

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE  
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**Anne T. Kent California Room**

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**INTERVIEW WITH VIRGINIA BORLAND**

by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent  
January 30, 1979

**INTERVIEWEE:** Virginia Borland (VB)

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

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** January 30, 1979

**TRANSCRIBER:** Marjorie Hoffman

**CE:** Today is Tuesday, January 30, 1979. Continuing the Oral History Project of the Marin County Library at Civic Center, this is Carla Ehat. Today, we have the extreme pleasure of interviewing Virginia Borland. She resides at number 54 Fremont Road in San Rafael, California. Miss Borland is the daughter of Robert Henry Hewitt Borland, a distinguished San Francisco attorney, and Anna Mason Borland. She and her family have owned property in Marin County since 1924 and she has been a permanent resident since 1932. She was educated at Stanford University where she received her AB in 1937. Miss Borland received her Masters in Library Science at the University of California, Berkeley in 1968. She has been associated with the Marin County Library since 1961 and, until her retirement in June of 1978, was the Branch Librarian at the Civic Center. In this capacity, she fought long and hard to preserve and enlarge the California Room and only last year, in January 1978, wrote and successfully pushed through a resolution before the Board of Supervisors making the California Room in perpetuity. She made the library come alive with programs and outstanding exhibits and created the Oral History Project for the County. To learn more of this extraordinary woman and her achievements, let us turn to her today. Good afternoon, Virginia.

**VB:** Good afternoon, Carla.

CE: Well, Virginia, you have a very interesting lineage, and let's start with your maternal side of the family. Now, as I understand, your maternal great grandfather was Dr. Edgar Mason. Is that correct?

VB: Yes, that is correct.

CE: Tell us what brought him to California. Tell us the story.

VB: Well, first, just a minute, because Mrs. Kent asked me to go back as far as I could. My family tree begins in the year 699 with first fourteen Kings of Denmark, from Gorman the First through Harold the Fifth. And then my ancestors went to Normandie where they were Dukes of Guignes, G-U-I-G-N-E-S, and then they went with William the Conqueror and fought the Battle of Hastings. And then William LaBlount, B-L-O-U-N-T, was Master of Horse to the King and they stayed in England and had estates, but when King Charles was beheaded, so many royalists went to France, but they came to this country. My great, great, great grandfather was the first Governor of Tennessee, and –

CE: What was his name, Virginia?

VB: William Blount. And his son, Richard Blount, married Catherine Minor, and their daughter, Eliza Blount, married Edgar Mason, Dr. Edgar Mason, yes, and he was born in Tarrytown-on-Hudson.

CE: Do you know the year?

VB: No, I would have to look that up. Then he came west as physician to a wagon train, bringing his wife and four small children and her lady's maid to dress her hair on the way across the plains. So they settled in Marysville, but there was a terrible flood and they had to go out the hotel window, upstairs window, in a boat.

CE: Tell me, Virginia, did you learn which route they took in coming to California?

VB: I'm sure they came from St. Joe, Missouri and then across the plains to Northern California.

CE: Did they come in through Carson Pass, or did they come in through Truckee? Do you know?

VB: I don't know. So then they moved from Marysville to Crescent City where Dr. Edgar Mason was the first physician and also the first County Judge. His son, Alonzo Mason, then married my grandmother. Oh, my grandfather was born on December 30, 1855 in Crescent City.

CE: Well, tell me, Virginia, I understood it was your great grandfather, Dr. Edgar Mason, who gave to Crescent City two blocks of land, which they use for its plaza, and also gave for a schoolhouse the land on which its civic center now stands? Is that the same gentleman?

VB: Yes, that's correct and he also gave them the land for the Masonic Temple. My grandmother, who was born in 1859, she came across the Isthmus of Panama on a donkey.

CE: Is this Mary Elizabeth Keegan?

VB: Yes that's right. And came up the coast then to Crescent City where her mother had a sister.

CE: Tell me, did either of your grandparents keep a journal or are there any letters or ephemera relative to this –

VB: No, I think not, but they both talked all the time so I have a lot of oral history recollections.

CE: But not on tape?

VB: No, recollections. Her mother, my grandmother's mother, was ill and so she died and my grandmother was brought up by her mother's sister. Then she went to the Normal School, I guess when she was about nineteen. My grandfather went to Heald's Business College and they settled in San Francisco, and they always had – I think they were on Telegraph Hill in the beginning because they always wanted a view of the bay, and –

CE: Do you have any idea when your grandfather came to San Francisco?

VB: Yes, in 1876.

CE: 1876, 100 years ago.

VB: And then he married my grandmother, who was then teaching school in Crescent City, and – Incidentally, my great-grandfather had property in San Francisco which he let go for taxes because it was just all sand. So anyway, we came over here –

CE: Well, wait a minute, before you get here, we've got to get you and your father and mother together. First of all, Alonzo Mason and Mary Elizabeth Keegan Mason's daughter was your mother, is that correct?

VB: Mary Elizabeth Keegan was my grandmother. Anna Mason Borland was my mother.

CE: Yes, I mean your mother was their daughter.

VB: Yes.

CE: Alright. Was she born in San Francisco?

VB: She was born in San Francisco.

CE: Tell us a little bit about your mother.

VB: Well, she studied painting and she studied music for six years –

CE: In San Francisco?

VB: In San Francisco. And she studied elocution, public speaking, drama, all from the woman who was the mother of one of the two outstanding trial lawyers in San Francisco now. She coached plays and taught drama before she was married.

CE: I gather she might have been interested in genealogy. Is that correct?

VB: Yes, she was.

CE: And you seem to carry on that same interest.

VB: Yes, I do.

CE: Tell us, how did she meet your father?

VB: Well, she met my father at a house party at Half Moon Bay. It was a benefit for some Portuguese and she went with Willa Gilbert and my father went with a friend of his, and so they met there. She said his voice just went right through her.

CE: I think you should start now and tell us a little bit about your father and the Canadian side of your family.

VB: Yes, my father was born in Centerton, Ontario, Canada in a big farm house and he went to school and he saved a little boy's life by – A little boy fell in the river and my father went, ran down to the bridge and caught him and pulled him out. The mother kept the village store and she told Bobby he could have anything he wanted, so he took a pencil box. And the little boy whose life he had saved stole it back from him.

CE: There's a moral in here somewhere. I want to backtrack just a moment to your mother. I don't think you said where she was from. Was she from the south, Virginia, your mother?

VB: Well she was born in San Francisco but yes, my family is from the south. I'm named for the state of Virginia.

CE: Oh her family were from the south?

VB: Yes, my grandfather's –

CE: Whereabouts? Do you know?

VB: Well, they came – William Blount, another William Blount, came in 1642 and there weren't very many people there, so probably –

CE: Do you have any relatives that you know of still in the south?

VB: No.

CE: Alright, let's get back to your father.

VB: Alright. So his father taught school and preached and he got – Well I guess he got tuberculosis. He was out playing with the boys in the very cold weather and so the doctor said he should come to California for his health.

CE: So that's what brought the Borlands here?

VB: Yes.

CE: I see.

VB: So then his father went to San Bernardino where the climate was very hot.

CE: Did he improve down there?

VB: Yes, he lived to be eighty-two. So then later, he brought his family up to San Bernardino.

CE: He became a citizen?

VB: Yes, he did.

CE: And in the 1890s, I presume, the wife and children then automatically became citizens?

VB: Yes, they came. My mother was born in 1886. My father was born in 1884, October the eleventh. She was born March 26, 1886.

CE: Did your father go to the local schools in San Francisco, or had he –

VB: No, he was in San Bernardino, and then he went to Stanford.

CE: What made that decision of your father to go to Stanford?

VB: Well he always wanted to be a lawyer, even before he knew what a lawyer was, so he came north.

CE: Tell me, Virginia, before we continue with your father at Stanford, getting back to your mother for just a moment more, she was a member of the DAR, wasn't she?

VB: Yes, she was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and she was a regent.

CE: Did some of her family fight in the Civil War?

VB: She belonged to the Daughters of the Confederacy, the Jefferson Davis Chapter, and was an officer, but wouldn't take the presidency because she thought two other people should have it before she did and the nominating committee said they'd never get it. Well then, she wouldn't take it. Yes, my mother was very active in the Daughters of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis Chapter. I was the President of the Children of the Confederacy when I was six-years-old.

CE: Would you tell us briefly what that means?

VB: Well, I knew parliamentary law better than most adults know it now, and I presided at the meetings, and that's where I knew, well, a great many women –

CE: You mean your mother's age?

VB: Mrs. Joseph LeConte came to my meetings and she was always very nice.

CE: What would you discuss at these meetings? History?

VB: Well, we discussed whatever was going on. The Mother Chapter, the adult chapter, did work at Caney Creek, sent clothes and books and that to Caney Creek.

CE: It was a service organization?

VB: It was a service organization, yes. And I have a picture that shows me placing a wreath on George Washington's statue. And there was another veteran that's when I was six-years-old – there was a veteran of the Grand Army of the Republic standing there, too, and also a man from the Spanish War.

CE: Where did this take place? Do you know?

VB: Well it's in the – Now it's in the Grand Opera House or the one next door.

CE: The Veterans' Memorial Building?

VB: The Veterans' Memorial Building, yes.

CE: Well that's very interesting. Alright, let's get back to your father. He wanted to become a lawyer.

VB: Yes.

CE: Why did he select Stanford?

VB: Well, because it was the best college, university, on the west coast.

CE: And the law department excelled Berkeley?

VB: Excelled, yes.

CE: And any other universities in the area?

VB: Yes.

CE: Alright then, what happened?

VB: Well, I should say that my mother and father were married at the Century Club in San Francisco.

CE: Shortly after he graduated, or when?

VB: In 1914.

CE: 1914. Now is that the same Century Club located on Franklin and Sutter today in San Francisco?

VB: Yes, same one, yes. And he had worked during the fire and earthquake out at the Alta Plaza Park, doing relief work, you know, and my mother was not too far away, on Vallejo Street, but they didn't meet until later when they met at this house party.

CE: Then what did he do, go to work for a group of lawyers initially?

VB: Yes, he went to work for Harding and Monroe, who were very good lawyers.

CE: General law?

VB: Yes, general law. And he was paid thirty-five dollars a month.

CE: Good wages for those times.

VB: For the time.

CE: What form of law did your father enjoy the most? What did he finally –

VB: Well, what he enjoyed the most was his work for Donaldina Cameron.

CE: We must get that story in. First of all, tell – For the record, tell us a little bit about Donaldina Cameron, who she was and , what she did in Chinatown.

VB: Well she lived on a ranch with her father and her sisters and her brother and she was a great horseback rider, and – Said Santiago, which evidently was a kind of a war crime because they went right off – And then she came for one year to 920 Sacramento Street because Miss Culbertson, who was the leader or superintendent there –

CE: Well, what motivated Donaldina Cameron to leave this cloistered home down in the valley and seek this sort of social work? Have you any knowledge of that?

VB: Mrs. Philip Brown begged her to come just for one year.

CE: Had she known this girl?

VB: Well, Mrs. Brown did, but Miss Culbertson didn't. And so she went and – Look at the deer!

CE: Oh yes. We're sitting at a window in Mrs. Kent's living room, looking up towards Mount Tam, and it's raining gently and some deer have just walked across the lawn. It's a beautiful sight.

VB: Surely is a lovely sight. So then she went for one year and then –

CE: Well, tell us for the record what that 920 Sacramento Street place was. What did it do?

VB: Well they saved, rescued, slave girls who had been brought into the country presumably to marry Chinese husbands, but they were instead brought in to houses of ill fame and sold. And some of them would get prices of \$3,000.

CE: It was a terrible struggle for them, but she finally won the respect of the San Francisco Police force, did she not?

VB: She certainly did.

CE: And gained a great deal of co-operation, and what part did your father play in assisting her?

VB: Well, he went into court and defended her. And he also – When the girls were stolen – Now Miss Cameron was running 920 –

CE: Miss Culbertson was discharged.

VB: Yes, and now it was Cameron House. So if they were stolen away, my father phoned district attorneys and various places and had them brought up and they were made wards, not of the court, but of Miss Cameron's.

CB: Did she assume the total responsibility and care?

VB: Total responsibility and care, yes. And she dressed their wounds, which were sometimes syphilitic, and she never caught anything. She was just a truly great woman.

CE: Well, I know that recently a biography was published, and you very graciously gave Mrs. Kent and me a copy: *Chinatown's Angry Angel: The Story of Donaldina MacKenzie Cameron* by Mildred Crawl Martin.

VB: Yes.

CE: Is this in your judgment a fairly definitive –

VB: Yes, I think this is a very good book. I recommend it to anybody.

CE: I wonder what got your father interested in this. Had he ever heard of the woman?

VB: Well, yes. Henry Monroe had been her lawyer and then when my father came into the office he took over –

CE: Her account. “Here’s the folder of a woman I think you can handle.”

VB: Yes. “And there’s no money attached to it, so –”

CE: I understand your father did this for so many years with no remuneration.

VB: That’s right, yes.

CE: Had you had the pleasure of meeting this woman?

VB: Oh yes, I knew her all my life and she gave me this ring when I was born.

CE: When you were born. Would you describe her to us?

VB: Well, she was a beautiful, beautiful woman and when I knew her, her hair was white but very becomingly dressed. She usually wore, at least when she was at 920 Sacramento Street, she wore Chinese brocaded dresses. She was gentle but oh so determined, she went across the rooftops and dropped down with Sergeant Langen who was head of the Chinatown squad. And I guess sometimes my father would be there, and these highbinders would be sitting deciding the girl’s fate and she would just take her by the arm and walk away with her and take her back to the home.

CE: She lived a long life, too, didn’t she?

VB: Yes, she lived to be ninety-eight. Until 1968. I talked to her every week and I went down about twice a year to see her.

CE: You talked to her every week on the phone?

VB: Yes.

CE: You mean when you were going to school, even at Stanford?

VB: Well, all the time. She came to my graduation and gave me a jade pendant from Shreve’s.

CE: What did she give you intangibly that has stayed with you all your life?

VB: Oh, loyalty and courage and I’m sure many other things.

CE: She was an inspirational person.

VB: Yes, she was, and I still miss her.

CE: Has she been gone for some time, Virginia?

VB: Just around Christmas, 1968.

CE: I notice in your own home, you have a lot of Chinese furniture and artifacts. Is this influence the result of your many years’ association with Miss Cameron?

VB: Yes. Well there’s a vase that, I think, is Ming, which she gave us one Christmas, and then there’s the Chinese rug that my father bought from B.S. Fong who was the president of the Six Companies and he bought the two Chinese lions in Chinatown.

CE: Well, there must have been some Chinese who were established in Chinatown who were supportive of her action.

VB: Oh absolutely, and there were many of her girls who were married from 920. So she not only saved them and protected them but she got them husbands.

CE: Very good. Well, Virginia, we’ve got to start with you, now. When were you born?

VB: I was born October 6, 1916.

CE: In San Francisco?

VB: In San Francisco.

CE: Where was your family home then?  
VB: It was on Vallejo Street.  
CE: What was the address on Vallejo?  
VB: 1962.  
CE: That would be near –  
VB: Between Fillmore and Steiner.  
CE: Did you attend the local public school?  
VB: Yes, I went to Pacific Heights School where my mother had gone before me, although it was a different place. Same school.  
CE: And then where did you go?  
VB: And then I went to Galileo High School because they had the only telescope. They had a refractor and a reflector.  
CE: And you were interested in astronomy?  
VB: In astronomy, yes.  
CE: Well, in those days, as your contemporaries, it seems to me you could go to the high school of your choice if they had academic subjects you could –  
VB: It was a good high school and it was my area as much as anything. And Dr. Norris, Joseph P. Norris, was the principal. One of his brothers was a judge and one was a newspaperman.  
CE: Well, I know I'm jumping ahead a bit, but I know one of your main interests in life has been horseback riding. Did it start at that early age with you?  
VB: Five years old. At six o'clock in the morning, my father and I rode along the beach. Sunday morning at six o'clock in the morning.  
CE: Where did you keep the horse, out at the park?  
VB: Yes, we rented the horses.  
CE: At the park?  
VB: No at the beach.  
CE: At the beach  
VB: And then later in high school, I rode on horses from the park, but then I rode over here. In Larkspur, there was a lumber yard and there were also stables and I rode on horses down there when we came over.  
CE: First, let's finish your education. You also had this desire to go to Stanford. Was that prompted by your father?  
VB: Yes, I'm sure it was.  
CE: And you wanted to emulate that?  
VB: That's right.  
CE: What were you interested in pursuing during those Stanford years? What was your major?  
VB: My major was history.  
CE: And I know you cultivated a great interest in Greece and its culture.  
VB: Yes and then I did graduate work in archeology and Greek and in the Classics. That's one department. But I had always been interested in Greece and I had slept with a thick book whose cover had a picture of Pegasus on it under my pillow.  
CE: Was it always your dream to go to Greece?  
VB: Well I think from the time I was in Galileo. I had a very good teacher who had good bibliographies -- that were really college bibliographies, because I read the

*Sea Kings of Crete* then and that was also on college book lists. So then my first quarter at Stanford, and it was very hard to get in then for women, only four students out of Galileo were admitted. And there was an introduction to Greek archeology given and I took that. I was fascinated by it. And I was very impressed by the professor.

CE: Was that the woman?

VB: Yes.

CE: What was her name?

VB: Dr. Hazel Dorothy Hansen and she went to Greece every –

CE: She was almost an equal to Edith Hamilton, wasn't she?

VB: Yes. They made her a citizen of Skyros, which is an island, and they were talking in their Parliament about having resort hotels on the island and she stood up and she said, "Not in my lifetime." But then I took everything that was given in that department. Greek Monuments, Greek Sculpture, Greek History and then there was a Journal Club of Archeology that I just took every quarter. And she was an inspiration to me.

CE: Well it did result – Forty years later, you did visit Greece.

VB: Yes. I don't know.

CE: You graduated in '37 and in '77 you went to Greece.

VB: Well that's true, yes. I'm very delighted that it happened then.

CE: All right, now when you graduated from Stanford – By the way, did you live down there?

VB: Oh yes.

CE: You didn't commute?

VB: No that's much too far.

CE: Did you enjoy campus life?

VB: Yes, I enjoyed it, excepting that my father had died the year that I entered and so I was sad so I didn't have that kind of rah-rah life.

CE: You couldn't share the joy with him?

VB: No. But he did know that I was going so he was happy about that.

CE: One of your classmates is Marshall Dill Jr.

VB: Yes.

CE: Who we've met through you. Any of your other classmates you ever see?

VB: Well, Joan Hendlen who was my roommate.

CE: Oh, up in the Seattle area, Tacoma or –

VB: No, it's Chehalis. Yes, and there's another one who lives in Roseville.

CE: Alright you are graduated now. What did you do with your life after graduation? Did you go to work?

VB: I didn't go to work right away. I stayed home for a year and I worked around the place, you know, painted things and clipped the hedges and things like that.

CE: What road did you take? How did you want to utilize this education?

VB: Well I had taken all the courses in education I needed to take excepting I needed more apprenticeship in the schools, but –

CE: Were you thinking of becoming a teacher?

VB: Yes, I was, but I never wanted to be –

CE: As an avenue –

VB: Yes, but so I didn't. So then I went to work in Hale's Department store, in the office, because someone had introduced me there because Marshall Hale and Reuben Hale had been my father's clients.

CE: You mean there was a tie there?

VB: There was a tie there, yes. And so I stayed there for about two years and I didn't get a vacation that whole time.

CE: I must interrupt you for a moment. I'm losing track of the fact that before your father died in the '20s, you did get the house in Marin and the property.

VB: Yes.

CE: And that was your retreat for any holidays and summers and weekends?

VB: Yes, my father died in 1933, October 23.

CE: So he did have a few years there.

VB: Yes, yes. I nearly had a double mastoid. That specialist in San Francisco gave me when my own doctor, Dr. Mary E. Glover, was away, so Dr. Langley Porter blew my cold into my ears and I was threatened with a double mastoid. So Dr. Glover said, "Don't take her down the Peninsula because there's too much malaria, but take her to Marin." Well, my father came over and looked and looked very hard to find anything and finally he found this cottage, the Freitag Cottage, it was called. And so we were there for six months. Then we went back the next year for a vacation. Not the same house, but a different place. Then we went again for a vacation and my mother and father took a walk up Marquard Avenue, which was not paved then, and my mother fell in love with the redwoods because there had been redwoods in Crescent City where she went for her vacations when she was a little girl.

CE: And didn't you tell me she had gone by boat there sometimes?

VB: Yes, these little lumber schooners.

CE: Yes, tell us about that. Digress a moment in that area.

VB: Yes, they went by lumber schooner and she was the only person in the family who wasn't seasick. And –

CE: What happened?

VB: Well that was the only way of access, and she loved it. And when she was twelve years old they thought she was going to die; the doctor thought she was going to die, and should go to some hot place, meaning Arizona or something, and she wanted to go to Crescent City, on the beaches. And he said, "Well it won't make any difference. You might just as well let her do it." And so she did, and she was happy and she recovered and they went up there every –

CE: Would that be – The kind of vessel she went on would be sort of like the Wampama or the Thayer that are berthed at the San Francisco Historical –

VB: We have it. I bought it for her to give to one of her friends. It's called *Ships of the Redwood Coast*. We have it in the library. Perhaps you have it, I don't know.

CE: Yes.

VB: So Tuesday – That was Sunday, and Tuesday he came home with the deed to the lot.

CE: Well first you bought just the virgin land, and then you built the home on it.

VB: Yes, right. And then that was – It was built in 1925, built in 1924 and then it slid. There was a landslide and it slid down the hill fifteen feet.

CE: How large a piece of property are we talking about? Two acres?  
VB: Two acres.  
CE: And there was a grotto.  
VB: Yes, there was a grotto.  
CE: And lots of blue stone has been taken from there.  
VB: Mined And there's a spring.  
CE: There's a spring and there's a swimming pool.  
VB: Yes.  
CE: Well, tell me, when your father died, did you relocate over there permanently shortly thereafter?  
VB: We did it before.  
CE: Before he –  
VB: Before, because my grandfather wasn't well and we thought it would be good for him to be over here.  
CE: Would you take the train and the ferry and go to Hale Brothers and etc.?  
VB: Yes.  
CE: How did you enjoy that commute?  
VB: I loved the commute but I didn't like the business work.  
CE: Didn't like the business world?  
VB: No.  
CE: You really wanted to get back in the academic milieu. How did you do it, Virginia?  
VB: Well, when I lost my mother, which was March 1, 1957, and I wanted to do something for humanity, and there was an opening at juvenile hall, so I applied.  
CE: In Marin County?  
VB: In Marin County. I applied and I took an oral and I got it. I got the job and it's very, very hard work, you know, because they're so emotionally wrought up and if you have any feeling at all – and I have lots of feeling for people – why, it's very difficult.  
CE: I would think that would be a devastating area to be in if you're sensitive at all.  
VB: Yes, it is. So I stayed about two years, I guess, a little more than two years, and I left there in 1958 or '59, I'm not sure. Then there was an opening at the County Library and so I went in, and Mrs. Keating interviewed me.  
CE: Are we in the new building at Civic Center?  
VB: No, we're in the old building.  
CE: Down at San Rafael?  
VB: The old Coleman School.  
CE: Okay.  
VB: And she said, "This is only for \$50 a week or something." Anyway, I think once a week at Marin City, and would I be interested? She said, "We would want a college graduate." And I said, "Well I am a college graduate." And so she accepted me and I started. She hired me to work on Saturdays and I worked Saturdays, every Saturday for seven years and in the meantime we moved into the new building in 1962.  
CE: Well that was the right decision.

VB: Yes, it was. And at first I was on the desk, then I was Young Adult Librarian after I got my library degree.

CE: Now, tell us a little bit about that. How could you possibly work and go over to the University of California in Berkeley nights, or whenever you did it, and get your Master of Library Science? How could you do that physically?

VB: Well, I just did it.

CE: When did you go to school, at night?

VB: No, in the daytime for the most part. I worked every night and I worked every Saturday. I went to school in the daytime and I ate my dinner, or lunch as the case may be, driving back and forth. My first quarter, I was so sleepy that I couldn't sit down and study for my exams. I had to stand up because if I sat down I fell asleep.

CE: Alright, so you finally got your degree. Did that take you a couple of years or what, Virginia?

VB: It took me seven quarters.

CE: Seven quarters. Now, by virtue of receiving that degree, what did that do to your career?

VB: Well that meant that I was a librarian.

CE: Had Virginia Keating by that time thought of retiring?

VB: No, not yet. So then I was Young Adult Librarian for all the libraries in the system.

CE: What did that mean? The acquisition of books? The advertising of them? The distribution of them to the –

VB: Yes, displays and programs.

CE: I imagine you liked that?

VB: Yes, I did like it.

CE: Alright, what else? Continue.

VB: Well, then after doing that for, I don't know, maybe a couple of years, I had to compete for the position of Branch Librarian and I won it. Then Bruce didn't like to be in his office, because the public wandered in and asked him questions.

CE: Well, wait a minute, back up a minute. Virginia Keating had gone by then? Had she retired? Who was Virginia's replacement?

VB: Bruce Bajema.

CE: She hired Bruce?

VB: Yes. She hired him from Mendocino County.

CE: Why did she do that, I wonder?

VB: Well she wanted a man because she didn't think that any woman could replace her.

CE: And certainly a lady from Stanford would have been most extraordinary.

VB: Well, some people thought that I would be the right person, but anyway she went to these meetings with him, with the other directors of the other libraries in the North Bay Cooperative Library System. And so then, she did retire and had a retirement dinner at Deer Park Villa, and she seems to be enjoying her retirement.

CE: Well, I wonder if you would interject now and clarify to whomever is listening to this tape in the future. Your office was in the headquarters on the fourth floor where the Marin County Librarian has his headquarters, the Civic Center Branch?

VB: Yes.

CE: But it could just as well be in another building, could it not?

VB: Yes.

CE: You were the Branch Librarian in the same area that the administration offices were?

VB: Yes, that's right. And it later became my office. He didn't like it because too many people came in, and –

CE: Right off the elevator and there he was.

VB: Yes, and he didn't want to be bothered with the public.

CE: Well, I think it's time we ought to say what his interest was.

VB: His interest was the computer.

CE: He was terribly interested in the computer and what it could do. It could do everything. And service was an intangible that wasn't too important. And your whole life had been motivated by service.

VB: Service to the community, yes.

CE: Now let's talk a little bit now about the California Room. Tell us the beginnings of that.

VB: Well the beginnings of that was just a little cupboard in –

CE: The Coleman School?

VB: The Coleman School, and then she prevailed upon the –

CE: She who?

VB: Mrs. Keating prevailed upon the Department of Public Works to put a wall, two walls, in the hall. So then there was this room with one locked cupboard and all the others open shelves, and that was the California Room.

CE: Well, what was her idea in creating the California Room, as you best understood?

VB: Well, she was just crazy about California and she did buy everything she could, unless it was too expensive, for the California Room. Then when we moved in 1962 to the new building, there was this California Room where it is now.

CE: And she insisted that space be left?

VB: Yes. And she continued to buy very heavily on Californiana.

CE: Well you know she used to be given credit for doing, initially, collecting initially for the California room without the advantages of your education and your MLS. She is to be, I think, to be given a great deal of credit.

VB: I think so, too, yes.

CE: But the California Room, as I understand it, blossomed and grew and became known and was used when you became the Branch Librarian and I think you can say that with all modesty.

VB: I think I can say that. For one thing, Ida, her secretary, never wanted to let anybody use anything and I was always anxious to have it used.

CE: Well, the California Room was a great deal to you further. Do you remember the battle you fought a year ago to keep the California Room?

VB: Yes, I remember and even before that, Bruce wanted to take that space and put the Children's Room in there and move that to the Children's Room where it wouldn't be the same at all.

CE: Well tell me, do you think that Bruce Bajema has come to regard the collection with a little more favorable light over the months and years?

VB: Yes I think he has, so Margaret Parkerson tells me.

CE: Do you think part of that was through the effort that you made writing the resolution and having the Board of Supervisors pass it unanimously?

VB: Yes. Well Barbara Boxer, of course, is the one who kept it through –

CE: To keep it in perpetuity.

VB: Yes.

CE: That opened his eyes.

VB: Yes. And I think he gave up.

CE: Well the library, financially, now has these personnel problems. Margaret Parkerson is in there as much as she can, I understand, and also had to double up as reference.

VB: And she also doubles up on the desk, circulation desk.

CE: But there still is the California Room.

VB: Yes, and it will be there as long as the library is there.

CE: That is something that you achieved.

VB: Yes.

CE: Now I'd like to talk a little bit about this Oral History Project that you created and got Mrs. Kent and me involved in. Tell us how that all began, Virginia.

VB: Mrs. Kent came in one day and said she was going to make a speech at the Moya Library on the Ross Valley and so I helped her get material on Ross Valley. Then I believe Doris Schmiedell told me that it had been very well-received and she thought we should have a copy of it. And I asked Mrs. Kent, could we have a copy of it and she said there was a copy.

CE: Well, had it been taped?

VB: It had been taped and she would ask the person who taped it if we could have it. And I believe we did get it, I'm not positive.

CE: Yes, you did.

VB: So then Mrs. Bissinger was coming to lunch about, oh, films, I think, that we might want to show, and so I asked Mrs. Kent and you to come also and we went to lunch at the Taverna Yassou.

CE: Yes. Now as I remember. Mrs. Kent has now joined us. Mrs. Kent, we had meanwhile had the Old Timers Weekend or something at the Marin Art and Garden Center, had we not? The "Good Old Days," and you thought it would be fun to corral some old pioneers and bring them up to the Octagon House and we would show some old photographs and collect some reminiscences. Is that –

AK: Yes. Well, on that day, we had a great exhibit of all the pictures we could find, and we had them all around on the tables and on the walls and I thought that if these patrons, these old timers especially, who would be looking at the pictures maybe argue or maybe agree or whatever sounded very interesting. So I would walk up to one or two of them and say, "Would you mind going over to the desk and repeating what you just told me? That's interesting." And so it happened. They'd go over to the desk and Carla had the machine there and instead of having enough on one reel, as we have on a tape now, we have six or seven people, just little short things on each. That's what started it.

CE: Well you know how Mrs. Kent is. She's a very persuasive woman. When I retired from the Navy after thirty years, she told me one day, "I have a project I'd

like you to help me with.” And I said, “What is it, Mrs. Kent?” And she said, “I think we’re going to do oral history.” And I said, “What’s that?” And she explained, and she said, “Well my father-in-law used to have Old Settlers’ Day and they’d collect people from all over the county and ask them to reminisce about what brought them to Marin County.” She said, “Now that they have this invention, I think we can do it,” and I said I’d never done anything like that. But she had a way of convincing you you can do anything so we went up that afternoon. Then somehow you heard about this, too, and you invited us up. Now continue the story. We brought some tapes, didn’t we?

VB: I don’t know whether you brought some tapes then or not but –

CE: We did.

VB: Yes, you played your tapes of the Old Timers Day and I thought your voice was wonderful and just right for this kind of work.

CE: Well you had been looking for a long time –

VB: I’d been looking about two years.

CE: Surely there must have been someone who could have done this, Virginia?

VB: No, there wasn’t anyone else.

CE: Were you concerned about the confidentiality of the material?

VB: I was concerned about the voice, the voice that came through asking the questions.

CE: Well, that’s partly important, but don’t you think in view of – For example, in Bancroft Library where they make a transcript of every tape, this is something hopefully we want to achieve and we’ve been able to get maybe fifteen done. That’s the ultimate tool, isn’t it, that most scholars want to use? They’d rather research it visually than listen to an hour’s tape. But I think, as you said, there was a great deal of personal and private material that we had collected. And you wanted to be sure it would be kept in an archival depository, and not be talked around. And you felt you could trust Mrs. Kent certainly with her background and you had somewhat of a similar feeling considering I had worked thirty years in the security group in classified intelligence. That was part of it, as you told me.

VB: Yes that’s true, an honorable person.

CE: Now, why is oral history important for Marin County?

VB: Oral history is important for Marin County because there is so little written about Marin County, compared to what is written about San Francisco, for instance, or California in general. But a lot of this would simply be lost if it weren’t taken this way.

CE: Well, you know, to date, we’ve interviewed about 180 people.

VB: That’s quite a record.

CE: And part of the criteria is that we must get somebody older you know, before they go, and she’s so right in this. We have gotten people who are no longer with us. Well, continue how we got in touch with the University of California and the Bancroft Library. You arranged a meeting there, remember?

VB: Yes, I called Willa Baum up and said that we would like to come over because we would like to do something similar and we would like to – I think we were already doing it but we would like to know how to keep them, preserve them.

CE: Remember she had written a rather definitive book on how to collect local history for the oral historian and we had a copy of that in the library.

VB: Yes, that's right.

CE: Well, lets see, then we went over, and they took us in the basement where they stowed this material.

VB: Right, on shelves.

CE: And they warned us to keep it free of magnetic fields, remember?

VB: Yes.

CE: Never use a vacuum or a buffer around – You could erase the material. Keep it at “people temperature” and they had so many things you couldn't do. It scared us to death. Remember, Anne?

AK: Yes.

CE: Well okay, then what did we agree, that we'd do it? We must have.

VB: Yes, well what we have is a file case, a steel file case, in a closet which is locked and it isn't vulnerable to buffers and vacuums and that sort of thing. It's just about as safe as it could be.

CE: You then gave us our first assignment. Do you remember? Dr. Leo Stanley.

VB: That's right. We went up to his –

CE: We went up with my tape recorder. Regina Jimenez went with hers. We brought Doris Schmiedell, Mrs. Kent, and you and I.

VB: Yes, that's right.

CE: And had a delightful afternoon.

VB: Yes. And he filled several tapes that day.

CE: Yes, well Doctor Stanley was just great. You have in the archives of the California Room some of his papers, do you not?

VB: Yes, we have the Leo L. Stanley Collection. We have everything that he – We have more on San Quentin than San Quentin has.

CE: That reminds me of a point too. Last year, one of our talking points to keep the California Room in perpetuity. If you remember, Margaret Sanborn wrote letters; Mrs. Kent and I did, because we found out while going around interviewing people that they had wonderful photo albums. They had journals, and they had many things that fell in the category of ephemera. And they were asking us all the time, “Is there any place we can leave this material in Marin County? Does it all have to go to the Bancroft Library or the California Historical Society?” Or, reluctantly, they mentioned the Marin County Historical Society and they were afraid about that because they thought it – It's a charming wooden Victorian building, but might pose a fire hazard. So, until you made the California Room in perpetuity, we couldn't guarantee there was a place. Now, since then, we have received quite a few things. You made it possible, Mrs. Kent, I think, in talking to Marian Hayes Cain, to get the papers of the Mountain Theater.

VB: Yes that's right. We have the press books since 1913 with, I think, a couple of years missing; somebody borrowed and didn't return.

CE: What other papers do you have?

AK: Well I know that we have Dr. Stanley's –

CE: You have prepared a bibliography.

VB: Yes.

CE: Your staff – You arranged for your staff to do this in time for the, honor of the California admission to the union in September 9, 1977 and this bibliography contains everything.

VB: Yes, everything on Marin in the California Room.

CE: Do you envision your – What would you like to see evolve with that room as time goes by? A greater –

VB: Greater collection and perhaps annual meetings there on Admission Day would be a nice idea.

CE: In your judgment, do you feel it's a safe archival depository?

VB: Yes, just as safe as anything is.

CE: And it has many advantages in that, until Proposition 13, it was staffed professionally all the time.

VB: Yes.

CE: But that can return. I mean, full staffing, hopefully, may return someday.

VB: We hope.

CE: It's open more than a voluntary museum staff could afford, like the Historical Society, that's staffed just a few hours, a few days a week. What other advantages does it have? Well the material is catalogued.

VB: Yes. Well it isn't all. Dr. Stanley's isn't catalogued yet, and I'd be glad to have that in the catalog, or in the computer now, as it would be.

CE: Oh that material is not in the computer –

VB: No.

CE: But the books are, but not the papers. Is that the way I understand you correctly?

VB: I don't think any of his collection is in the computer, but it is all available.

CE: Well another thing I noticed with the California Room and, correct me if I'm wrong, but you have given a lot of programs in that room.

VB: That's right.

CE: You've given receptions, like when Margaret Sanborn's book on the American River was published, it seems to me you had a reception there –

VB: That's right.

CE: Honoring that achievement. And you have had speaking programs there, relative to California. You had the Chinese programs. The Greek –

VB: Greek dancing, not in the California Room, out in the library.

CE: You served food or something.

VB: Yes. That's right, the Greeks served Greek food.

CE: The ambiance has been very warm and intellectual.

VB: Yes. Well, we had 400 people at that Greek dancing, and that's the most people ever were at a program in one day.

CE: But you've also had shows. You've had photography shows. You've had art shows, and this material, it seems to me, is always spilling over into the California Room.

VB: Yes, well, we had, I think this is from Margaret Sanborn's book too, we had paintings, one of which was worth \$18,000, in the California Room for that display. That display had a great many things. That was the best display we ever had. We had Indian baskets, and Indian arrowheads, and one of those was ivory.

Or perhaps it was a bone arrowhead and my great-grandfather had cut that out of an Indian's throat.

CE: I want you to tell us about that. Your great-grandfather had a close association with Indians there. Tell us about that.

VB: Well those were Yuroks and they – Anyway, the Indian didn't flinch when he cut out the arrowhead.

CE: Tell us a little bit more about his Indian reminiscences or experiences.

VB: Well, I can say in Brewer's book, *Up and Down California*, said that Dr. Edgar Mason and his gentlemen, whose word could be relied upon, rode out into the redwoods and he and four companions sheltered themselves and their horses in this one redwood tree, which is remarkable. I don't really know any other – I know my grandfather gave an Indian an army overcoat with all these brass buttons which he dearly loved and he gave him hats and he wore one hat right on top of the other until he was wearing eight hats!

CE: Well –

VB: Yes, and when news of Lincoln's election came, my grandfather rode horseback down to get the mail and Lincoln was elected and my mother said to him, "And how did you feel?" He said, "We felt terrible." So, going back to that, my great-grandfather, Dr. Mason, gave money to the Confederacy, but they were out here then and they couldn't fight, but his wife's brothers fought in the Confederacy on the Confederate side.

CE: Well now, getting back to the library, I want you to mention – We forgot to mention, we had a big party once. Remember?

VB: Oh, we had a lovely party.

CE: It cost a lot of money.

VB: Champagne and –

CE: Do you remember that reception, May 16, 1976, when we had 200 people in the library?

VB: Yes, in the whole library.

CE: And what was that for?

VB: That was for Oral History and for people who had been interviewed.

CE: I think we had done 100 people at that time and by the time they brought their wives or their husbands or their sweethearts or their chauffeurs. We had 200 people and you very graciously picked up the bill to rent the building.

VB: Yes.

CE: We had to get permission from the Board of Supervisors to open the building on a Sunday, and pay them \$200.

VB: Yes, yes.

CE: And then I think, if I remember, the Moya Library and the Friends of the Marin County Library, as well as yourself, chipped in and paid for the champagne and whatnot.

VB: Yes.

CE: But that was a nice event.

VB: It really was, yes. People enjoyed it.

CE: We had put up in the California Room all of the photographs we had collected to date. Everybody seemed to enjoy meeting people they hadn't seen in years. Mrs. Gilbert, her photographs – Tell us about that.

VB: Yes. Her father had a furniture store in San Rafael on Fourth Street and she saw his store and later I had that copied, at my own expense, and sent it to her. She was so pleased.

CE: Well, let's leave the library for a moment, Virginia, and get you back on those horses that you love. You stated earlier when you were a child you used to take a horse out of Larkspur. But tell us, as you grew up, and your involvement and ultimately membership in the Tamalpais Trail Riders. Tell us about that organization.

VB: Well, that was the first horse organization in Marin County. There are a good many now, but this was the earliest. And Dr. Stanley was my sponsor in it.

CE: What year did you join?

VB: I joined in 1949 or '50, I'm not quite sure. And that was the year that Doris came back from Carmel.

CE: Doris who?

VB: Doris Schmiedell of Ross.

CE: A friend of yours?

VB: A very dear friend of mine since then.

CE: Did you meet in this organization?

VB: That's right. And she had a horse called Feather and I had a horse called Flash, and Feather and Flash were friends also. And Doris didn't want Feather to eat on the trail so she tied her head up and so Flash picked bunches of grass up and Feather took them in her mouth.

CE: You can't win.

VB: No.

CE: Well, where would you ride?

VB: Well we rode on the water district.

CE: Where did you keep your horse?

VB: At Walter Elliott's.

CE: Where is that?

VB: That's the Marin Stables in Fairfax and he took very good care of the horses. And when he saw a picture of a group of people, well the Board of Directors, on their horses, he said, "That's a good picture. All the horses have their ears front." He didn't care what the people looked like, but the ears were front so the horses were happy.

CE: Well, when would you ride?

VB: Well, weekends, Saturdays and Sundays and on my vacations. And I rode a good deal with Doris, particularly on weekends.

CE: I notice you have, outside of your office, between your office and the California Room, a little cut-out of wood with little brass name tags on it and it's got Doris' name on it. What is that for?

VB: That's for contributions, generous contributions, to the California Room. Mrs. Kent's name is on it. Your name is on it.

CE: Time, energy, money, whatever?

VB: Yes. The Friends of the Library. Dr. Stanley has a little plaque on it.

CE: Is that your idea, Virginia?

VB: Yes, that was my idea.

CE: With this personnel problem, coming back to that, could you envision any sort of a volunteer staff assisting over this period?

VB: Well it's possible, if the people have the time to do it.

CE: And were properly indoctrinated and took it seriously.

VB: That's right, yes.

CE: Well look at how they use volunteers in hospitals: the Pink Ladies. Those are dedicated women. Just because you're a volunteer and don't get money doesn't mean you have to erode your standards.

VB: No, there aren't nearly as many Pink Ladies now as there used to be.

CE: Well there's not a lot of as many things as there used to be. But rather than see it not used, wouldn't you welcome such an idea?

VB: Yes surely, I would, I would. But then I have no authority.

CE: No. Well I'm looking for suggestions.

VB: Yes. You know, if you have a few hours to go there, but I don't know how you would have, with everything else you do.

CE: Well we spend hundreds of hours, as you know.

VB: Thousands of hours.

CE: Thousands of hours, and we've traveled thousands of miles. Well, let's get back on the trail. I had the pleasure once of going to one of your breakfasts at Dr. Stanley's.

VB: Yes, those were wonderful breakfasts.

CE: On Crest Farm. And how would that come about? You would ride early in the morning and then come back and have – followed by a breakfast?

VB: That's right.

CE: Now you were an officer in the Tamalpais Trail Riders, weren't you?

VB: Yes I was the secretary for years.

CE: And –

VB: Oh yes, on the Board of Directors. The trophy was for the liaison work I did with the water district.

CE: What was that, might I ask?

VB: Well the Most Valuable Member of the Year. But I worked on getting a trail named for Doris, and that was when I went to the meeting. First I went down and talked to the trail manager and he didn't see any objection, and then I went to the meeting where it was to come up, and both the other people who were active then had to leave to call home, so I was left when it came up and I made a pitch for it and I can be very convincing.

CE: Yes, I would agree with that. We've been to many Board of Supervisors meetings, have we not, Mrs. Kent, where Virginia has stood up and been most articulate. When Bruce was unable to come up with the figures, you were always ready.

VB: So then I said all that she had done for the Trail Riders, and all that she had done for the outdoors in the county, and that I thought that the Tamalpais Trail Riders,

hoped that they would agree to have the Pilot Knob Trail named the Doris Schmiedell Pilot Knob trail.

CE: Now, wasn't that achieved just within the last couple of years? Wasn't that rather recent?

VB: Yes, about three years ago, I guess.

CE: How was Doris Schmiedell informed of it? By letter, or what?

VB: Yes, by letter, which I took to here. And she was very pleased.

CE: How long did you two friends ride? Until you had to give up your horses individually?

VB: Yes.

CE: Twenty year association? Fifteen?

VB: I think twenty.

CE: I notice that the – Well we know that Doris has been a patron of the Oral History Project and she's done other things for your California Room and your library.

VB: Yes, she's given us – Oh she gave us an olla for the California Room

CE: A what?

VB: An olla. It's like a mortar and pestle. That's a Spanish name for it. And she gave us that little picture of where John Muir lived, the Hutchins cabin, and her father took that picture, Edward G. Schmiedell, took that picture and it's hanging on the wall in the library now.

CE: Well she has been a good friend to our program, hasn't she, Mrs. Kent?

AK: Very a very good friend.

VB: Yes.

CE: Helped us financially when we needed help. I think we must get in this, too. I want you to tell us what the library did in support of this Oral History Project. You would provide all the tapes.

VB: Yes, that's right, we would provide the tape.

CE: And any photographs that we took. You know, we would go to somebody's home and they say, "You may copy this for your archives," and you underwrote the cost of the film and the development.

VB: Yes, right.

CE: And that's how we have quite a collection now of eight-by-tens.

VB: Films, yes. Very nice.

CE: And I think everything else then we contributed or the Moya Library would pay –

VB: Yes.

CE: We had to buy file cabinets and we had to – And a few friends, but we are very grateful for the support that we get and the support your library was able to give us until July of last year. But we will continue this project, won't we, Mrs. Kent?

AK: I hope to.

CE: And somehow we have the attitude that it will all work out in some way. So before we close, I want you to tell us what you are going to do now. You've retired from the library last July, and – What keeps you busy now? Are you doing something –

VB: My two broken hips are what keep me busy, but yes, I read.

CE: You read a good deal?

VB: Yes.

CE: Would you like to go out on some interviews with us?

VB: Well, that would be nice sometimes.

CE: Any follow up on that?

VB: Yes, would be very nice.

CE: You do think we must continue this project? Even though you're not there?

VB: I do, and I do think that the library ought to be able to pay for the films and the –

CE: I'll tell you how we're working that out now. I'm just buying the film and taking the photographs, and then we're waiting until we get monies to develop them. Do you follow me? At least I have a file of negatives, and the day comes when we're going to print eight-by-ten photographs from them will be down the road. But there's no use denying ourselves a collection.

VB: No.

CE: Well, Virginia, it has been a pleasure to talk with you today and I'm so happy that we've had this opportunity to get on tape not only your story, but all of your achievements and efforts that you've made in the Marin County Library system and also to make clear once and for all, for the record, how you created the Oral History Program of Marin County. It has been a pleasure having you here today.

VB: Thank you very much, Carla.