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Anne T. Kent California Room
Marin County Free Library
3501 Civic Center Dr. #427
San Rafael, California, 94903

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT CARSON

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent
May 17, 1983

INTERVIEWEE: Robert Carson (RC)

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

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CE: Today is Tuesday, May 17, 1983. Continuing the Oral History Program for the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat and once again we are at the residence of Mrs. Jordan Martinelli. This afternoon we have a real treat in store. With us today is Mr. Robert Carson who resides in Attenborough in Nottingham, England and he is here in a visit to Marin County and is going to share with us today some of his exciting adventures while living in Marin County. He has been involved, as the family has, with the Carson Glove Company, which was established in 1875 and ran that company for many years. He's been involved in the creation of Hamilton Field, the Golden Bridge District and Marvelous Marin the Redwood Empire Association and other things we'll find out. It's awfully nice of you to come this afternoon, Bob.

RC: Thank you very much.

CE: Tell us a little bit about your background there.

RC: I was born in San Francisco in 1902, in the only house that was left on Van Ness Avenue after the fire - 2806. It was a wooden turreted front house with a marble staircase. I went to grammar school on Pacific Street between Broderick and Baker. To Lowell High School between 1916 and 1920 and to the University of California where I graduated in 1924.

CE: Bob, interrupting you a moment. You were what, four years old at the time of the earthquake?

RC: That's right.

CE: Do you remember anything about it?

RC: The only thing that I can remember of the whole earthquake was watching the piano, downstairs piano, gradually walk its way from the Lombard Street side of the hall over onto the side near the Fort and that's the only thing I can remember of the whole ?

CE: And the home was not destroyed? Did you stay there or did your family relocate?

RC: They - -actually they had the dynamite in the house ready to blow it up but my father wouldn't get out. He said, "No, after all this is the last house on the avenue. It's all sand dunes from here on and there's just no point in blowing it up." So he finally talked them out of it and it ended up that we had the only house that was left on the avenues because it didn't burn.

CE: And that was near Lombard?

RC: That was near Lombard and it's still there today. And if my mother could see it she'd get out of her grave and come back and buy it back because it looks absolutely horrible. My father had founded the Carson Glove Company in San Francisco in 1875 and this was burned out in the earthquake of 1906. And the family had purchased the Fernhill tract in Ross in 1890 and at the time of the quake they had a summer home on the property. It was decided to restart the glove company in Marin County and after some considerable hassle with those in authority who were then protecting our County from industrial contamination the temporary quarters were established on Billie Shannon's villa which was located at San Rafael at the end of what is now the Miracle Mile. We were the first, and for many years the only manufacturing venture in Marin County.

CE: I'd like to ask you, gloves - - I understand from Mrs. Martinelli you made beautiful gloves, your company. You don't find many shops today that stock beautiful gloves.

RC: These were not strictly speaking dress gloves. These were heavy work gloves for the oil fields.

CE: That was the first thing you did - -

RC: That was the main thing we did. We never did go into fancy gloves.

CE: Women's gloves?

RC: Never. But my mother made those gloves like they were dress gloves and everybody that wore gloves in this state always said Carson Gloves were the best gloves. Because she saw that they were made right - -

CE: You mother did?

RC: And nobody could fool with her.

AK: When my sister Martha taught at the Ross School, your mother would give her beautiful, beautiful, kid gloves.

RC: Yes, but those were not ours. Those were not ours. Those were probably Dent's. They weren't our gloves. We never did make really fancy dress gloves. We stocked them and we sold them but we didn't make them.

CE: All right.

RC: Well, we were the first and for many years the only manufacturing venture in the County. And I regret that I cannot proudly point to a thriving and prosperous light industrial development in the County. After all these years it still needs the same things. Same type of industrial development, that will provide employment for a portion of its residents as well as to lift a little of the tax burden from the shoulders of the property owners.

CE: Well, that's true.

RC: We're still the bedroom of San Francisco and the occupants are still asleep.

CE: Tell me, Bob, how many people did you employ?

RC: We employed about 175.

CE: Hundred and seventy-five!

RC: Yes. I should think - - and this is not speaking in a derogatory manner. I should think every Portuguese or Italian worked for us sometime in his life, or his grandfather or his grandmother's life.

We were a big family group and we all got along marvelously together and it was a wonderful deal. We never made any money, because the company was not run that way. It was just run for the family and it wasn't - - - it was never intended to be a profit-making thing, I should think. Only in the early days was it profitable. But the rest of it just carried on and it made work for the rest of them and they were happy as clams.

CE: Where was your final location?

RC: Well, we left Billie Shannon's villa and we moved down next door to Charlie Lund at the lumber company, which was underneath the pass, which comes in over San Rafael. We were right next to the canal, right at the top. And we had a great big long building, it was about 250 feet ? . My uncle had built it with his own bare hands and it was a lovely thing. There was one time just before the - - well, just before the war when it looked as though we might be going to make a little money for some strange reason. So we decided to have a safe. So we had this safe put in the middle of this thing and lo and behold it started taking the whole factory down in the canal. And eventually we had to take and cut the cement out bit by bit by hand and throw it all out or we'd have gone down with the building. So then the state came through, the road came through and then they switched us on over next door to Don Collin's.

CE: The Buick dealer, yes.

RC: And we had a place there, which then became too small for us. My nephew ran it for the family but then when his kids came in, Tom and John O'Connell, they wanted to try to do something with it. And Kay wasn't really very interested; he was more interested in stocks and bonds than he was in doing anything with the factory. And so they had kind of a hard time with him and eventually when it got to the point where the factory wasn't big enough to do what we wanted to do - - - You see, we now make all the cones, the highway cones that you see across the bridge. We are going to - - It looks very, very much as though we are going to have a chance to make the cones for the bridge this new arrangement that they have got down. And that is going to be quite a big thing. It's only one of the things that we're involved in, but we're into plastic more - -

CE: You're diversified now.

RC: We're more diversified than we were.

AK: Well, that's in Sausalito now.

RC: Yes, that's right. In the [19]20's, the chances of the county's development were constantly blocked by the Southern Pacific, who operated the Northwestern Pacific through Marin on the basis of the absolute minimum of service and maintenance which would keep them from losing their Eureka to San Francisco franchise. The sole purpose of which was to keep competition and other lines from getting into San Francisco from the north. Soon after my father's death in 1928, I found myself operating the Carson Glove Company without very much confidence in its future projects. The family concern had done well making heavy work gloves in the days when it took ninety men to dig a ditch by hand. Now one man on a cat can do it in half an hour wearing a pair of canvas gloves. And the business had been left to my mother and I was not been able to convince her that it had changed and that it had to change if it was going to meet the new conditions.

In 1928, there were rumors that the government was planning to establish a chain of air bases on the Pacific Coast for defense purposes. And Harry Ridgeway, who was the

manager of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company in Marin County, was at that time the president of our booster association, Marvelous Marin, and I was vice president. The chairman of what was laughingly called the Airport Committee - -

CE: Interrupting you for a minute, Bob, tell us for the record, what's your idea - - what was Marvelous Marin created for?

RC: Well, we were just a booster association. Nobody ever got paid anything. The boys all did things - - Those kind of things will never happen again. We used to go out and spend all our time during the end of the year working for the Red Cross and the Boy Scouts and the Campfire Girls and all those sort of things and giving our time to it. In the end, it cost about - - - about 90% of what we collected would go to the Campfire Girls and the Boy Scouts and 5% went for the cost of collecting it. Now today, it takes 95% to collect the stuff and if you get 5% to the Red Cross, you're really doing something.

CE: And now they're not boosting, they seem to want to close the door and keep everybody out. The whole philosophy is changed.

RC: Who?

CE: The residents that have recently moved in.

RC: Ah, yes, but the new residents in the County haven't got that same feel. We all lived together, we were all friends. There wasn't any trouble that you could get into, in this county, that some old pal wouldn't come along and try to sort you out. And those days are never going to happen again, never in this lifetime. Not ever.

CE: Well, was the Marvelous Marin tied up with the Redwood Empire Association?

RC: Yes, we were associated with them in order to try to boost the travel up and down the Redwood Highway. Yes, that's how we started the Indian Marathon later on in our lifetime.

CE: Are you going to cover that later?

RC: Not in here.

CE: Well, couldn't you cover it now?

RC: Oh, boy it would take - -

CE: All right we will talk about that later then. Well then you're talking about Hamilton Field -

RC: Yes. And at that time Harry was the president and I was the vice president and - -

CE: Well - - why was the federal government anxious to establish another major military base on the coast here? What was the reason?

RC: Yes, they were going to establish - -

CE: They had March Field down - - the southern - -

RC: March Field was the opposition

CE: Down in Riverside somewhere and - -

RC: That's right. I've got all the rest of that down here.

CE: And you were the group promoting this space.

RC: Yes, we were trying to see what could be done, if possible, in Marin County. We'd had trials of trying to see what we could do about putting in an airport and really it was pathetic. I mean, like all these efforts, they're talking about it now. Airports are simply for the birds these days. If you haven't got a great big industrial setup, you just can't make an airport operate. There's no way that you can do it. And we were teetering around here trying to see if we could put one in Mill Valley or Corte Madera or you might - - There was only to be a little difficulty having to get those 707's down over the big power lines and into a ditch with 150 feet to spare. That was the kind of space we were talking about for an airport and it was absolutely ridiculous. So we were in hopes that maybe there was some place that we had that would be a good place because the fogs were heavy, as a rule, in San Francisco and we were - - as you went further north toward Novato it became less and less. And that was really what we were kind of pinning our hopes on.

CE: Well, we were sort of in the beginning of the depression too, wouldn't it bring money into this community?

RC: Well, yes of course, that's what everybody hoped it would do, yes.

CE: Okay.

RC: So there is a little bit of science fiction in this gambit, I guess, because we thought if we couldn't resolve our ground problems with the Northwestern Pacific getting to San Francisco we'd take to the air. Our attitude in this matter reminds me so much of the English story of a man and his wife who started up a fish and chip shop. And they worked very hard at this for some years and eventually it just became absolutely nothing. He was worn out and he gave up. And he said, one night he threw his spatula down and he said to her "Nellie, this is the end." He said, "I am going to take this place and turn it into a brothel." And she said, "But, John, dear, if we haven't been able to make money selling fish and chips what make you so sure we'd be successful selling broth?" Anyway, that's an English story, you don't have to laugh.

In any event, in the matter of air bases, all the interested parties were to send in details on suitable sites in their areas. The meeting was called at Mayor Rolph's office where the entire project was to be explained. And our committee consisted of myself, Harry Ridgeway, Herb Brainerd, who was then the city manager of San Rafael, Lt. Col. G. C. Brandt, Commanding Officer of Crissy Field in San Francisco, who was to have been present to explain the project. But in his absence, the president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Cutler, outlined the general idea. Now, Oakland, Sunnyvale, San Leandro, South San Francisco, Alameda and others had all sent some pretty sharp looking groups. And our position was very much like that of the small gambler when he suddenly realizes he is trapped in a no-limit game.

CE: You were playing with the big boys.

RC: That's right. As we started home I said to Harry Ridgeway, "I wonder why that fellow Brandt didn't show? Why don't we stop off at Crissy Field and find out?" And Harry said, "He'd throw us out." And I said, "I've been thrown out of better places than Crissy Field." So we went and asked to see Colonel Brandt. Now Jerry proved to be a most charming man, and he loved hunting fishing and shooting and we talked sports until he broke out the bourbon by which time we found that we had run into a kindred spirit who was no slouch for the bottle. About this time it seemed reasonable to ask the important question, so we inquired as to why he hadn't attended the meeting. And he said he didn't want to get into the fracas until the local politics had narrowed the field. And I asked him if he had seen the plans submitted and he said he had. And by this time we were all in first name terms and I said, "Jerry, if you had a simple choice as a flying man, which site would you pick?" And he told us that if the money and the politics had nothing to do with it, he'd pick the Marin County site. So we thanked him and said that's all we wanted to know. And it took us four years to make the grade but right then and there we stole the air base project right out from him. We held back the idea until after a number of aborted meetings when it seemed as though March Field was going to get the call while we were arguing amongst ourselves. And then we suggested that as this was of vital importance for the whole Bay Area, why not put up all the sites for free choice by the Air Corps and agree that we would all throw our considered weight behind whoever they selected. And the idea was adopted.

CE: Good.

RC: And that's how you get it for nothing. Meantime Jerry Brandt became so well known over here that we were thinking of running him for supervisor. The Air Force got its free choice and Marin County was selected as the best location. And it still took three and a half years of slogging, but it was worth every bit of the effort.

CE: Well, tell us where the site was. What was it called? Marin Meadows it seems to me?

RC: Marin Meadows, yes, that's right. It belonged to the California Packing Corporation.

CE Was anything going on on that land?

RC: Yes, they were raising - - they were canning - - raising stuff to can there - -

CE: Off of the land?

RC: Yes. And they had a system which was a Dutch system which was called cannonball system in which to drain it, they used to run thin pipes through underneath the ground and then they'd actually drag cannonballs on the end of a wire through it to open up these trenches and then that would drain underneath and that's how they worked the land.

CE: Because it was marshland, wasn't it? Below sea level.

RC: It was marshland. That's how they built it up bit by bit. So when we first came in of course -

CE: Gee, the Army must have thought, "What they were handing us here - - "

RC: Oh, I don't know, the Army thought that it was great, right from the beginning they landed one of the big planes there, in the early days. I've got a picture of himself and - -

CE: We're talking about several hundred acres aren't we? Seven or eight hundred acres something like that?

RC: That's right.

CE: Well, then how did you give it to the army or how did you sell it or how did you actually transfer the title of that land? Did the County own it?

RC: No, the County didn't own it, the - -

GM: California Packing - -

RC: California Packing Corporation owned it. And I had to, eventually, go down and talk old man Armsby, who was the head of California Packing Corporation and I - - Jeff Armsby and I were school kids together, we went to grammar school in Ross. And I had to ask him if by any chance they could see their way clear, if the army is going to consider this, to turn this property over to them. And he looked at me and said, "Damn you kids, I came over here from San Francisco to get away from all this so-called progress," and he said, "I wouldn't care if they never paved the road in Ross. If you had to walk right from the station with a lantern like you use to have to do fifty years ago." And he said, "Now you damn kids want to bring it all back in here." And he said, he said "I will say this off the record because if you dare say anything about this I will chew you up publicly." But he said, "As a matter of public - - - from a public standpoint we will

support it." But he said, "If I thought for a minute you were going to get away with this," he said, "I would stop it right now." And that was the way he left us hanging. And I went back and I said to my mother and father, "The old goat, he just don't believe in progress." But as a matter of fact, when I finally came back home and went to building, I built way up on the top of the hill as far away as I could get from everybody else and maybe the old man had something in that.

CE: Is that Mary Armsby's father?

RC: Yes, that's Mary's father - - she's a great gal.

CE: She's great, yes.

RC: Now, I had a picture that I had here which was taken in 1929 of the first plane that ever landed and it was called then Marin Meadows. And standing in front of it are Bill Deysher, supervisor, Jerry Brandt, Clarence Lee, was our congressman, and a wonderful congressman if I may say so. I'm a black republican but he was a democrat and he was just absolutely wonderful. If it hadn't been for Clarence Lee I don't think we would have gotten that because when it came time, after all the struggle that we put in on it, then somebody had to take this bill through. And the republicans were in at that time. And he came to me and said, "Bob," he said, "you know I hate this. We've worked so hard at it and I'm entitled to get this bill through on my own. But," he said, "It's going to have its best chance if Mrs. Kahn takes it through because this is a republican administration." So it went through as the Kahn bill and I think that that was the most selfless thing for any - - any man to do. He was a wonderful fellow.

Meanwhile, 1932 was marked by the end of prohibition. Now I'd been the secretary of the old Marin Golf Club on San Pedro Road for four years, for three of which I had tried to resign. The monthly dances used to be affairs to be remembered because all the members brought theirs either on the hip or other handy containers. The process of clearing the empties out of the hydrangeas surrounding the porches were to be an operation of some magnitude on Monday mornings. Incidentally, I had become a great friend of our sheriff, Walter Sellmer, and of all his deputies who are all very kind about preserving order and had patience far exceeding the requirements of their office.

For a period, we seem to have a clientele who were blessed both with great capacity and a vivid imagination. I can remember characters voluntarily jumping into the swimming pool fully clothed long before it became fashionable to push your guests in. Harold Dollar, I remember, as one of our star turns. He used to attend occasional dances in which he never failed to get into a roaring good humor and ended up by kicking in the base drum. It got so that it was cheaper to keep an old base drum in reserve and switch it on the last dance so that Harold could put his seal of approval on the party without hurting anyone feelings.

All this was good clean fun. But with the end of prohibition imminent, you probably understand why I put in what I fondly hoped was my final resignation. After going through what was considered par for the course during what was supposed to be a

dry period, I wasn't for having any part of the soiree when members could really drink. I think I must be a born loser where my friends are concerned. There is a well-known story in England, which just about fits me. It's a story about a bookie who eventually got so tired of losing all the time that he packed it up. And he went to his pals and he said, "I am quitting, I am not going to place another bet." And they said, "Oh, Fred, don't quit, you're one of our best customers. So if you're absolutely determined, let us give you a going away present. We will put into this cap all the tickets for the last two months of the winners. Ten to one, twenty to one, there is nothing but that in there. And you draw. And whatever you draw, we will pay you off as a going away present." So he made his bet and he put his hand into the cap and he picked out a ticket and his face fell. And they said, "What did you draw, Fred?" And he said, "Six and seven-eighths." And that's what really happened to me in that club, they just conned me right back in there again. As you would suspect, they got me into a corner and they begged a little and the next thing I knew there I was waiting in fear and trembling for the music to start at that first party after that awful dry spell. And the visions of the Independent headlines floated before my eyes, "A most successful party marking the end of the prohibition was held at the Marin Golf and Country Club on Saturday evening. Walter Castro, the Chief of the San Rafael Fire Department and his boys battled valiantly with the flames until four a.m. but were only able to save the men's locker room and the pool. The president, Mr. George Hind, indicates that work on the new cub house will start on Tuesday." But you all want to know something, it was the nicest party we ever had. The very sight of all that liquor racked up behind the bar in full view of God and everyone else with all the rest of the time to drink it unmolested, just cooled off those big kidney boys. I never got stuck with the cost of a second-hand base drum because Hal didn't even bother to kick it in.

CE: That was a wonderful club, what a wonderful club!

RC: Oh, they were, once again, they were wonderful people. Davy Duncan who was our big Scotsman, oh, he was a lovely man, he was from one of the big oil companies. And Davy used to play that course religiously every New Year's morning, with two pipers following behind him and a bottle whiskey on his hip. And he'd have a drink at every hole until he fell down. Never quite made it but he always made a good try at it. They were just wonderful people.

CE: What happened to that club? Did it –

RC: All the youngsters there – well, not only all the youngsters, some of the older men, they were annoyed because it wasn't an eighteen hole course.

CE: Oh, it was a nine hole.

RC: And we could have had an eighteen hole course, we could have – if you take the bottom where the entrance is now at Margarita Drive and gone around you could have had all the property you wanted up there for another -

CE: There were no homes there –

RC: No homes at all, nothing up there – but they didn't want it. And we had a Yacht Club, and we had lighted tennis courts and a lighted swimming pool –

CE: The Marin Yacht Club, across the way there?

RC: It was all part of the club, we had a lovely little place, but you know George was a little bit stubborn about, you know, not wanting them to go into all of that expense, and the younger fellows and the boys all said, "Look, we've got to have an eighteen hole course." So they went up to the Meadow Club and got room the first two or three times. Look, everybody who starts a club is in on the death of the first, the first lot that started, and then sometimes there's another one that takes it on, then another one.

CE: That happened with the San Francisco Yacht Club.

RC: I believe they've steadied down now, but it was a shame to lose the old club because it was beautiful.

CE: What did it become? Didn't it become something? A Pony Express?

RC: No, no, no. The fellow that bought it had some relatives that were in the Pony Express.

CE: I see.

RC: And I thought, when I first came over and saw it, I thought, "My gosh, what a posh place," I thought, "now there's a place to get a drink." I was going to go in but fortunately I was saved myself the embarrassment when I found out it was privately owned.

CE: Then after that, the land was sold and sub-divided and homes are all in that area.

RC: Yeah, homes. They lost that club for \$50,000, that's all they owed. How in the world they did that, oh, boy.

CE: The membership could have absorbed that in some way, it seems.

RC: I will not say what happened to that; that was...

RC: The end of prohibition was also the end of the big depression that had been plaguing us since 1929. The most important thing seemed to be to live better after all those lean years. And no one wanted to tie up money in trying to plan the future of the county, which in 1935 was just beginning to feel the beneficial effects of the presence of the air base. Meantime, the Southern Pacific, having pleaded continual poverty for the Northwestern Pacific while letting the rolling stock and the roadbed in Marin County go to hell, suddenly found that it had unlimited funds to spend in trying to stop the building of the Golden Gate Bridge. Having lost cases questioning the validity of the bridge

bonds in both the State Supreme Court and the Federal Court in San Francisco, it now declared its intention to carry the fight to the U. S. Supreme Court where it hoped to kill the project or delay it indefinitely.

CE: Bob, how did you and the other counties get the idea to form a Bridge District with George Harlan assisting you, guiding you somewhat? And that \$750 you talked about?

RC: Well, we were all pretty despondent about this whole thing because it looked as though it was a lost cause. San Francisco had to put up part of the money and we were supposed to put up the rest of it because we were the only point on which the bridge touched that was the law – we were the only folks that could actually put money back of it. Consequently, we were just losers on that. But George Harlan came along and said, "Look, I have an idea that if we went around to the other counties surrounding us and we were to say to them, 'Look, how about joining into a Bridge District?'" That if they voted to join the Bridge District we would then be able to have funds enough to really finance this along with San Francisco. And he talked us into it. And we said to him, "Well, look, George, how much is this thing going to cost?" And he said, "How much have you got?" So we shook the till and we looked into it and we said, "\$750." And he said, "Well, I'll take it." So he went off and he put these dues on in every county and he won, in every case. And so then we ended up having a Golden Gate Bridge District. Now, I suppose this is kind of a naive way to start things out, but we were all pretty naive anyway, most of us, and we thought that if we had enough nerve to start and built a bridge from our side halfway over to San Francisco, they'd just have to build it the rest of the way because they couldn't hardly leave it hanging in the air. It's a kind of attitude that you've got in Alice in Wonderland. An awful lot of the times it's an amazing thing, it pays off. So, that's what happened, we got the San Francisco Bay Bridge - - The funny part of it was that in the end we found that George Harlan had the loveliest piece of property just off the end of the bridge and he made a lot of money. Everybody started saying, "Oh, that awful man, how in the world..." - - - Well, we said, "What of it? George got the bridge for us and we only paid him \$750 and who could do a better deal than that?" And that's the way it turned out.

CE: Bob, let's get back to Hamilton Field for a moment. I understand that it was completed through some other future litigation, the army wanted more land from the Bodkin property? – For quarters etc., and that put a hitch in it, didn't it?

RC: That hit us really hard, and it was one of those things that always happens in these deals with the government. The last minute they find some one little thing that's extra, that they've got to have. And they railroad you into it and you've got to go the whole way or you don't get anything. So they said to us in the end, we suddenly find that we want the place - - - Here they had a great big level piece of property, but they didn't want that, not for the officers. They suddenly decided - - -

CE: That was for the airstrip and the hangers.

RC: That was for the airstrip and the enlisted men and the hangers and the rest of it. But for the officers, now, they wanted a piece of the hill, which was called the Bodkin property. Now that was murder. Because it had never been mentioned before and the Bodkin's obviously were delighted and we just sat there like - - - we were sitting ducks on this thing. And it was not very fair because they were friends of ours, they were kind people, and we just got thrown at them and they - - their attorneys were just laying there waiting for us. And we had to eventually get to the point where we had to threaten to just constrain the property and it was a very unpleasant sort of deal and it set us back another year. And it was not very nice, really. Although it was obviously the piece of property that was dead logical because Hamilton Field has been the most sought after place for the Air Force to stay in all of the states.

CE: Oh, it's beautiful Spanish or Mediterranean style quarters. If you get orders to go to Hamilton, that's the "creme de crème," isn't it?

RC: That's what the boys always said.

CE: Bob, you have a beautiful photograph there taken of a group of prominent citizens in 1927 at the - -

RC: No, February 20, 1929.

CE: All right. At the E. B. McNear properties. Now, what brought that about? Was that after you consummated the contract, a sort of a - -

RC: Yes, that was when we knew that we were going to get it and the Air Force came out and they had a party with us and we had all the local celebrities and all the people that had to do with this, all came out and had lunch together.

CE: Would you mind reading this into the record, those names again?

CR: In the middle of this picture myself as the chairman, Dolf Doherty, who is from - - Dolf is the most lovable man. Dolf Doherty is the man who organized the Larkspur Fire Department and it's the only fire department in the world that ever made money. And Dolf is one of the workers for the community that nobody is ever going to forget.

CE: His wife, his widow, now, is still alive, you know, at the Tamalpais.

RC: And then there was Harry Ridgeway, then there was George Harlan, there was A. A. DeVoto, there was George Kaenel, there was Ben Schmidt. Those were the members of the air base committee and, as it happens, I'm the only one left now of that whole crowd. Then there was the Marin County Supervisors, Casper Gardner, William Deysher, chairman, Ed Sweetser, Bob Trumbull, A. Martinelli. Then there were the people from the Air Force, there was Truby Davidson, Secretary of War for Air, there was Major ? Simmons who was his second in command and Colonel Jerry Brandt and other dignitaries of the Air Force. Then the Marin crowd, there was William Kent a college

friend of Truby Davidson's, Charles Reindollar, State Legislature, Harry Lutgens, editor of the Independent, Bill Nock, mayor of San Rafael, Lee Smith, Dodge Agency, Jack Hunt, Chrysler Agency, Bill Murray, Bank of San Rafael, Jeff Zander, National Auto Parts, Carlos Freitas, attorney, Fred Dickson, ranches, Bob Austin, Marin Telephone and Telegraph, Rafael Dufficy, doctor, Malcolm Perry, nurseryman, Ed Meyer, Coca Cola, Mark Harry, realtor, Hal O'Connor, Highway Patrol, E. Cohen, banker, Charles Lund, Henry Hess Lumber Company, Charles Marcus, Albert's Incorporated, Harry Marcus, Albert's Incorporated, Jake Albert, Albert's Incorporated, Dudley Williams, funeral director, Al Robinson, doctor, J. Keaton, mortuary, and J. Martinelli, judge. Those were the crowd that were there. And the funny part of this is as I look at this picture it reminds me of a very funny incident because Erskine McNear, the son of E. E. McNear, was a very odd character and he wore a great big walrus mustache and he was quite a character. And just a little bit eccentric. And we turned to see who was taking this picture and he was standing on two boxes, like in the old movie news, with his cap turned on backwards and a look of wild - - a wild look in his eye while he was taking this picture and everybody simply collapsed in the whole crowd, it was really very humorous. It accounts for all the smiles that were in there.

CE: Well, Bob, about five or six years later then, in May of 1935, the air base is completed and the dedication day arrives. You were there, of course.

RC: Yes, as the guest of honor.

CE: I understand 15-20,000 people were there that same day, Sunday, Mrs. Martinelli was there with Judge Martinelli. Did they have an air show? Did they provide the public with - -

RC: They had an air display for us.

CE: The power of the Air Force and what it could do? General Hap Arnold was there?

RC: That's correct.

CE: Today, talking in conclusion a moment about Hamilton there, the citizenry doesn't know quite what to do with it. For a long time, during World War II, it served another function, didn't it? And after the war it became an air force base.

RC: Correct.

CE: The world has changed, hasn't it? And the technology of warfare, I wonder what its future might be. The Coast Guard, I think, has an interest in it today, the Navy - - The Air Force itself has declared the base surplus but it is still being used by some detachments of the Sixth Army. Some of the Coast Guard use it and the Navy operates an exchange, a commissary, and a housing office. I wonder what its future would be? Would you care to comment on what's going to happen to that?

CR: Well, it's very hard to tell that, but - - the whole thing about that is that whatever the Navy or the Army or the Air Force gets a hold of they never want to let go. And so when it comes to the time when they're supposed to turn it back to you for a dollar and give the whole place back to you, they suddenly say that there are reservations and that you have to maintain an air field and you have to do this and you have to do that, only because they want to keep their thumb on it just in case they suddenly wanted to use it. And I've got a very bad feeling about all of that and I think we're being treated very badly by the government on that. But it's nothing unusual; it's the thing they always do. And that is the reason for upsetting us so much by trying to tell us what we've got to do with it. Certainly if they could con us in putting in an airfield and that would be fine. But an airfield is an absolutely suicidal sort of thing for a small community like this to take on, and it would just cost more money than anybody ever knew and it wouldn't be worth it. So the question is, "What are we going to do with it?" I mean, we are just kind of being driven into a little bit of a corner by the government here, trying to get us to keep something going which they would like to keep their sticky fingers on. And I think somehow we ought to get free from them but I couldn't advise - -

CE: How to divorce ourselves from that.

RC: How we ought to divorce ourselves from it.

CE: Well, it's a perpetual problem, there's not a week goes by, is there, Gen, you don't see an article about Hamilton Field in the paper and the Board of Supervisors have been torn asunder by this problem.

RC: Well, friends of mine, you know, say, "You're the one who helped to get the base," and I say, "Yes." They say, "What for?" So then I'm supposed to look embarrassed about it, I don't know. I think - it gave great opportunities to the county, I don't think the county took the best advantages of the opportunity that it gave or Novato wouldn't be bigger than San Rafael. I think they were remiss. We didn't accept socially the Army and the Air Force personnel - - -

CE: Into the social scene of Marin?

RC: Into the social scene of Marin County. And if we had done so, I think that things would have turned out a great deal better. I don't see any reason against Novato, they saw the opportunity and they took it. But San Rafael certainly was very, very lax in not making an effort until they suddenly found that Novato was getting bigger than San Rafael. And this is all a very selfish sort of attitude and I know it's easier to talk about this and say you oughtn't to be that way but - - but the County - - -

CE: It never used to be that way did it?

RC: The taxpayers of the county are entitled to something for the effort that they made to try to give the government what it wanted and I think we ought to get a better deal from them and I'm sorry that I can't tell you exactly how I think we ought to get it.

CE: All right. Well, Bob, that problem you don't have to solve. I'd like to know, and I wish you would tell us just before we sign off this afternoon - - - I understand you moved to England in 1937, now what brought about a change in your whole lifestyle from the Carson Glove Company to England?

RC: Well, in 1935, my father-in-law wrote me from New Orleans, where he was then the Port Engineer, to inform me that he was homesick for England and that he and his brother, who was then in Australia, were considering returning to Nottingham and starting a spring business in ? . While neither of them had manufacturing experience, they were convinced that there was good opportunity in that area as the furniture, bedding and motor trade were booming. He wanted to know if I would consider joining them in two years if it proved that their efforts showed promise of developing. And I replied that I could say yes at once provided that they were willing to allow me to buy shares in the new venture from my earnings over a period of at least ten years and up to a maximum of one third of the shares that were then outstanding. The Robbins brothers gave me a wonderful offer of employment in 1938 and I left Marin County to try my luck in the old world. In spite of the fact that the Second World War broke out a year after my arrival, the company prospered and, from a staff of fifty at the start, we were employing 750 in 1946. I enjoyed the work immensely and found that, although I had no engineering training, I have a flair for mechanical problems. I hold fifteen patents for the company and several of these were of major importance in furthering the development of the business.

In 1956, on a visit to Marin, I was talking to my nephew, Carson O'Connell, who was then involved in the welding of PVC products through high frequency heat sealing. He showed me an article in a trade magazine, which noted the PVC was now being formed under a new process developed by the Gerdler Company of St. Louis. Since 95 percent of all automobiles seat covers are vinyl, as well as the door panels and a good deal of the dash molding, it occurred to me that the possibilities were enormous if you could heat seal the padding to the covers and eliminate stitching or gluing. I stopped off at St. Louis on the way back to England and, as the idea was still only in the development stage there, I was able to secure for us the first European license to produce vinyl foam under a guarantee that if we got up to five tons per week in four years, no further licenses would be granted in Great Britain.

We went through a pretty harrowing 18 months before we got the first plant in operation, but the company is now supplying vinyl foam to Ford, Vauxhall, BMC and most of the other car manufacturers in Britain. We also export to Germany, France, Italy, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. The company now has 1,500 employees and in vinyl foam we are operating five plants 24 hours a day. Four plants we built ourselves and we produce 150 tons of foam a week.

CE: Mrs. Martinelli want to ask Bob a question.

GM: Bob, can you tell us what happened when you wrote back here to Marin County and asked all of your friends to send guns back to you, that no one had guns where you were living.

RC: Oh, that's quite a story, you know.

CE: Now, is this during the early part of the war?

GM: During the war.

RC: Yeah, that's right. Well, it was just after Dunkirk. I had written back to some pals of mine here saying, "If you've got any guns that you got knocking around that you're not using, send them over because I would like to have something better than this sharp stick that I'm walking around with. I mean, so would the rest of the boys. It so happened that I had gone into the Home Guard over there and I ended up by being a Bombing Officer for the Twelfth Battalion of Sherwood Foresters. And it wasn't until I came up for a commission that they found out I was an alien, but at that stage, I mean, nobody was worrying very much about - -

CE: They'd taken anybody, huh?

RC: They were taking anybody by that time. So as a say, I ran this bombing base. Well, we took through 5,700 Home Guard through that base in our three years that we were in there and we never lost a man.

CE: Good.

CR: And the government came in and took it over from us two weeks and they killed two men and left us the place in such a state that we - it took us two weeks to sort out where all the unexploded bombs were. But it was a most wonderful experience, and it taught me a great deal about the British Army.

CE Bob, time precludes our getting into more stories, but I want to get something straight. Now, you lived in Nottingham, Attenborough, Nottingham, but you come back to Marin five months every year - -

RC: Four months every year.

CE: Four months every year. And you have a home near the Dominican, up on the hill there -

RC: Up on the hill above Dominican, facing the mountain.

CE: And you have been doing this ever since you moved to England?

RC: That's right.

CE: You've left a little bit of your heart here, then, haven't you?

RC: I never want to lose my American citizenship. They're going to keep pressing me all the time until they finally make me gag a bit but I never have and I always want to be an American citizen.

CE Well, Bob, we can't thank you enough for sharing with us today just a few of the highlights of your most fascinating career. And we feel indeed fortunate to have you stop by and give us this time this afternoon, thank you so much.

RC: That's very nice of you to ask me.