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**Anne T. Kent California Room**

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**INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BRUSATORI**

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent  
March 10, 1981

**INTERVIEWEE:** Robert Brusatori (RB)

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

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** March 10, 1981

**TRANSCRIBER:** Marjorie Hoffman

**CE:** Today is Tuesday, March 10, 1981. Continuing the Oral History Program for the California Room at the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat. Today we are at the residence once again of Mrs. Thomas Kent at 131 Goodhill Road, in Kentfield. We are going to have the pleasure shortly of talking with Mr. Robert Brusatori, who resides at 424 Forbes Avenue, San Rafael. Bob has an interesting story to share with us today. For forty-seven years and ten months, he was associated with the Marin Municipal Water District. He started as a meter-reader and wound up for many years as Secretary of their Board. Bob was born in San Rafael, January 20, 1906, and has been retired now for about thirteen years. It's a pleasure to have you here this morning, Bob. Start with the beginning. What's the background of the Marin Municipal Water District?

**RB:** Well, the original water companies at that time were the Marin County Water and Power, I believe it was, and the North Coast Water Company. The former was for the central area and the latter was for Mill Valley and, I believe, Belvedere. Everything at that time was on flat rates. There were no meters unless they saw you using a little extra water, and then of course they came along and put a meter in your premises so you couldn't use as much water as you'd like to. Now, the original company, the Marin County Water Company, was owned by people that lived in Scotland, and the manager here was William Barr. And in 1911, I believe, somewhere along in there, a group got together and decided because of the fact that we had so little water – To digress a little bit, at that time I think all we had

were Lake Lagunitas and Lake Phoenix. So a group got together and decided that they would start a municipal water district, and the law was passed in Sacramento, I think, around April 13, 1912, creating the Water District. At that time there were five directors to be elected at large, and ten appointed, nine, that is, one by each municipality in the District, and one by the County Board of Supervisors. Now this is a special district that had nothing to do with the county whatsoever, except that it was elected directors and appointed. The first directors – I don't know if you'd be interested in who the first directors were.

CE: Yes, I think you should read that into the record.

RB: The directors that were elected at that time were V. J. B. Cheda, William Kent, William G. Morrow, M. O'Shaughnessy and Patrick Ross, elected to four year terms in office. The reason that these Directors were appointed by the various cities – And I think that these were the ones that were –

CE: We can go on to a little deeper study, Bob.

EB: This shows everyone of the Directors that was ever on the Board.

CE: And they change frequently.

EB: Yes.

CE: How did you get started? What did you first do?

RB: The law was passed and it was strictly, at that time, for Marin County. The legislature passed it, and the law was actually written by George Harlan. Now, subsequent to that – Of course, the law was made for all of California and now it's all over the state of California, and where Marin County was the dog that wagged the tail, now it's the tail that wags the dog, in that they have expanded that to include recreation districts, sewer districts, every kind of a district you can think of, whereas Marin County has stayed strictly to the water deal. Now, in 1934, the certain people got together and decided that the fifteen-man board was cumbersome and too expensive, and therefore they passed a law, the legislature passed a law in Sacramento, making it a five-man board. There were five districts in the County and each one of those elected a director.

CE: And this was done on the ballot?

EB: That's right.

CE: Well, tell me, interrupting you a moment, Bob, how large an area are we talking about, within the County of Marin?

RB: Well, the District goes from the town of Lagunitas to Sausalito and from this end of it, from Hamilton Field to Sausalito. Now Nicasio, Point Reyes, all of those, are not within the boundary of our District. This is just this one particular district that is, as I say, governed by the Board. The District at the time was made up of a lot of small water companies. There were the two main ones, and then in those days, when a subdivision was put in, each one of the subdivisions would put in their own water supply, and so the Water District inherited all of those and it was quite a thing to bring them up to standard, and it took many, many years before it did get up to where it is now. In 1918, of course, they built Alpine Dam. They raised it twice; I think once in the '30s and once in the '40s. Then they built Bon Tempe, then Kent Lake, then Nicasio Dam and the Soulajule Dam. And now they're in the process of raising Kent Lake again.

CE: I know, Mrs. Kent and I, driving back from an interview in Point Reyes the other afternoon, we were coming through Camp Taylor and she said, "Oh sometime I want to take you up that dirt road and up to Kent Lake." It's named for Tom Kent, her husband. And just then one of your Marin Municipal Water District trucks came down and two gentlemen were going to open the gate, and I hailed them and I said, "How could it be arranged so Mrs. Kent could go up and see the dam sometime?" And they said, "How about now?" So we – They turned the truck around, and we followed them up and parked the car right on the dam, and these two gentlemen explained what was going on, and Mrs. Kent was thrilled.

RB: Well it might be interesting to note just how Kent Lake was named.

CE: Alright.

RB: When Kent Lake was first even thought of – Of course Tom Kent had been on the Board from 1920, the year I went to work for the Water District, by the way, and was there until 1959, and – This is sort of an aside. Tom was – I don't know whether you'd say he was an older brother or just my second father. I think he was the grandest person that ever lived, and I'm not saying that because Anne is here, because I really meant that. But, when the Board decided they were going to name that Kent, the whole project, and Tom himself says, "Well, now, wait a minute. Mr. Peters has been here a long time. why not call it Kent Lake and Peters Dam?" And that is the way that lake was named.

CE: And Mrs. Kent has a lot of photographs here today that she brought down. Where's that one of that plaque, Anne? Is it in here?

AK: Yeah.

CE: There's the plaque. I wonder if I could divert you just a moment to have Mrs. Kent make a statement. I think it is appropriate at this time. She's always been interested in why her father-in-law, William Kent, wanted to save that area as Redwood Canyon to prevent it from being dammed up to provide water. After that was done, Mrs. Kent, you had an interesting addendum to that story.

AK: Well, you know, when I came into the family I had to dig for all this information because nobody seemed to talk about it. I don't think the family knew too much about it. But, at any rate, I did discover that this silly business of always remembering that he saved Muir Woods was not the story. The story was that he really saved the canyon from being a dam. Then it was because one of the friends in Mill Valley came to him and said that he always heard that he was so fond of trees, and did he know what was happening in his own county. So he took him over there and showed him what was happening, so there was nothing to do but try to buy it. There was no other way to save it because it was in the state of condemnation right then. It was a long, hard fight and he did save it, and after he saved it, I thought it was so like him – With all this trouble of not knowing what to do with it for Marin or the city or the state, the thing that suddenly hit him was, if anybody would do such a terrible thing as that, to be willing to cut all those trees, there must be a shortage of water in Marin and he didn't know it. Didn't know it, I think, because most people had their own water systems. As you say, most people had their own systems of some kind, and he didn't realize there was a shortage. So, as I understood it, he asked Mr. O'Shaughnessy to look over the county and see where it would be possible to make a dam, and Mr.

O'Shaughnessy chose the place which is Alpine. Then out of the whole business came this Marin Municipal Water District which would bring water down to everybody. Then I think it was his first love all the time, thinking of what a wonderful thing it is to bring a good water system into a county like this where all could work down by gravity. I think that was it.

CE: Have you heard that story?

RB: Yes. Another thing, too – The late William Kent, I think, was a stockholder in the Marin Water and Power Company, and he turned that stock over to the Water District to be used for recreational purposes on the watershed. They were allowed to hike and to fish and things of that kind. I know that for years, I think it amounted to something like \$11,000 or \$12,000, and we just kept that drawing interest, and finally it had to be used, and it was. That first money for recreation was donated, through the stock, by William Kent.

CE: That's interesting. Did you know that, Mrs. Kent?

AK: No. I didn't know that.

RB: And of course Pat Ross – I think Pat was one of the boys that worked for you down there. He was a director.

AK: That's right, he was the first gardener.

RB: And he was also a director of the District. He was one of the first, I think. He was the first director that died according to the thing that you have there. I think you'll find from the notes I gave you there, that the group that got together was called the Southern Marin group, that started this thing. And I guess of course Mr. Kent was very prominent in politics and other things, and he was of great assistance in forming the thing. As the group went along –

CE: Well he was in Congress still, at that time, wasn't he. Mrs. Kent?

AK: Yes, must have been.

CE: Yes, he served three terms in Congress, and I think it extended to 1918.

AK: I think maybe they put him on the Board; maybe they put him on honoring him, and then he wanted to tell them –

RB: Well, they used his name, undoubtedly, because he was so prominent, and then I guess the thing came up that you couldn't have two elected offices at one time, and for that reason is probably why he resigned at the very first meeting. Norman Livermore was another one who was on the Board and then he resigned, I think, at the first or second meeting.

AK: No I don't think –

CE: Well, he was a utility man, wasn't he?

AK: Yeah.

CE: Mrs. Kent, wasn't he with the PG&E?

AK: He was, yes. But he stayed on longer because I remember hearing that –

RB: The stuff that I gave you will tell you exactly when he went off.

CE: Tell us, Bob, from the beginning, what were generally the responsibilities of a Board member to this new Water District?

RB: Well I think their main responsibility was to make sure the District had plenty of available water at reasonable rates, and that they took no part in politics outside of the Water District itself, and anything administering to that. And through the years they have enlarged the mains; they built new dams, and they were always

ahead of the needs of the people. It was – In my opinion, they were to set the policy and then the managers or the staff were to go ahead and administer what the Board set down. As long as I was there, it was pretty well adhered to.

AK: Choose the directors. I mean, choose the engineers

CE: Did the Directors choose the engineer?

RB: They chose the Secretary of the Board, of course, the manager and the staff, and all – Of course the – At first the general manager had the full power to hire and fire, but later it was made so that the Board had to put him actually on the payroll, and he had to go before the Board to put him on the payroll.

CE: Well, you mentioned earlier a man by the name of John Bert who was general manager for some years, I gather?

RB: That's right. He was general manager for – until 1934. I think he retired on the first part of 1935.

CE: What would you care to share with us about him?

RB: Well, I, of course, didn't know him too well.

CE: You were still young in the organization.

RB: I was still young in the organization. I met him; I knew who he was. He was, in my opinion, a very good general manager. He could never learn to drive a car. He had to be driven home and picked up all the time. First couple of times they tried to teach him to drive, why, he didn't do so well and he gave up on his own accord.

CE: Well can you explain the distinction between general manager and manager of the District, which you said Jim Peters was?

RB: It's one and the same.

CE: So was it Jim Peters who succeeded him, then?

RB: Yes, Jim Peters succeeded him.

CE: You worked under him, I presume, for many years?

RB: Yes I did.

CE: Tell us about Jim.

RB: Well, he was born in Canada, came down, and originally worked for the Water District when an engineer by the name of Baker at that time brought him down from Canada. He was just a young fellow out of school, and he was practically in charge of Alpine Dam. In fact, the contractors in Alpine Dam went broke, and Mr. Peters had to go over there on skid row and he'd round up fifteen or twenty, and bring them over, and they'd work until they got their first paycheck and then he'd have to go and get another group. It's interesting to note that after they – We held back the first five days of the employees, so when they got their check and went back to skid row, they never did come back for those five days' pay, and I think the Water District still has that money down there in their treasury; at least they did have when I left. So then, he was made manager in 1934, and he was instrumental, I would say, in building the tunnel between what is known as El Portal and just below the Meadow Club there, the – I believe they wanted a filtration plant, and the District didn't have that kind of money, so they devised a deal of putting this tunnel in, and then they would put alum into the water, which would clear up all the water, and every three or four weeks they would have to go in and clear out the sediment from that tunnel, but that was used in the hole for

many, many years, until finally the filtration plant at Bon Tempe was built. And then the one out at –

CE: San Geronimo?

RB: San Geronimo. But he was the king, if I might say; if we spent a dollar of the public's money he wanted a dollar and a quarter back.

CE: We could use a man like that, men like that in the federal government.

RB: That's right. He was the kind that watched that – He watched the p's and q's – his as well as the public's. He was a gentleman from the word "go." Now that's all I can say.

CE: And you know, when people come new to Marin County, they look at Mount Tamalpais and that great watershed and they don't realize that much of what they're looking on is the Marin Municipal Water District property.

RB: That's right.

CE: Acres and acres, thousands of acres of it, and it's an extraordinary thing. In your judgment, would you say that this county has used a great deal of foresight in arranging for that?

RB: Well, for a long time, I think, the Water District was the only one that actually had those facilities. Of course, there was the Boot Jack Camp, and all of that they had back there, but here we allowed them to fish. We had one caretaker, or one supervisor, on the mountain. Now I think they have four or five. We didn't charge, except \$1.00 if you wanted a boat to fish. Now I understand the fees are much bigger.

CE: Can you still rent a boat?

RB: No, they don't allow boats on the lakes anymore, as far as I know.

CE: Because we've seen many photographs, haven't we, Anne, of charming scenes of people in the 1890s and 1900s, in the boats?

RB: Of course, the Alpine Club and the hiking clubs helped a lot in building the trails, and even policing a lot of them, something they don't do very much right now, in my opinion. Of course, there are so many more people, and then all of these tragedies that are going on on the mountain now – You can't have a warden every ten yards, but I think that just too many people if you want my honest opinion.

AK: I think that's one of the places where Al Pinther, who has just died shortly ago – I think that's one of the places where he helped the –

CE: Alpine Club?

AK: Well, over the trails and all kinds of things that had to do with the mountain –

CE: Well, clarify something for me, Bob. You mentioned before there was the Water District, there were these little separate companies of water. When the District was formed, was there then a wholesale installation of meters, and a great deal of that was necessary?

RB: Oh yes, they started metering right away then. The District then would take over these smaller water districts, little by little and then, of course, the County started to grow, and the subdivider would come in, and at that time, the District would have the subdivider put in the pipelines at the District's specifications, so they would be large enough for their use then, and any future use that might come on. And then the District would refund half of the revenue until that money was paid back without interest. And that went on until the late '45s when the County got

going so fast, for instance, when Terra Linda and Marinwood and all of that – And the District just did not have the money to keep putting forth the money to build those, so they cut it down to twenty-five percent, and eventually just took it off entirely, and the subdivider had to put up the entire amount without any refund. So, much of the new mains, et cetera, were actually paid by the subdivider, at least advanced. The money was advanced by the sub-divider. The District later paid them back on revenue they took in. Now, some of the bigger lines, for instance this one line that goes from Bon Tempe through Kent Woodlands, here down into southern Marin, all of those were done by bond issue. And I might say, one of the things now that I get a lot of complaints, because of the fact that I was with the District, is the water bills now that go out, they've got it broken down into each one of the things, and people can't understand why they pay seventy or eighty cents for water and eight or nine dollars for debt reduction, and they seem to forget they voted these bonds, and now they have to be paid. And I'm sure that Tom and I have our names on bonds that won't be returned until year past 2000. So we're still paying for those, and there's been several bond issues since. So people have to realize that they have to pay for it. I know that – I always used to tell them, "We don't charge for a dime for the water. God gives it to us. We charge you for bringing it to you." And I say, "If you want to go up to the dam and get it with a truck, I'm sure they'll give you all you want for nothing, because it will cost you ten times more to bring it down than we're giving it to you for."

CE: Well, when we stopped to visit Kent Lake the other day, the engineer was saying that they were raising the dam forty-five feet, and he said it would double the capacity of it, the water. I find that mind-boggling, but it is a fact.

RB: Well, it is a fact. After all, the higher you get – It's like a cup. There's no water in the bottom of the cup, but when you get up on top, why, that's where all the water is. Of course, personally, I'm not what you call an environmentalist; I'm not what one might say that we should let promiscuous growth go along. But when they come along and give you this shrimp deal – I never heard of a shrimp in all the years I was there in the Nicasio Creek, and all of a sudden they go into the courts to stop anything that comes along. That's stopping progress, and I think that's –

CE: It's unrealistic, isn't it?

RB: It certainly is.

CE: We've gone through a decade of over-emphasis on the environmental problems. Would you care to comment on that?

RB: Well, in all the years I was the Secretary of the Board, which was from '38 to '68, I don't think, if we took the cumulative total, that there were more than 100 people that ever came before the Board. The Board had their meetings and told the staff what to do, and they did it. There was hardly ever – Now starting in, oh, I don't know, about 1963 or '4 I believe, the Board was approached about putting a tramway up on District property from Larkspur Canyon up to the top of the mountain, and that's when the Marin Conservation League took exception to it. They started attending the meetings, protesting, and it was then changed to try to bring it up from Mill Valley to the top of the mountain.

CE: And what happened?

RB: The conservation people attended the board meetings, and they set down what they thought the rules should be, both on how the mountain should be used, and that this thing would scar the mountain, and would be detrimental to the scenery. And in the end, the Board, I think, finally turned the whole thing down.

CE: Well, the Water District was amenable to the idea of having it –

EB: Well, they were going to listen to it, listen to both sides. They never did come to a fulfillment one way or another.

CE: Good heavens, if that thinking was alive and well when they built the Tamalpais Crooked Railway, it never would have got up there, would it?

RB: That's right.

CE: And look at the pleasure that brought to people. It would be a smash today if they had it. All these young people would go up on it.

RB: It would be a tremendous thing in the summertime, especially. Winter, it wouldn't be as much –

CE: Well then, you could shut it down.

RB: And whether it was feasible financially or not was something that the Board wasn't going to consider; that was the developer, and if he wanted to do it. All the Board was interested in was giving him a lease to go up top of the mountain. There were several plans submitted that would hide the tramway, so to speak. It got to be such a hot potato, if you don't mind my saying so, that it was – I think the company, or the man himself, or the man that had the idea, just finally withdrew from it.

CE: Well, have there been other instances of objecting to plans that the Water District has proposed over the last decade?

RB: Not in all the years that I was there, very rarely that we – As I say, no one ever attended the meetings.

CE: Well now, when you joined the Water District – Let's see, that was 1920, you said. Had Alpine Dam just been built?

RB: Yes. And at that time we had 3,000 consumers. That is meter consumers, 3,000 services.

CE: 3,000.

RB: 3,000 services. When I left in '85 there were shortly under fifty, well, I'd say a little over 49,000, and from what I gather in the last thirteen years, they're now only up to 54,000. So you see the rate of growth isn't that large.

CE: Would you care to comment on that moratorium of water for those people who didn't live through it?

RB: Well, I think that – Actually, there probably wasn't anything else they could do. It was a drought that they had once every 100 years.

CE: Are we talking about the 1975-76 drought?

RB: Yes. I think it would have caught any board short. I can't condemn them for that. I personally object to some of the surveys that it made. That's one gripe that I might have: a lot of these surveys could have been made right in that Engineering Department, were let out to consultants. I cite one where they paid \$12,000 to get a report on whether it was going to rain or not, and I questioned them a couple of times down there. "What would you have done if they told you it was going to rain and what would you have done if they told you it wasn't going to rain?" So

- what was the \$12,000? The man that made the survey, I questioned him at one time at another meeting that I attended, and I said, "What was the reason for you making the survey?" He said, "All I did was sell the idea. What they did with it after they got it wasn't my business."
- AK: That's going on all the time.
- CE: Well the subscribers – I'm a little confused. Would you explain to the lay person, the ratio of subscribers to the population? Is it sort of like five to one?
- RB: Well, I've really never gone into that.
- CE: I just wonder what that means. Those are not individual households we are talking about?
- RB: Yes they are. They're households and businesses. Anybody that has a water service, and that's what they are now, and of course each individual house needs a – Except for apartment houses that have their own service –
- CE: The water – Mrs. Kent has talked to me a long time about water. It's been a continual lifetime concern of hers since she's married into the Kent Family, and I'd like to ask some questions on that.
- End, Side A
- CE: The other day Mrs. Kent and I were driving home across the San Rafael-Richmond Bridge. Of course, that line is still on the bridge that brought water during our drought period, but she was mentioning the pier that extends out into the bay. She said it was built by the sugar people. Do you have a little story on that?
- RB: Well, actually, it was built before I came. I think it was just about 1920 or so, and the California Hawaii Sugar Company needed that water because the water that they had on the East Bay was not good enough for refining sugar. So they put the line in from Alpine Dam all the way down to that pier. At the end of the pier they had one or two 500,000 gallon tanks. The idea was to put the water in those tanks and have the barges come over and barge it over to Crockett. I think the first and the second time they filled it, both tanks went over into the bay, so they took it direct from the line. But for many, many years, they were getting water from here, barging it over to Crockett for the sugar refinery over there. I'm not sure, but I think when they built Con Dam that's probably when the water was of the same quality and then they didn't take any more from us. But now the Marin Rod and Gun Club has that pier. In fact, I think it was given to them by the Sugar Company.
- CE: Are we – That installation on the San Rafael Bridge is still there, of course. Is it likely that it will be used in the future?
- RB: Well, put that in the papers. They were thinking about water from them, but – See, that's a funny thing. They had to have permission, and the southern Marin had to give up the water in order for us to get it. Now, whenever you go after water, the state owns the water. As it is right now, they have to have a permit from the state to impound the water. So on this pipeline that comes across, conditions being so grave that the Contra Costa Water let them use their lines to let them bring it this far, and then over the bridge, and as you read in the paper, they're not sure they can get that water. They have no right to the water. They would have to make some agreement with the people. I think that eventually that

- pipeline is going to have to come off of the bridge. But as they're taking up one full lane, and as it is right now it's more than the bridge needs, but if it ever comes to the time when they need that lane, the District is either going to have to get permission to strap it on the side of the bridge, or eventually it's going to have to come off. I don't know if they'll ever need it again. I think with the raising of Kent Lake, I have my doubts that they'll need any water there for years and years and years.
- CE: You mentioned earlier, Bob, and I wish you'd repeat it, about the use of water. You said – You made a statement that you didn't think it was the Golden Gate Bridge that brought in the expansion of water users; it was the Marinship Yard and the people that were brought to this part of the county and didn't want to go back again?
- RB: Well, through the war effort – People that came out to Hamilton Field and – After all, the climate in Marin County is supposed to be the best in the world, practically, in California in general, so they just didn't go back, or if they did they came back here again. You know, the influx was from Arkansas, Oklahoma, all of those that came out here, and that's when I would say the growth actually started. Now, of course, it has slowed down.
- CE: Well, in a period of sixty years, subscriber growth from 3,000 to 54,000 is a big jump, isn't it?
- RB: Well, I think we were putting in about an average of about 2,000 services a year, and now we're down to around 500.
- CE: 500 services a year?
- EB: I think that's what it is now. Well, let's see, from '68 to now is about thirteen years, and they had about 5,000 consumers or services put in in that time, so –
- CE: Oh I see. That's prorated, prorates to 500. How does the Water District feel – Or, would you care to comment on the acquisition of private property for public use, like the Point Reyes National Seashore and also the Golden Gate National Recreational Area? Did they feel one way or another about it?
- RB: Well the Board would have no interest in that at all. That wouldn't be – In fact, it's outside the boundary of the District and it's a problem of West Marin more that it was here.
- CE: Well then, answer me this, how does west Marin get their water?
- RB: They had their own wells until couple, or three years ago, and now they're a part of the North Marin Water District.
- CE: Stafford Lake? Is that Stafford Lake?
- RB: Stafford Lake. Well they don't get it from there. I think they get it – I don't think there's any land out there. Yes, I'm not sure, but I don't think so. But the people out there wanted to go into the District. The interesting story there, too, is when the North Marin County Water District was started out there, they actually started it under the municipal law. But, somewhere or other, the Lucas Valley didn't want in because they felt they were never going to get any water from there, and when the ballots were sent out, they were omitted for some reason. Although they were in it, they didn't get a chance to vote. So they questioned the legality of the election, and so then rather than go into court and start all over again, they started a new water district under the North Marin County. Now they do come in –

Although they have elected directors of their own, they are a part of the county to the extent that I think that the county has something to do with the financial part of it. I'm not too sure about that.

CE: Well, you see, to the lay person, I guess they don't know. They look at Marin County and think that's all – Marin Municipal Water District takes care of the whole thing, and it doesn't. So West Marin is out of it. How about North West Marin where the new – What's the name of the new dam?

RB: You mean Soulagule? That's not within the bounds of the District.

CE: It is not within the boundaries?

RB: No. In fact Nicasio Lake is not within the boundaries of the District.

CE: But it's a part of it, isn't it?

RB: No. We built the lake and we had to get permission of the supervisors and everything. We had to acquire that either by negotiation or, in one case, almost by eminent domain. It's just the same as San Francisco gets its water from Hetch Hetchy and Oakland gets –

CE: But the lake itself is not within the Marin Municipal Water District?

RB: No it's not, and that's why the District has to pay tax on that land. The District is not taxable. None of the District property is taxable.

CE: Oh, but they have to pay tax on that?

RB: Yes, because it's outside of the boundaries of the District. I think the theory behind that was that the school district out there – If you took that great big thing out, then they were going to suffer. So the District does pay taxes.

AK: How about the people paying into the Water District? They don't?

RB: No, not from Nicasio.

AK: What do they do for their water?

RB: They have their – There are all ranches out there, and they have their own – You see, Marin County is not a good area for wells. At one time, Novato got all of their water from wells and then it got so much iron in the water, and one thing and another, and that's when they went to build Stafford Lake, and subsequently into the Russian River water. Most of their water now comes from the Russian River. As you recall, during the drought, people tried all over – I don't know how much money the District spent because of this geologist up north who said there was water all over Marin County, and they went down to the headlands and tried to build – They spent, I don't know, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and they didn't get enough water to make it feasible to use. Marin County doesn't have any. Of course, now, the Meadow Club, they tried for water up there. I played golf up there once or twice and that fourteenth hole is always wet, and yet they couldn't find any water right next to a lake. So Marin County is not conducive to – You'd have to have a well every five or six feet to use the water because, at one time, in summertime, the consumption in Marin County was 50,000,000 gallons a day. Now the drought has brought that down, and people are a little more conservative, and I don't think it will approach that –

CE: Well, answer me this: why have there been so many private wells that have been built in Kentfield and Ross? They must find water, don't they, Mrs. Kent? Some of your neighbors up the line?

AK: All my neighbors have wells.

RB: Well, but how much water? In other words –

CE: Do they use it for gardens?

AK: And it's bad. I don't know what they use it for. Some of our trees that relied on the streams are dying.

RB: There isn't enough water to – The strata is such that Marin County is not conducive to wells.

CE: Well, now we have six lakes in your system. Is that correct. Water District?

RB: Well, that we are using. Lagunitas, Bon Tempe, Alpine, Kent, Nicasio, Soulajule. Now, how many is that? And of course they also have Phoenix Lake. They have the right to use the water in Phoenix Lake. They have deeded that, or sold that to the state, but they still withhold the water rights to Phoenix Lake.

CE: I didn't know that.

RB: They can take the water out, but it's so expensive to pump it and use that; only in an emergency would they use Phoenix Lake.

CE: Well that's something I wish you would explain. Water flows down hills, of course, and you have original Lagunitas Lake, which I understand was built in 1872, and it empties into Bon Tempe. And then Bon Tempe empties into Alpine.

RB: And Alpine empties into Kent.

CE: But Alpine is kind of a low valley and it has to be – The water has to be pumped back, doesn't it, to the communities?

RB: Yes. In fact, right now, they're pumping from Kent into Alpine and Alpine into Bon Tempe to furnish Southern Marin.

CE: Well what's Phoenix Lake's isolated story?

RB: Well that's right here in Ross, and originally that was one of the only lakes they had when they took the District over. Now, they haven't used it. Well, they used it during the drought; they pumped it up. It only holds about 145,000,000 gallons.

CE: 145,000,000 gallons?

RB: Let's see. I'm confused between that one – Phoenix holds – Lagunitas –

CE: Lagunitas is supposed to hold 120,000,000 gallons. Would that be fairly –

RB: No, more than that because I think they raised it since that. I think it holds around 160,000,000, and Phoenix 145,000,000. But when you're using 50,000,000 gallons a day, how long would that last?

CE: 50,000,000 gallons a day.

RB: That's what it was in the summer time on those hot days. I think the average is around 40,000,000.

CE: What do you propose as the solution to the water problem in Marin? Conservation? Plus –

RB: Oh, a little of both, I suppose. I think that the raising of Alpine Dam, I mean, of Kent Lake, that the problems will be pretty well-solved. And, of course, then you still have the Russian River. We're getting some water from Russian River.

CE: We are?

RB: Oh yes.

CE: The Marin Municipal Water District?

RB: Sure, oh yes.

CE: Oh I didn't know that.

RB: I don't know how many acre-feet are coming through now. You could call down and find out. But they are getting water from the Russian River right now.

AK: How does it come in, through Novato?

RB: Yes.

CE: Tell us a little bit about your experience. You said you started off way back in 1920 reading a meter.

RB: That's right.

CE: Did you have a district? Is that what these men do? You have an area or neighborhood or something, and your –

RB: Well no. We read the meters for the whole County, but of course, in those days –

CE: Oh you just kept going. It was a continuous reading?

RB: You read every day. But, in those days, we also repaired meters. We also went out on investigations when people complained. Now the meter is – I suppose they have seven or eight meter readers. They have territories, and I would imagine they rotate them so that they all know all of the routes, so if one got sick somebody else could take over.

CE: How do you answer an irate client who said, "I swear they never read my meter last month"?

RB: That has been a bone of contention with me for years and years because in all the years that I was there, and that complaint always came to me, I never found one instance where the customer was right. I would personally, even though I was the Secretary of the Board and the manager, I would go out and read that meter and say, "Let me see your bill and let's compare what it is." Now the reason they do that is they read them every two months now, for instance, and if you have your meter in the lawn, or something, the minute you water, that meter box is going to get covered up, and so they swear that has never been – Now a meter reader is an experienced man and all he has to do is see three numbers; the last two numbers don't count. And I've always said to the people, "Go out and read your meter. You can read numbers. Go out and compare it with your bill." Now, this is not saying that the meter readers don't make a mistake; they will over-read a meter. But when it is, then it's either rebated or the next month it corrects itself because you subtract one from the other, so you will have a low one the next time. Of course, people are always at the PG&E or the Water District; the utilities are always wrong. They never know anything. They're a bunch of – They never did any hard work in their life, and that's what burns me because all the years I was there I was going down there on Saturdays and Sundays and everything else and no one – Maybe I'm blowing smoke, but more dedicated than I was, and it burns me up to hear some of these comments.

CE: Sure, well you were a real servant to the –

AK: I think that is so of almost all the workers in the Water District. I think they are a dedicated lot of people. One place, I think – I've been in and out several different times, and it seems to me that's so different from the offices where you go and they say, "Oh I don't know. Ask him down the line." Almost any person you ask in that building will have an intelligent answer and a courtesy help, and it's been that way – I've always hoped that they'd get around to the place where the

women in the Water District would be paid equal, equal pay with the men, because they are the most dedicated people, it seems to me.

RB: I think they're getting pretty close now. I don't think there's that much of a difference.

AK: Just a big family. Remember how –

CE: Remember how courteous they were during the drought. You'd go down there to get those little bottles to put in your tank, and they were so helpful, teaching you, helping you, repeating, "Come down. We'll show you how to do it." And everybody then got in the spirit. And you'd meet your neighbor out in front reading your meter. You know, it was kind of a good feeling. You read the meters for a while. What did you do then?

RB: For about eight years, and then I went into the office and I was the consumer clerk and then I was the timekeeper. Then I was the assistant office manager of the office, and then in '38 I went in as Secretary of the Board. At that time I was Secretary of the Board, I was the Controller, I was the Treasurer, and I was the office manager. In 1968 when I retired they broke it up in the four different positions.

CE: Sure. That we've heard so many times, haven't we, Anne?

AK: Yes.

CE: A man who is so versatile, and when they replace him – Look at Stanley Arnold, your relative across the road who's been with the *Chronicle* for years, and four people are going to replace him. Were your offices in Corte Madera very nice? Were they always there?

RB: No, the original office was – You know where the Elks Club used to be?

CE: Sure.

RB: Well, the Bank of Marin – Not where the Elks Club is now, but where the Bank of Marin, across the street there where the *Independent Journal* building – That's where the original building was. We were there until St. Patrick's Day of 1923 when we moved. All of the office gang, everybody got together, and we moved from there down to 874 Fourth Street, next to where Merrill's is. The story there is, when they bought that property, and Tom Kent was on the Board and he wanted to buy the lot next door for around \$2,500, but the Board thought that was too much and they didn't have that kind of money, and so they passed it up. Now it's probably worth two million dollars or three million dollars. Tom always told me that story. And of course, that went from Fourth Street right all the way back to Fifth Street. In 1962, then the building got too small and that's when we went down to Corte Madera, and we also built the pipe yard and everything right across the street from the office building itself. They also bought a piece of property over there in what is now, where the quarry is over there, and I see in the paper that the other day they're renting it out for \$4,500 a month or some darn thing. I don't know who got it; they had it leased and some lady in Mill Valley or something went into court and stopped it, and they had to go all through that again.

AK: Still own it?

RB: Yeah, so –

AK: I didn't –

CE: Well I gather your whole staff, office management just everything, just enlarged from a small organization to – You must have 100 or more employees in that office. What is the personnel?

RB: Oh, I don't know what it is now. I imagine with the yard crew and everything else, oh, around 150 or so employees, but then I don't know how much; whether they're letting out a lot of the construction work to the outside, or what they're doing. I know that, when we had it there, we had that crew and Mr. Stefani was our superintendent. He had about the lowest record of pipe installations of anybody; no one could touch it. And now, of course, we have our own machine shop and mechanic, all the mechanics down there. I believe they're thinking of letting that out, but I don't know when that's going to come.

CE: Mrs. Kent has just held out an organizational chart on the construction department.

AK: Did you do that?

RB: No, I started it, I guess.

AK: There is one like that that has all the –

RB: Yes, right from the manager down.

CE: Well leave this out. It's interesting to me because there's so many crafts represented there. You've got mechanics; you've got electricians; you have blacksmiths.

RB: Pump repairmen. They're all self-sufficient. Most of that is done themselves. The only contracting they did when I was there – And I think that was the great big pipe jobs – When you come to the twenty-four inch or something like that – But anything under twelve-inch, the work was done, except when the subdividers were doing it.

CE: How do you answer an old timer? We were talking to a family that had been here a long, long time, and the gentleman now is ninety-three. He said, "The water doesn't taste as it used to." Is there any truth to that?

RB: I would say yes, because in the days when we first started, we got that pure water from, you might say, spring water or whatever it was, but now they have to put in – The state makes you chlorinate the water, and stuff goes through the filter plants. It isn't the well water. Well, for a while you can still go out on the way to Point Reyes from that spring. They say it's not contaminated, and that tasted, just pure water. Now you have chemicals in the water and the state makes you do it.

CE: Does the Environmental Protection Agency enter into your operation at all?

RB: Not that I know of, only as a private citizens, that I know of.

CE: Well, these treatment plants, like the one you pass out in San Geronimo Valley, that's a big operation. All waters that are going east, go through that, Bob?

RB: Yes, go through that filtration plant. Then there's one at Bon Tempe that takes care of all of southern Marin, and that takes care of all of San Rafael, that area. But that's all –

CE: And that's a continual operation, night and day?

RB: Oh yes. There's a filtration plant operated there at all times. They can be put on manual; there are certain times when they may put it on manual. Most of the time – I don't know about not – When I was there we had an operator out there.

AK: May I ask –

CE: Yes, Mrs. Kent.

AK: I know that sometimes a tank somewhere will leak. Does that show immediately on some kind of a chart in the headquarters?

RB: Well, now they have a system where the minute the tank goes down all they have to do is read it. Before we used to have to send the men out to see what the level of the tank was. But now it comes right into the yard out there, and they almost at all times know the level of those tanks, and know just what it is. I was never too familiar with that myself. That was really not my department. But I know enough that – Al Tate was the one that was in charge of that.

CE: Mrs. Kent was trying to explain to me the other day – I asked her a naïve question. I said, “What is a watershed?” and she said, “Well, you’ve got to have that natural cup of vegetation that when it rains it’s got to hold the water.”

RB: That’s right.

CE: That’s right. If you had a barren pond out there or barren terrain and just had a cup in it, it wouldn’t stay.

RB: No, because the water would simply run into the dam and run over when it was full. That’s why when we had the big fires – When was it, Anne? In ’23, wasn’t it? When we had that big one, wasn’t it, where the fire started at Ignacio and ended up here in the middle of where the Meadow Club is now, and we were fortunate to stop it there or it would have been right down in here. Now it took all of that, all of those big trees – However, the vegetation itself grew back rather quickly, and so the thing was diluted, as you say, and we’d have nothing to hold the water. That’s why they’re afraid of fires more than anything else, because it could hurt the watershed.

CE: Well, it’s hard to believe, for me, sometimes, that the timbering that occurred right here in Ross Valley 120 years ago, 140 years ago when it was first available, all those hills on either side of the Corte Madera Creek were timber. Greenbrae, it was a beautiful stand of trees, and the creek was wide, and then they timbered it off, and what do you have? All the silting down into a narrow, narrow, little tributary. Tell me, Bob, the Marin Municipal Water District is open to the public for hiking, horseback riding, anything else?

RB: Fishing. They’re allowed to fish. Nothing else that I know of.

CE: Is there any sort of a guard or patrol system on this?

RB: Well they have their rangers up there. I think there are three or four now. They’re just to oversee, more for fires than anything else, but now they’re also for recreation or anything else. I don’t know whether there are deputy sheriffs now at the time or not. An interesting story you might – When we acquired some of the land for Alpine, and we – The Board at that time thought they would need more land and they wanted the land that is now Kent Lake. That was way back in about 1926. They heard that Petaluma was going to come down and get that land for a dam of their own, so the Board went to pick the land up, and went into condemnation, and they set a price of fifty-eight dollars an acre. The Board knew at that time, well, that was exorbitant, and Petaluma wouldn’t pay it, so they had to pay the fees for the suit, and they did that. Well, in 1946 it seems as though there were twelve undivided interests that owned that, Stanford University being one of the biggest. And so they came to us in 1946 and wanted to sell it and we

bought the whole thing for thirty dollars an acre, and they were paying something like \$5,000 or \$6,000 a year taxes for all of those years. So in the end they were the big losers.

AK: For what? How much?

RB: I think something like thirty dollars an acre, I think we actually got, just speaking from memory now as what we got it for. And that's what we got it to build Kent Lake. Now again, this is speaking from just memory. Jim Peters was instrumental. When we raised Alpine Dam, he pulled enough strings so that he got the C.C.C. to do all of the removing of the timber for the area that was going to be flooded. Another thing he did that I'll always remember is that –

CE: Pretty resourceful gentleman, wasn't he?

RB: Oh yes. Oh, he pulled some of the darndest things. During the war, remember, Anne, when we had the National Guard up on top of the mountain?

AK: That's right.

RB: A fellow by the name of Todd Hunter who was our credit man came in and he was a member of the National Guard and said he was going to be sent to Applegate to guard the tunnel up there. Mr. Peterson, "Like hell they are! We got watershed and they're going to send him up to guard a tunnel." And he got on the phone to Washington and everything else, and doggone if he didn't get that National Guard here. And we went out there to the Fairfax Pavilion one night, raining, and Mr. Peterson said – There was a Captain Dawson, I think, had charge of the National Guard, and Mr. Peterson said, "Aw, don't put him out tonight in all of this rain." He says, "You got nothing to do with that anymore." He says, "That's our business now." They didn't have any uniforms on, and Jim and I went out to Hamilton Field and got all the old overcoats and uniforms from the First World War, and brought them up here. And we had the C.C.C. barracks up there right where the Girl Scout Camp is now, and we set up a commissary there, and George Kaynel was the chef. He robbed two or three places, the Elks Club being one of them, some pots and pans and anything else, and set up a commissary up there, and went on from there. But he pulled those strings and he made them leave them, and they were left there for pretty near the duration.

CE: We talked about drought, Bob. As a contrast of – During your many years with the District, did you have terrible results of too much water? Bad winters? Never?

RB: No. Our biggest problem was the system in a lot of places not being big enough to supply the area. Many a time, that Mr. Stefani and I would go down the hills of Waldo, and get down and almost pray that the fog would come in to stop the consumption because, as you know, Marin County would have three or four real hot days and then the fog would come in and relieve it. But we'd get to places – I site one like Santa Venetia where we had, oh, maybe a million and a half gallon tank and they'd use the water so fast that the tank would go down so there'd be no fire protection. We then would have to send our meter readers and everybody else out and say, "Please don't use any water during the day, and use as little as you can." From that point there would probably be some water shortages, and that's why people say, "Oh you had it before." Well, we had it to that extent, but not because there was a shortage of water itself.

CE: Well, Bob, I know we could talk for a long time but this particular tape has come to a conclusion and I want to thank you so much for sharing some of your many reminiscences of the Marin Water District.

RB: Thank you.