tradition, Nellie. When people came you gave them board and room and fed them and if necessary gave them a fresh horse.

NM: Yes, until they could get out and make their own living that's where they landed. I saw many and many a person come from Switzerland, come directly there.

CE: Now, when you were growing up, Mrs. Kent asked you about riding your horse. Did you have your own horse and go around before you had a wagon, as a youngster?

NM: Well, I had a horse and cart; that's what I had before I was married.

CE: But you didn't go on horseback, just alone?

NM: No, I didn't. Now my sister-in-law, she went all over Nicasio and everywhere. And she'd come from the ranch and come into Tocoloma, think nothing about it, on horseback. I never did much riding. In fact, about the only time I ever rode a horseback was the time we'd go blackberrying over the neighbor's ranch over the hill. It was a mile up and down to go to the ranch for the blackberries and I rode horseback then but that's the only time in my life that I'd ever -- Oh, a couple of

times I do remember now, once we went to Lagunitas to see a sick woman there. Blanche Hardman and I, we went horseback that day. But that is about the only time I can remember being out on the highway on horse, saddle horse.

End of Side A

CE: You mentioned something about your sisters. What did they go into?

NM: They went into teaching. My sister-in-law --

CE: Sister-in-law?

NM: Yes. I had two sister-in-laws that were teachers. And at one time --

CE: Do you know their names?

NM: Mary and Flora, Flora Hawkins and Mary McIsaac. They were both teachers and they both taught school in Sausalito. Flora taught in Pacheco School for a while but most of the time, as I recall, they both taught just in Sausalito.

CE: Did you know any of the Pacheco descendents?

NM: Oh, Pachescos. Oly Pacheco lived with me for seven years.

CE: Tell us about that.

NM: She was a teacher too, lived in San Rafael.

CE: What was her name?

NM: Olivia, we called her Oly. She lived with us I think seven years, a long time, she taught school there at Pacheco and finally --

CE: Is she Gumosindo's daughter?

NM: Huh?

CE: Was she Gumesindo Pacheco's daughter?

NM: Yes, yes. She lived with us for a long time and from there she took a school down the valley somewhere. I don't remember just where it was, but after she'd been there that length of time she figured she ought to go someplace else, so she was down there for a couple of years.

CE: Tell us, Nellie, some of your classmates. See if you can recall some of your classmates.

NM: I can remember, yes, the girls that I graduated with, Bertha and Edna Stedman, and their father was, I guess, a wood chopper down in the canyon, down between Camp Taylor and Lagunitas. And then Olympia Mazza was our rancher's neighbor. So the four of us graduated from the grammar school together, the two Stedman girls and --

CE: Anybody else from that school you remember?

NM: Oh, I remember all of them, I guess.

CE: Well, give us some of those names.

NM: Oh, Steadman and Mazza and, oh what else were there? Oh, I'd have to think, you know.

CE: Do you remember any of the Boyd Stewart family?

NM: Yes, they lived on a ranch right downtown. I never went to school with Boyd, though; he was a lot younger than I.

CE: When you say downtown, what do you mean, dear?

NM: Well, near Nicasio, they had a ranch right off, just within a quarter of a mile within the town of Nicasio and he went to school there at Nicasio but I never went

to the school in Nicasio. I -- The only school that I ever went to was to Tocoloma School. They called it Tocoloma but it was really at Jewell's, a mile below Tocoloma. So that was it; that's the only school I ever went to.

CE: Tell me, did your mother teach you, on the ranch, all of the things that later one uses as a mother and wife? For instance, did she teach you how to cook, how to sew, how to mend?

NM: Oh, and what I want you to know is that both my father and mother had teacher's credentials. My father taught school in Switzerland for two years and my mother had just graduated and had her teacher's credentials when my father went back. He had to do military duty, you know, in those days. He made a special trip back there.

CE: Well, it was fortunate he met your mother.

NM: He met my mother there and married her.

CE: So they both were qualified teachers?

NM: Yes, both of them. My mother had never actually taught; my father had actually taught two years but my mother had her teaching credentials when she married him and came to this country.

CE: What language did he speak?

NM: He spoke Swiss.

CE: Italian, French, or German Swiss?

NM: Italian.

CE: Italian Swiss.

NM: You see, they bordered Switzerland on the Italian side.

CE: That's the area they came from. So they taught you how to --

NM: My mother could read English just like I could. She'd get interested in a book and she'd forget, you know, what she was doing, just read.

AK: That's wonderful.

CE: Did she teach you how to cook?

NM: Oh, I don't know if she taught me or I automatically picked it up.

CE: And to sew?

NM: Our food was very simple in those days.

AK: Were the Chedas Swiss people, too?

NM: The Chedas? I don't ever remember the Chedas ever living on their ranch; they may have sometime before my memory.

CE: Were they from Switzerland also, do you know?

NM: Oh yes, oh yes, I know that. But I can't remember their living there. I know they did but I doubt very much if they ever went to the Tocoloma School. I think the school itself was built before the Chedas left and moved into San Rafael. I think that. I think none of the Chedas went to the Tocoloma, what we called the Tocoloma School. That's the name the school went by.

AK: I was thinking, too, about the hospitals. Was Dr. Hund's hospital the only one, or -- Where was the hospital?

HM: Dr. Hund was in San Rafael. You'd have to look for the records; either San Rafael or San Anselmo. He never was out our way. We had him come, yes. I don't know if we ever had Dr. Hund come but we had Dr. Jones and Dr. Sawyer

come out at different times from San Rafael when we needed somebody, before there was a doctor in Point Reyes. A long way to come.

CE: Tell me, Nellie, did you ever know any of the Mailliard family?

NM: I never -- Not personally.

CE: There were still some Mailliards on the San Geronimo Rancho though.

NM: See that was too far; the horse and buggy days you didn't get around the way you do now with an automobile.

AK: A long way, that's right.

NM: I knew of them, yes, but I couldn't say that I can remember meeting them personally; I can't remember that.

CE: Other than his Masonry work, did your father ever go into any community efforts? Did he ever consider running for supervisor?

NM: No, I don't think so.

CE: There were some West Marin families who made that contribution: Marshall, for example.

NM: Oh, he probably helped out, yes. He was always very much interested in politics, but not for going in for himself. I have no memory of it, anyway, that he ever ran for anything excepting school trustee. He was trustee of the school for --

CE: Well, that's a community endeavor.

NM: He was trustee of the school there for many, many years. He signed the old -- I don't know but what I still have or they have over at the ranch, the old, what would you call it? The registry, you know where they made out the checks for the new teachers.

CE: Where would you go to church?

NM: Well, we didn't go, period.

CE: Was your family Catholic?

NM: Yes.

CE: Where would be the closest church, in Nicasio?

NM: I think so.

CE: Probably.

NM: I'm just trying to think. I think I was baptized in the Nicasio. See that Nicasio Church is a very old church and I have a hazy memory of the Olema Church being built, just a hazy memory.

CE: At Olema. You perhaps remember the old hotel at Olema, do you?

NM: Oh, yes. Well, the old hotel is still there, isn't it?

CE: Well, they're trying to restore it. It's kind of in wrack and ruin but -- Do you remember who owned it then?

NM: Nelsons owned it.

CE: Nelsons.

NM: Nelson owned it and they used to run a stage from Olema to Tocoloma.

CE: They'd meet the train.

NM: Passengers that came up, you know, for the hotel. And bring the -- And the mail would be thrown off there at Tocoloma and taken over to Olema at the post office over there.

CE: Today we think of these hotels as being rather close together with the rapid communications today, but in those days they weren't too competitive, were they?

NM: No. Although I can remember the Tocoloma Hotel just being packed. I don't remember how people got up there.

CE: Do you remember who owned the hotel?

NM: Bertrand built the Tocoloma Hotel, I can remember that.

CE: Bertrand. What does the name Tocoloma mean to you?

NM: Well, to me I always say its "touching the earth." Toco in Swiss would mean touch and loma would be soil, so I always figured that Tocoloma means touching the soil.

CE: I like your definition.

NM: That was my version of Tocoloma, that it meant "touching soil."

CE: Well, there are so many Indian derivations, but I like your definition.

NM: Well, to me, I always felt that way, that toco in Swiss would mean touch and loma would be soil. More than that, I couldn't tell you.

CE: Would you describe your mother for us? Do you resemble her?

NM: Oh yes. Just a hard working person, that's all.

CE: Did either of your parents ever have the opportunity to return to Switzerland for a visit?

NM: Yes, they went back the year of the epidemic.

CE: The flu epidemic here?

AK: Polio?

NM: They had -- What? It wasn't polio; they gave it another name. But anyway, they went back expecting to stay three months. When they left our place, they expected to stay three months and they stayed three weeks; they were afraid of the epidemic. It took them a week to get there and in a weeks' time they saw all their relations and then they came home. They were just afraid of contracting --

CE: The epidemic was there?

NM: Yes, oh yes. Of course they didn't know when they left that it was there or they wouldn't have started out.

CE: How would you communicate in those early days of your marriage with San Rafael or the county seats or the major cities around? Did you have a --

NM: Horse and wagon.

CE: I mean was there a newspaper?

NM: There was mail, yes.

CE: There was a newspaper from San Rafael that came out, *Marin Journal*.

NM: I don't remember how it ever got there, but we got it at Nicasio. When I lived over at Nicasio we got it at the post office at Nicasio. And at Tocoloma, why my memory of it many years ago was that when the train went through there they would just throw papers off, you know. On the train they would have kind of a -- - What would they call it? The post office? And when you'd get to the different towns you'd throw the mail.

CE: That's right, they would be sorting it while they were traveling.

NM: And if you wanted to mail a letter, you'd have to be over there and throw it onto, you know. Either that or go over to Olema or Point Reyes. I don't remember where else you'd have to go. But I know that I used to go over there and when the train would stop just throw the letters, mail, in.

CE: Very good.

NM: That's my memory of it. So, those were supposedly good old days, huh?

CE: Well don't you think they were?

NM: Oh, I think they were. Oh, my yes. I think they were happier days than now.

CE: The simple life.

NM: You appreciated little things in those days, don't you think? And they were little.

CE: Well I think that's inherent in the Swiss nature, too. They know what it is to live simply.

NM: My father and mother made one trip back to Europe together after they were married and that was the year of the epidemic.

CE: Over there, yes. I imagine they were glad to come home.

NM: Oh, they were afraid to do anything different. They got over there and they were planning to stay for three months. And it took them a week to get there and they stayed a week and saw all the relations and they beat it right home. They were just afraid of contracting the illness.

CE: Now tell me, Nellie, when your children were born, and you said they were born in the hospital, in San Rafael?

NM: The first baby that I had was born at the ranch.

CE: But the other two children were born in San Rafael?

NM: Yes.

CE: And then they lived on your ranch?

NM: No, I take it back; my first baby was born in Berkeley.

CE: Berkeley.

NM: I had a friend over there who was a doctor.

CE: What was her name?

NM: A girl that -- They were family friends and this girl was a doctor and who took care of me but I lost my baby, my first baby.

CE: Well, that's an unusual thing for a woman doctor then. Mrs. Stewart's mother was a doctor. Do you recall this doctor's name?

NM: Oh, yes. Perroni, Dr. Perroni. She's gone now. She's Dr. Mead now. That is her last name; she married a doctor, but she was Dr. Perroni in those days.

CE: Well then, when you had your other two children, they were born in a hospital where? In San Rafael?

NM: Wait. I'm just trying to think where they were born. One of them was born right there at the ranch. I'd had a bad time with my first baby and I sent for Dr. Cavanagh and my father was ill at the time and Dr. Cavanagh, I used to come and see him about every once a week or something like that. And I considered him just a family friend, but when he came, why, he said, "Nell you can't go you'll have the baby on the way." And every pain I had I'd think, "Oh, if I can only get out of here. If I can only get out of here." "But Nell, you can't go, you can't go. You'll have that baby on the way." After two days of having the baby on the way, why, I said, "I'm afraid I'm gong to lose this baby, too. It will be just like the first one." By then the nurse I had hired arrived and they went out in the kitchen and got the big pan and put the instruments in that and boiled them up, sterilized them, and then went to town. You could have heard me down at the Crossroads, I think, when that baby was born.

CE: Is this David?

NM: Donald, yes.

CE: Well now, the children then stayed on the ranch, and when did they go to school? Where did they go? By that time they had the other school.

NM: There was a school down there at Jewells. You know where the Jewell place is? There was a school right there and that's where they had their education.

CE: Then did they go, on to high school?

NM: Then they went to San Rafael. I think that -- We had our own horse and cart and they drove that way to San Rafael. But both of them graduated from San Rafael High School, both of them.

CE: And do you remember any of their teachers? Did you ever hear them mention an Eleanor Murray?

NM: No, no. Well I had -- I knew the Murray girls but that's so long ago that I couldn't speak for them. I was very fond of Kate Murray. Kate Murray had a case -- My brother-in-law had a case on her. Eventually he lost his wife and they were very friendly for a while, he and Kate. But her sister didn't like her to -- But nothing ever came of it.

CE: Nellie, did you ever have time -- I know being a rancher's wife is a demanding thing, but did you ever have time to join any women's organizations or affiliations?

NM: I joined the Druids in Olema there; that's about the only one that I ever joined.

CE: Now that's the building that's still standing.

NM: I'm just trying to think if I ever joined some of them in San Rafael, but I don't think I did. It doesn't stand out, anyhow, whether I did or I didn't. But I did join the Druids over there in Olema.

CE: What do the Druids do? Or is that secret information?

NM: What's that?

CE: What do the Druids do? Or is that secret information?

NM: Oh, that's nothing very much; it was just a happy get-together. That's about all it was for us. Periodically we'd have a dance or we'd have a lunch.

CE: Social.

NM: That's about all we ever did; we never did anything. They had the meetings, the State meetings, of course, the Druids would somewhere but I never went to any of them.

CE: Tell me, Nellie, did you ever get over the hill and go down to Bolinas, by the seashore?

NM: No, not the real -- Once in a while. That was a buggy ride, you know. There wasn't really any special attraction at Bolinas for us.

CE: You didn't want to escape the heat and get over near the water?

NM: No. No I never did anything there. To me, it was, when the trains came in there, why, getting on that train, going in to San Francisco and staying a couple of days, that was a treat, really a treat. I had friends in San Francisco and --

CE: Would you ever go in and go to the theater?

NM: Do what? Oh yes, go to the shows or something like that that was for doing.

CE: Did you attend the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition?

NM: Oh my, yes. That was an event; we couldn't miss that.

CE: Did you stay overnight at the Inside Inn ever?

NM: Oh I don't remember where we stayed. No, I have an idea we just stayed with friends. My father had planned to go. We had a nurse with my father. He was bedridden for pretty near three years and she had planned on taking him to the fair. I don't know how she was going to do it. I never did find out, but anyway he died the day the fair was opened so he never got to it. But nevertheless, why, the plans were that she was going to take him to the fair and how she was going to do it, as I say, I don't quite know. But she was a wonderful nurse.

CE: Tell me, Nellie, did you feel any of the repercussions of the earthquake in that morning in 1906?

NM: It was quite a sensation, believe you me. And still, you know, the funny part that I never could understand -- It was a two-story house, and my mother and I were on the upper floor and my younger brother, who was only six or seven years old at the time, had a room up there and the two of us jumped right out of bed and met right out in the hallway and the both of us had one mind in that boy in our mind, in getting over to him. But, the funny part of it, and I can't understand yet, you'd think that the upper part of that house would have been demolished, but it wasn't. It was the lower floor. The plaster all had to be replaced. Four rooms downstairs, the plaster had to all be replaced.

CE: Did it scare the cattle?

NM: Oh, I suppose it did. They stampeded.

CE: Did you lose any livestock?

NM: I don't think so. I don't think we did.

AK: But you all ran out of the house? Outside? Or what did you do?

NM: Well, I don't remember that. I just laid in bed until it was all over with. I just shivered. I didn't know what it was all about. But that afternoon, I had a friend, Maureen Olson, was staying with me that night and they had been on a ranch out at the Point and were leaving; they were going up the valley somewhere, and they had relations, the Vonsens, on the other side of Red Hill and the father and mother were over with them and Marie stayed with me and she just fretted about them so in the afternoon my father just simply hitched up the wagon and took her over to her mother because she was so worried about them not knowing what had happened.

CE: Had you heard the story of the cow that was lost in the crack?

NM: Oh yes, the crack. I've seen that cow afterwards with the tail hanging out.

CE: You have actually seen it?

NM: Yes, oh yes. You could just see the --

CE: Well, we interviewed Oscar Shafter's granddaughter, Mrs. Christ, and she went over couple of days after the quake and saw it.

NM: I never went right over to the cow but on the road going by you could see part, you know, part of her back and the tail sticking out.

CE: So it is a true story?

NM: Oh yes, it is that, oh yes.

CE: Nellie, in concluding, if you would be good enough to kind of describe a typical day on the ranch. After you were married and had your babies, when did you get up, for instance?

NM: Oh, around six o'clock in the morning and had breakfast with the boys when they came in after doing their milking jobs.

CE: They'd been up for a couple of hours or more, three o'clock?

NM: No, around four o'clock in the morning they'd get up.

CE: They'd have a couple of hundred head of cattle to do?

NM: Oh, the McIsaac Ranch was great for hunters. They had friends in San Francisco, you know, periodically that came out and stayed a couple of days.

CE: You misunderstood me; did you have a couple of hundred head of cattle to milk?

NM: Oh, a couple hundred, no. If we had a hundred, it was a lot.

CE: Then the men would come in, you'd cook them a breakfast and I imagine it was be huge. What would you fix?

NM: Well, some mornings it would be hotcakes; some mornings it would be sausage, sometimes just ham and eggs.

CE: How many men would you feed?

NM: Well, I had my brother-in-law living with me for thirty years, and I had him and usually two others in help.

CE: And your husband, of course.

NM: Yes, my husband, yes. I had four to cook for.

CE: Then after breakfast, would they attend to other chores outside?

NM: Yes, they had a lot of plowing and one thing or another. They had no tractors or anything in those days; it was all following the plow, you know, plow the land and plant.

CE: What was your stove like?

NM: My stove? An ordinary wood stove.

CE: And who'd would cut the wood?

NM: Well, my husband had to.

CE: And he always had it going for you. Did he fire it up in the morning?

NM: Well, sometimes yes and sometimes no. After all, he was up a couple of hours before I was and if he had done it then the fire would have been out. So, usually, why, we'd lay the fire, you know, the wood and everything in the stove, when we went to bed at night so all I had to do was fire a match in the morning.

CE: Did you have kerosene or gas light?

NM: Eventually we had gas.

CE: Electricity, yes. Are we talking about kerosene lanterns at that time in your life?

NM: Oh, yes. I had to go back to lamps. You know, at the Tocoloma Ranch my father was very progressive and he had an acetylene plant, his own acetylene plant, and the whole place was lit up, the barns and the dairy and the house and everything. Acetylene lights upstairs and downstairs in the house and --

CE: It must have been a showplace.

NM: Oh, it was a showplace. I had more than one person speak of it as a showplace. He was -- Everything had to be just so. The fences had to be so. When he built a fence, he had a marker. The pickets had to go down to a certain distance and they were just so far apart from one another. I can remember my father building those fences, how they just had to be so --

CE: Well, the Swiss are very much perfectionists.

NM: Oh, I know but he was exceptional.

CE: I bet everything was whitewashed frequently.

NM: Oh yes, every year everything had to be whitewashed, every year.

CE: Tell me, did your mother and you have a little vegetable garden?

NM: Oh, we had quite a vegetable garden and I had a beautiful flower garden. Oh yes, my father's place was a showplace there, it really was.

CE: Is it still going, your father's place?

NM: Oh yes, the house is still there but it's very different to what it was in those days.

CE: Who owns it presently, do you know?

NM: I think it's in my son's name. As I recall, I've turned everything that -- Eventually was mine, eventually, because my brothers all died and when they died they left their interests to me, but a number of years ago I turned everything over to my son because I felt that I wasn't going to live forever and I knew what we had had to give the government. You know what that means, and I wasn't going to have them go through it again. So I have nothing in my name now. Even the little house that I have been living in. Hartzel built that house a number of years ago and it was sold and eventually Dee and I moved into it, and first we paid rent and eventually we bought it. So even that now is in the boys' name, I have nothing, just nothing.

CE: You seem kind of happy about that.

AK: It's a very smart way to do.

NM: I think so. I feel this way about it: my boys are always going to take care of me.

CE: Of course they will.

NM: They're not going to let me want for anything. I know what I had to do when my husband died, what I had to pay the government, you know, and I just can't see any sense to it. You work all your life accumulating something and then have to turn it over to the government; that's all tommy rotten. There is nothing, absolutely nothing in my name now.

CE: Nellie, in closing now and in retrospect, you had a happy, full life, didn't you, out in West Marin?

NM: I should say so.

CE: Is there anything different you would have done about your life?

NM: Oh, I suppose there were. I suppose so.

CE: But don't you feel you led a very rich life?

NM: I had a very happy life as long as my husband was alive but since then it, you know --

CE: It's been lonesome.

NM: It has been lonesome.

CE: Well, Nellie, we want to thank you, Mrs. Kent and I, for letting us come and talk with you today.

NM: Well, I certainly have talked. I don't know if I've told you anything that was worth listening to.

CE: It's been a pleasure and we are, feel privileged to have chatted with Mrs. Nellie McIsaac today, and we will leave her now in Novato and maybe we can come and see you again.