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INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM MURRAY VANDERBILT  
by Carla Ehat & Anne Kent  
April 30, 1981

INTERVIEWEE: William Murray Vanderbilt (WV)  
INTERVIEWERS: Carla Ehat (CE) and Anne Kent (AK)  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 30, 1981  
TRANSCRIBER: Marjorie Hoffman

CE: Today is Thursday, April 30, 1981, and continuing the Oral History Project of the California Room, this is Carla Ehat. Once again we are at the residence of Mrs. Thomas Kent in Kentfield. This afternoon we are going to talk with William Murray Vanderbilt, a friend of Mrs. Kent's and of mine. He resides at 115 Jordan Avenue in San Anselmo, California, and he's going to tell us today a little bit about his family who have been in Marin since the 1850s. It's a pleasure to have you here this afternoon, Bill.

WV: Thank you.

CE: I'd like to start with your grandfather, first, if I may. I understand his name was William Vanderbilt and he was a New Yorker.

WV: That's right.

CE: Could you tell us briefly what brought him to California?

WV: Well, he was born in Lyons, New York and became a carpenter. He signed on as a ship's carpenter aboard a ship coming to California but when the ship arrived at Panama, he left the ship. We never knew why, but we've all been grateful that he did, because the ship continued on its voyage and was never heard of again. He came across the Isthmus and when he got to the west coast there was no ship coming north so he had to wait quite a while. He stayed with an old Spanish lady there who took a liking to him and when he finally found passage she gave him two large sacks of onions which he took aboard ship and as they proceeded up the west coast, why, scurvy developed among the ship. He distributed his onions to the people and always claimed that's what saved their lives as well as his own

- life. So ever since then, it's been a custom in our family to serve onions with our Christmas and our Thanksgiving dinners. We still have the creamed onions every year.
- CE: Wonderful. How did he get to California then? I mean, did the ship berth at San Francisco?
- WV: Yes, the ship came into San Francisco and he landed in a rowboat at Market and Montgomery Streets. In those days that was about the waterfront line. He didn't like San Francisco and left and went north into the Oregon gold fields where he went into gold mining for about a year or two years, then came back and settled in Tomales in 1857.
- CE: Was he successful in his mining venture?
- WV: Yes he was. He was, but there was an unfortunate situation arose. He had three partners and one of the partners was going back to New York, so my grandfather gave him between \$2,500 and \$3,000 to take back to his mother. And this friend arrived back there, talked to all the people in town, and never said a word about the money. There got to be quite a little bit of ill wind between the Vanderbilt sisters and my grandfather because they thought he had just forgotten his mother. It took him quite a while to straighten it out but they finally believed his story and everything was all right again.
- CE: Why did he choose Marin, do you think?
- WV: He liked the area and he liked farming and he had been through here previously when he arrived in San Francisco. Why he chose Tomales, I don't know, but he did settle up there and he was first a deputy sheriff and then he was appointed Assessor of Marin County for, at that time, a three-month term. That's all the Assessor had to do was for three months. Then he clerked in a grocery store in Tomales at one time and then did some building up there. He built the Keyes Warehouse which was a huge warehouse along the Walker Creek.
- CE: Yes. Well, that was his trade: carpenter.
- WV: Yes, carpenter, right.
- CE: How did he get into ranching?
- WV: That I'm not sure of.
- CE: You're not sure of that in the story.
- WV: I'm not sure of that, no. Of course, it was a ranching community, in those days Tomales area was considered to be one of the finest in the State of California for vegetables and would have probably continued had not the vegetable gardens started down south of San Francisco and it was easier to get produce into San Francisco.
- CE: I've never heard that before.
- WV: Yes, it was much easier; otherwise, they had to go out by boat, out of Tomales.
- CE: All the way around.
- WV: All the way around, yeah. So, that's what really hurt the farming in Tomales.
- CE: Well, we did interview David Burgess Burbank who was the nephew of Luther Burbank, and he was telling me the potatoes that they raised were just great and they would sell them for seed to southern California, too. Well, also, your father was very active in the Settlers' League.
- WV: My grandfather.

CE: Grandfather. Tell us what that was.

WV: Well, the Settlers' League -- They had a problem there that there was an attempted land grab of all of the property that the settlers had and they banded together to fight this action and my grandfather was not an attorney but he went to Sacramento, studied law and became an attorney, was admitted to the bar, and then went back to Washington.

CE: Representing the group?

WV: Representing the group, along with another attorney and they argued the case before the Supreme Court and won.

CE: And this league was created to resist the claim to this particular rancho, Bosa de Tomales?

WV: That is correct.

CE: Now he was also involved in the Grange. What is the Grange?

WV: The Grange is a farmers' organization which was quite prominent throughout California in the early days and there was a Grange started in Tomales and he was the first Master of the Grange for the Tomales group.

CE: And later they became, through their membership growing, they established a bank in San Francisco.

WV: That's right. And he was connected with the bank, I believe was a director at that time.

CE: Did he live his entire life then, conclude his life out there in Tomales?

WV: No, no. He served as Assessor on three different occasions, I think, and then in 1888 the home burned down and -- Just as a matter of interest, the mother and three younger children were at home and the rest of them had all gone into town and the house caught fire and the neighbor saw the smoke and rushed over there and three neighbors picked up the baby grand piano and passed it out a window to safety. The next day four men couldn't move the piano, so that shows what you can do under stress.

CE: I'd like to interject here in the Volume 3, October 1970 *Bulletin of the Marin County Historical Society* there is a nice story on your family. I presume you have this.

WV: Yes I do.

CE: That's for the record. Who did your grandfather marry?

WV: Mary Fitzgerald. She was a young girl who had come over from Ireland.

CE: Was she living out there?

WV: She had just come out on a ship to San Francisco, and Mrs. Dutton was looking for someone to work in her house and met the ship at the dock and engaged this girl to come up there. Apparently, from what my dad tells me, in those days there weren't many single girls in the area. So there was always a lot of people at the Dutton's home. And she was a very nice looking young lady and I guess there was a little bit of competition going on but my grandfather won out and they were married in Tomales, and then lived there. At that time he was a Deputy Sheriff and --

CE: Do you have photographs of your grandparents?

WV: Yes.

CE: Maybe we could see them later.

WV: Sure.

CE: But you didn't personally meet them.

WV: No, they both died before I was born.

CE: That's right. William Vanderbilt, born 1831, died 1905.

WV: That's right.

CE: All right, can we move on to your father, Newall Fitzgerald Vanderbilt?

WV: He was the youngest of the seven children of William Paton Vanderbilt and Mary Fitzgerald Vanderbilt.

CE: Where was he born?

WV: He was born in Tomales, June 4, 1874. He attended the grade school in Tomales and a strange thing about it, one of his teachers became my teacher in the sixth grade at San Rafael Grammar School. And she was a very strict lady.

CE: What was her name?

WV: Mrs. Coffin. She was a good teacher, a very good teacher, awfully strict.

CE: I think we've heard that name.

WV: Then he attended Mount Tamalpais Military Academy.

CE: Whose decision was that by the way?

WV: His father's.

CE: He thought that would be a good experience for him.

WV: Yes. His father decided that.

CE: And the school then was under the direction of Dr. Crosby?

WV: Dr. Crosby, yes.

CE: Well, that's a story in itself we'll have to get on the history of the school. All right, so your father was there and did he graduate from the Academy?

WV: He graduated from the Academy, he stayed on one year as an instructor and then entered the University of California and while he was there the Spanish American War broke and he enlisted. He was up in Vancouver barracks with the --

CE: Was that the Company D?

WV: Well, it was a group of Company D but by that time they had brought other groups in, so it wasn't all of Company D.

CE: But he is associated with Company D, the Fifth Infantry National Guard.

WV: That is correct.

CE: And the Bicentennial Room in the Marin County Historical Society has a whole room on Company D. Your father played a large part in that and also, ultimately, became Major did he not?

WV: He was Captain of Company D of San Rafael Fifth Infantry and then he was later commissioned Major in the California National Guard.

CE: I see. Did he go back to the University of California after the Spanish American War?

WV: After the war he went back and finished his work and as I say he was always considered the Class of 1902 to be his class but he had to go back in the summer for two years to get his chemistry certificate. So he really received his degree in 1907.

CE: I understand he was a fraternity man?

WV: Yes, Alpha Delta Phi, yes.

CE: After his commencement, what did he do then?

WV: Well, he came back to the Military Academy as a teacher and taught mathematics and science. He stayed on at the Academy, eventually became a Commandant and eventually then, the President.

CE: Well, while he was at the University -- Let's back up a moment. He was commissioned a Colonel of the University Cadets. Is that sort of like our ROTC today?

WV: Same thing as the ROTC, yes.

CE: To what do you attribute his outstanding success as a student of Military Science? An interest in it?

WV: Well, I think the training he received at the Mount Tamalpais Military Academy; I'm sure it was.

CE: So, after graduation he comes back to the Tamalpais Military Academy and he continues on for a few years and then he gets married. Tell us about your mother.

WV: He -- They were married in 1910.

CE: What was your mother's name?

WV: Effie Pauline Murray.

CE: And she's part of the William Murray family? Bank of Marin?

WV: Her brother was William Murray, yes. There were five children in the Murray family and the father was Adam Murray, who incidentally built the house where the historic museum is.

CE: Oh, he did?

WV: He built that house, yes.

CE: The Gate House.

WV: He had a lumber yard and he was a contractor.

CE: Adam? Adam Murray.

WV: Adam. We have a picture of his lumber yard; it's down where the Safeway store is now.

CE: Isn't that interesting? Well, when your parents were married, October --

WV: October 22, 1910.

CE: You told me earlier that they bought a home near the Academy; tell us about that, because it has several addresses.

WV: Well, when they purchased the house it was 715 Fifth Street. Then later on it was renumbered 725 Fifth Street and then somewhere Fifth Street became an avenue and eventually it was re-numbered again to 1527 which is now the present address.

CE: And the house is still standing.

WV: The house is still there.

CE: Does it belong to your family?

WV: Yes, yes. It's a nice -- In those days they called it a bungalow. It's a big, big three bedroom house and a full basement.

CE: Sure, it's on the low side of the street.

WV: Yes.

CE: The Academy, getting back to that a moment -- In 1912 I understand he was appointed Commandant?

WV: Yes.

CE: And then ultimately five years later he succeeded to the Presidency. Aren't those jobs one and the same?

WV: No, no. The Commandant is the head military man. Administers the military part of it.

CE: I see. The President is the academic.

WV: Right, right. Dr. Crosby died, I think, in 1917 or '18. About two months later my father was made President.

CE: Describe a little bit the campus. It's changed considerably but your main building was --

WV: There is just one building left of the original campus and that is Foster Hall. That's where they had the dining room, and the eighth grade boys lived upstairs in Foster Hall.

CE: And then you had other buildings scattered around?

WV: They had five cottages running up Cottage Avenue one block and then down on Mission Street which was then called Sixth. The older boys lived in those cottages plus they had rented four buildings along Fifth Street. There's a East Hall, which is still there. It's a big three story building across from the Odd Fellows Hall; DuBois Hall, which is where the convalescent hospital is now; Barnett Hall which is next to that. It's a big three story building, a real estate company at the present time and 1629 in the next block was the infirmary.

CE: Well, what was occupying the area where the present newer buildings are, just vacant lots? Private homes?

WV: Well, no, where the present Medical Center is was the big Tamalpais Hotel which was a big three story building but my father always thought it was too risky to have the boys in that, in those upper floors because of a fire hazard.

CE: Did it belong to the Academy?

WV: It belonged to the Academy, oh yeah. That was the start of the Academy, actually.

CE: Oh, really, in that building?

WV: Yes. Then they had all their classes down on the main floor and the upper floors were boarded off and the gymnasium was along where the Odd Fellows' Hall is now and that was a big building and they had two classrooms in the back of that, plus a little cottage out in the back of that. The other buildings that are there now were added on later on, after the Mount Tamalpais closed.

CE: Well, the Academy during your father's tenure received a commendation from the Army at one time. Would you tell us about that?

WV: Yes. Well, all of the military equipment at the Academy belonged to the Army. It was on a lend-lease program. The Army would send an inspector over once a year to inspect the premises and the equipment and to see the performance of the cadets. So each year, usually what they called Alumni Day, they would have an army man there to inspect the cadets and they'd go through all of their drills and he'd inspect the equipment, see if it was maintained properly. And they received a very high rating one year from the Army for the performance of the cadets.

CE: In turning out some of the finest cadets in America.

WV: Yes.

CE: Also a high rating in military as well as academic studies which I understand attracted students from not only this country but other countries, South America and Central America.

WV: They had students from all over, quite a few from South and Central America. That's true.

CE: Tell us about some of them.

WV: One young boy was the son of a president of Mexico, who at that time was Calles. Another chap was Joseph McMicking from the Philippines and he became very high in the American Army during the World War II. Was on MacArthur's general staff, left Corregidor with MacArthur. Another one was a young boy my father always thought was there under an assumed name. The name was Pote, but he was thought to be the heir to the throne of Siam. That was never definitely established but many years later a young man called on my mother who was the Ambassador from Thailand and it was this same young fellow.

CE: Tell me, Bill, what happened to the academy that necessitated its closure in 1925?

WV: In 1925 the stockholders of the academy had a chance to sell and they decided they would sell. So the academy closed and it was taken over by a man who then founded the San Rafael Military Academy on the same premises.

CE: What was his name, do you know?

WV: A. L. Stewart.

CE: A. L. Stewart. But they continued more or less as --

WV: They continued as a military academy.

CE: In the tradition of the school?

WV: Yes, that's right. And he then also purchased Hitchcock Military Academy and that became a Tamalpais School for Boys, non-military.

CE: Is that over in the Dominican area?

WV: Yes.

CE: I see. Did this disturb your father?

WV: Very much so, very much so.

CE: I was trying to think how old he might be when this occurred to him?

WV: Well, let's see, 1874 to 1925, that's fifty years. Yeah, he was really hurt that they closed out and there was nothing he could do because he didn't have the stock ownership to fight it. So he went back to his first love, which was flowers.

CE: All right, now let's get into that horticultural experience. I understand he was a breeder and hybridizer of dahlias and delphiniums and camellias. Tell us about this interest.

WV: Well, he had always had an interest in flowers and probably got it from his mother; she was quite a flower fancier. In his younger days he used to experiment with flowers, he started out with dahlias, and we used to have some beautiful dahlias in our back yard.

CE: On Fifth Street?

WV: On Fifth Street yes, yes. Then he got interested in delphiniums and actually he was one of the originators of the delphinium. The delphinium was started from the larkspur and it was just developed into a much better flower than -- Larkspur is a wildflower and through different hybridizing techniques, why, they developed the delphinium. He had his own breed of delphinium, which he called the

- Vanderbilt Hybrid, and he just initialed them VH Hybrids. He had a worldwide distribution of his seed and the plants and he obtained quite a recognition as a hybridizer of the delphinium.
- CE: Did this occupy his life then until his --
- WV: Well, no. When the Academy closed he started growing these delphiniums in our backyard and in his sister's backyard and he ran out of space. So then he got this lot down on Belle Avenue in San Rafael. It was about an acre or more, and he had a big lot down there and he used to raise his flowers there and ship them all over the country. And then he'd bring the seed home and sit at the dining room table at nighttime and sort the seeds out in little packages and he'd count the seeds so you'd get fifty seeds in each package, or whatever it was. It used to drive my mother crazy because he'd sit there all night doing this.
- CE: Did he have any property down here in Kentfield?
- WV: No.
- CE: Somebody was mentioning that earlier.
- WV: No, he used to come down to Henry Diener's all the time; Diener was quite a friend of his.
- CE: I understand he wrote a magazine.
- WV: Yes, he put out a magazine called Better Delphiniums, which had quite a distribution.
- CE: How did he get interested in camellias?
- WV: Well, we don't know exactly what started him on that but he always thought that camellias were something that hadn't been publicized enough and during the forties, 1940's, he got interested in this, in trying to catalog all the varieties of camellias because it had never been done before. He found numerous duplications of the same variety but under different names, so he started a little Camellia Digest and he had quite a correspondence going with camellia people all over the country.
- CE: There's some contact, too, with your father and Luther Burbank. What's that story?
- WV: Well, my father and Luther Burbank were very close friends and corresponded quite frequently about their flower problems and so forth. Then when Burbank passed away Stark Bros. Nursery from Louisiana purchased all of Burbank's plants and trees and so forth and he had an experimental farm in Sebastopol and they asked my father to work for them with Burbank's records up there. He would spend two days a week in Sebastopol going over, supervising the Sebastopol ranch. So that was really his sideline, again, because he still had his nursery. By that time, he had moved his nursery from Belle Avenue up to Ignacio and he had four acres out there, which was located where the Humane Society is at the present time. It was a big, big area and I used to go out there and work on weekends sometimes with him. Then Jackson and Perkins bought most of his stock and they developed their place down in San Jose and he went down there for about a year or so, to work down there, and came home on weekends. Then he got interested in camellias and just devoted the rest of his time to camellia research.
- CE: I understand he located a Chinese camellia that was some years B.C. and --

WV: Yes. It had quite a history to it and he was supposedly on the trail of a yellow camellia. That's never been established, there's no yellow camellia today that I know of, but according to the papers I had he was on the trail of a yellow camellia somewhere. He used to correspond all over the world with different nurserymen.

CE: Was your mother supportive in this effort of his? Was she equally enthused?

WV: Oh, yes. She was very fond of flowers, yes, very much so.

CE: I understand also he exhibited at the 1939 World's Fair here in San Francisco.

WV: He was in the Panama Pacific Fair.

WV: And the 1915 --

WV: 1915 Fair. We've got quite a few medals that he was given over there. And then he had flowers in the Golden Gate Exposition, also. He was interested in the first Marin County Fair, they called it Fiesta I believe it was festival, festival. It was held in Novato and he was on the Horticulture Committee for that and then he started the first Annual Camellia and first Annual Begonia Show at the Bank of San Rafael. He was quite interested in flowers; that was really his life.

CE: Do you find this a paradox, these two, or a dichotomy, his military life and his other --

WV: They all seem to go together, really.

CE: And the patience and the precision in --

WV: That's right. Because I've seen him out in the yard with a pair of tweezers picking up pollen off of one delphinium and putting it on another bush over here and that's the way he developed new strains of delphiniums. But he was very patient, yes, very patient.

CE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

WV: No, no.

CE: You were permitted to come as a young boy into this effort or --

WV: Oh, I used to help him yes, not as much as I should have probably, but it didn't wash off onto me the way it should have.

CE: Is there anything else you'd like to share about his horticulture? Or, Mrs. Kent do you have a question? Is that how you knew him?

AK: Oh, yes. He helped us in the first Marin Garden Center. He helped everywhere, where anyone was trying to grow or give out information. He was a great friend of Herman Hines's, too, I think. Whatever there was to do with flowers in Marin, it was always Major Vanderbilt we went to.

CE: That lady you told me had the iris garden, I guess people get interested in one --

AK: Oh, yes. Mrs. Hardee.

WV: Mrs. Hardee, yes.

CE: And old Mr. Diener, he's the one that I told you perfected that first red lily, that great thing that we just had. They were great friends; they were both hybridizer and they were both doing what people said couldn't be done. And before he fixed the delphinium, before he perfected the delphinium, it was a beautiful stalk of flowers that came out from the bottom and gradually the top but there was no such thing as one solid beautiful delphinium until he made it.

CE: Well, you must be very proud of that achievement of your father's.

WV: Yes, I am. I just wish I had some of his flowers. We don't have any of his plants left.

CE: None?

WV: None. I don't know where to find any. It's been so long now I'm sure that anyone that might have them they would be so far separated from the original.

CE: All right let's move on. He had another interest I'd like you to share with us and that was his historical interest, of this county.

WV: Yes he was very interested in history, particularly of Marin County.

CE: Along with Mrs. Kent I understand, he was one of the founders of the Marin County Historical Society?

WV: That's right, yes. He was quite interested in Marin County history.

CE: How did he research it? I understand he wrote some stories of early Marin and had them published in the *Marin Journal*?

WV: Yes, he wrote two series for the *Journal*.

CE: Just start looking through the archives?

WV: He did a lot of work with the Bancroft books. Now we had a set of Bancroft's at one time and I know he got a lot of his information from that and used to go over to the University and look up things in the library there. And talk to people, that's where he was greatly interested in talking to people. He could just sit and talk by the hour.

CE: Well, he would be right with us today in this project, wouldn't he?

WV: Yes.

AK: Exactly what he'd like, yeah.

CE: I understand also a book by Ira Cross entitled *Financing an Empire* your father had something to do with.

WV: He wrote the chapter on Marin County.

CE: Do you have a copy of that book in your library?

WV: Yes I do.

CE: I'd like to see that sometime. Maybe Elsie Mazzini has one.

WV: She has a copy yes.

CE: Good.

WV: In fact, there are a couple of editions; Elsie's edition is a little bit different than mine. I don't know which is the first one. I'll have to check on that.

CE: And your father then lived until what year?

WV: 1945.

CE: 1945. Your mother outlive him?

WV: Yes, she passed away in 1959.

CE: Did she continue living in the home?

WV: Yes she stayed at home.

CE: All right, let's talk to you. We've got to finally get to you, Bill.

WV: I don't know why, I don't know why, I don't have much to say. Elsie conned me into putting an article into Book Three.

CE: Good. We have to go and pick those copies up. Well, I know you were born in San Rafael; give us your date.

WV: February 12, 1914.

CE: You were born in the family home?

WV: Born in the family home on Fifth Street, yes.

CE: Only child?

WV: Only child.  
CE: Was that difficult for you, or were you spoiled?  
WV: I don't know. It was difficult being the Major's son at the Academy I know that.  
CE: Your early schooling was --  
WV: I went to San Rafael Grade School and then I went to Military Academy for one year and then up to grammar school in San Rafael and high school and then I went to Heald's College.  
CE: And you would have continued on at the Academy, had it not closed?  
WV: Yes, yes.  
CE: Did you find that difficult to be there as your father the honcho?  
WV: Well, it was because everything that happened they'd say, "Aw, that's the Major's son; he's getting the breaks somebody else wouldn't get," so you're kind of always hiding your head.  
CE: Who were some of your pals when you were growing up?  
WV: Well, Bob Menzies lived up on --  
CE: Bob Menzies?  
WV: Bob Menzies, we were playmates together. Frank Keaton, George Fray. George lived down on F Street. And Arthur Chong, a Chinese boy, lived down on First. We were very close friends, still are as a matter of fact.  
CE: That reminds me, I must ask you this. I don't know if you know, but we interviewed two Chinese brothers, Arthur and Sue Jue. Now one of them was a cook, was he not? Arthur, at the Academy?  
WV: Yes.  
CE: Did you know him?  
WV: Oh, yes, sure.  
CE: He said he went to the Academy one time in his life. Was he pulling our --  
WV: No, I don't think so. One brother did; one brother, but not Arthur.  
CE: Maybe it was Sue.  
WV: I think it was the boy who was the dentist. And I can't tell you --  
CE: All right, Bill, these men you mentioned, of course, we've known some of them. We've had the pleasure of meeting some of your pals. Did you, by any chance, ever have Eleanor Gilogly as a teacher?  
WV: No, no.  
CE: Did you go to San Rafael High?  
WV: Yes. But I think she taught in the grade school, didn't she? At the Coleman School? I remember the name but she was not a teacher when I was in school.  
CE: Okay. Did you know the Martinelli family or were they a little older?  
WV: The judge, yes.  
CE: He was older, of course.  
WV: Yes, yes.  
CE: Did you go in for any kind of sports?  
WV: Not in high school. I got interested in tennis about the time I was a senior and then became quite interested in that, and then took up golf. I played a little basketball but that's not so much --  
CE: We interviewed a contemporary of yours, might be a little older, George Tacchi. Did you know him?

WV: George Tacchi, Charlie.  
CE: Charles.  
WV: Oh, yeah I know Charlie.  
CE: He was telling life in San Rafael as a boy was pretty great, and you could take your gun and go walking in the hills, take your horse, or whatever. You've seen some tremendous changes.  
WV: I certainly have.  
CE: Not all good, I presume?  
WV: No, no.  
CE: Do you like what's going on now, the beautification of the city?  
WV: I think there's a lot to go.  
CE: A lot to go! What would you like to see done?  
WV: Well, they've got to improve the downtown San Rafael somehow and I'm not convinced that all these parking lots are going to be an improvement.  
CE: Just more macadam, yeah.  
WV: Yeah. But the roads are very important part of the community today. San Rafael has done a much better job than any of the other localities, I'm sure of that, as far as improving the roads. My present home in San Anselmo, the roads are just deplorable. They're getting worse every day.  
CE: You know, when we interviewed some of the people who are older than you like Mrs. James Jenkins, her father was a Cushing, they had that house where Macy's is today. You remember some of those homes, of course.  
WV: Yes, yes.  
CE: Do you remember Miss Stewart's School or had that been torn down. It was very close to where the library is.  
WV: I've heard the name but I don't recall it.  
CE: All the streets were paved, of course, in your day.  
WV: Well, it was a different pavement; they had sort of a tar pavement in the middle of the street. Only the middle portion and the sides were all rock and gravel. Fifth Street was that way. I can remember the tar pots coming down and applying a tar on top of the road and then they'd let it set and put some light gravel on top of that.  
CE: Any of those large original old homes still standing, like was the A.W. Foster home, Fairhills, still standing when you were a boy?  
WV: Oh, yes, yes.  
CE: Did you visit it?  
WV: Yes, yes. My father and I used to take a walk on Sundays up through the Foster estate. He knew the Foster family very well; he knew the gardener quite well so he'd go up and talk about flowers. Then he'd go over to the Menzie house and Mr. Menzie would come out and talk about his flowers. He knew the gardener at Louise Boyd's home, too. So he was always discussing different flowers.  
CE: Now that gardener at the Foster home was the uncle of the present owner of West End Nursery, Mr. Untermann. I forget his name at the moment.  
WV: Lohrmann, Richard Lohrmann.  
CE: Lohrmann, that's it. The Dollar Mansion, as it's so-called, of course, during your youth that was occupied by Captain Dollar, wasn't it?

WV: Oh, yes, yes.  
CE: And Louise Boyd had Maple Lawn. Did you know her?  
WV: I met her once, I think, at some -- I've forgotten what the occasion was.  
CE: What other homes that were large and of interest then did you visit? Did you ever get over in the Dominican area?  
WV: Yes, yes, there were several over there. The Meahall house, which was not an old house because that was built in my time, so that was -- Oh, it must have been built about 1920 or so.  
AK: How about the Sharp sisters?  
WV: The Sharps up on G Street, yes, I knew them.  
CE: Well, you must be a contemporary of one of those sisters?  
WV: No, they're all older.  
CE: What decided you to go into Heald's Business College? Was that a decision of your father's?  
WV: No, no it wasn't. He wasn't too keen on it. But those were the depression years and my mother was quite interested in me getting a business education as she had helped her brother through Heald's, Wilmer, and she thought that was the thing to do. So I went there for a year and then went to work for California Packing as soon as I left there.  
CE: You wanted to get a job and get going.  
WV: Wanted to get a job and get some money.  
CE: And Cal Pak, wasn't the headquarters in San Francisco down where? Mission?  
WV: No, no, at that time 101 California Street. I started working there and then later on they moved over to Fremont and Howard.  
CE: Ultimately they became what? Del Monte?  
WV: Del Monte Corporation but now that's part of R.J. Reynolds. They were swallowed up by R.J. Reynolds four years ago.  
CE: You told us earlier that you worked 43 years of your life with them.  
WV: Yes. In San Francisco?  
WV: In San Francisco. I commuted all that time.  
CE: What year was it when you started?  
WV: 1934. April, 1934.  
CE: 1934. So you had a few years on the ferry train system.  
WV: Oh, marvelous, marvelous.  
CE: Tell us something about that.  
WV: That was something we should never have given up. It was a great treat to ride the train and the ferry.  
CE: Where were you living then, at home?  
WV: At home, on Fifth Street.  
CE: Before your marriage.  
WV: Yes.  
CE: And you'd do what? You'd walk down to the --  
WV: Well, I had a choice. There were two trains, one went through San Anselmo and down through Ross and the other went from San Rafael out through Greenbrae. The one that went out through San Rafael to San Anselmo left the West End Station at 7:55. If I was able to get up in time and get down to that, I'd catch that

one. But, if I heard the train coming then I'd turn and run the other way towards San Rafael Station and catch the Greenbrae train there. They both met the same boat.

CE: Now explain that. Those were electric trains?

WV: They both were electric trains, yes.

CE: One went through the tunnel that now goes near Larkspur Landing and on to Greenbrae.

WV: Yes.

CE: And then -- Was there a cutoff?

WV: There was a cutoff. It came in at Chapman. It was between Corte Madera and Larkspur.

CE: And a place called Detour or something?

WV: Yes, yes. Wait, let me back up. Chapman was beyond Corte Madera, before you got to the tunnel. Baltimore Park was the junction where they came in from Greenbrae and met the train coming from San Anselmo.

CE: Okay. They tell me today, 50 years later, you can't get to the City any faster than you did then.

WV: That is true, that is absolutely true.

CE: And you're much more harassed if you take your car or if you take the bus you're squeezed in.

WV: That's right. I used to catch, as I say, either the seven o'clock or the 7:10 train, I'd get off the boat at 8:05 and I'd be at the office at 8:10. And when I was commuting, just before I retired, I would leave, well, say, 7:30 and I'd be lucky to be in the office at 8:15 and that was in an automobile.

CE: Driving in a car?

WV: Yes, I went with a neighbor. We used to have a car pool. After the war we had a car pool, but it was the same problem then.

CE: I suppose the railroads gave up their right of ways and everything, didn't they?

WV: Yes, yes.

CE: So there is no way of retrieving it?

WV: There is no way of retrieving it, I'm afraid. Well, they could, I suppose with condemnation, that's the way it was obtained in the first place, a lot of it was right of ways and --

CE: Those tunnels are still there.

WV: The tunnels are still there, yes. But the ferry boat was such a delightful trip and I met so many friends that I still associate with, on the ferry boat. We played cards all the way over and almost missed the boat as it was leaving to come back to Sausalito, we were still playing cards.

CE: The news about Sacramento wanting to take over the Golden Gate Bridge District is very disturbing to a lot of people. Assemblyman Brown seems to be kind of hopeful that he's going to succeed in this. Barbara Boxer, who is on the Board, is fighting it. Would you care to comment or add to that?

WV: Well, I think that -- Well, I'd better be careful what I say, but I don't think much of the Board of Directors of the Golden Gate Bridge. I think they're inept.

CE: Do you think it's been too political?

WV: Oh, it's not too political it's just been poorly operated.

AK: That doesn't mean it isn't a good thing, though.

WV: Oh, no, no, the bridge itself is marvelous. It should be --

CE: What about the ferry system?

WV: I think the ferry system was something that they developed way in advance of what they knew about. They tried to be too quick and wanted everything new. If they had gone by the conventional methods of operating a boat they would have probably had a successful ferry system. But everything had to be new, computerized, and everything and I think it was just too far ahead of its time. It's unfortunate because the boat ride is a beautiful thing and I would like to see it continue but it's money-losing and I don't think we can afford it.

CE: Do you think we're going to lose control of it to the Bridge District?

WV: I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

CE: Well, what would be the eventuality?

WV: Well, that's the question. I happen to be out at the Board of Supervisors meeting last Thursday and -- I mean last Tuesday and their reaction is they don't know exactly what's going to happen. This bill that Willie Brown has put through is not clear at all.

CE: Just to disband it and --

WV: Yeah, but what becomes of the bus?

CE: That includes running the bridge itself, the busses and the ferries.

WV: That's right. You're still going to have the bridge operated though by a Commission, whether it's state or whether it's one director from each of the counties in the Bridge District, they didn't seem to know, so there is still going to be a lot of bureaucracy involved even if the State takes it over. But I'm sure the State could operate more efficiently than the present group that have been doing it.

AK: May I interrupt?

CE: Please.

AK: The state did not help us to build that bridge.

WV: That's right, that's right.

AK: In fact by helping the Berkeley bridge, they made it harder, made it much more difficult. And I remember that they -- When we thought we had gone over almost every hurdle, they brought in an engineer from New York to prove that it wouldn't be safe.

WV: Yes that's right.

AK: It seemed to me that when the -- I think it was nine counties had to bond themselves in order to build the bridge.

WV: That's correct.

AK: And San Francisco did not help, they were far from help, really.

WV: Well, I think if they had a Board of Directors and one man from each of the counties involved it would be a lot better, a lot more efficient.

CE: Yes, and that hasn't happened.

WV: No, because the present Directors don't want to lose their little, little toy, you might say. But I think if we had one director from each of the counties involved that operated that under one manager --

CE: How do these men and women attain this position?

WV: Well, they're appointed by the Board of Supervisors.  
CE: Of their respective counties.  
WV: Of their respective counties, yes. And San Francisco dominates the Board; they're allowed more representation than anybody else.  
AK: That's wrong.  
WV: It's wrong, absolutely, it's wrong.  
CE: It is predicated on population, must be.  
WV: No, I don't think so. I think it was established in the original term of the Golden Gate District.  
CE: Well, that's going to be a fascinating story to watch. You may have and we all may have lived in one of the nicer periods of Marin's history.  
WV: It's very possible things will get worse before they get better.  
CE: Well, let's talk a little bit about California Packing. You were in the San Francisco office most of the time.  
WV: Yes.  
CE: Or did you have to travel?  
WV: Well, just a couple of trips here and there but nothing of any importance.  
CE: Well, you have seen the growth of one of the big companies in California --  
WV: Yes, yes. It grew from a small packing company to a multi-national corporation.  
CE: Multi-national. And ultimately Del Monte and now owned by R.J. Reynolds?  
WV: Yes.  
CE: The tobacco Reynolds we're talking about?  
WV: Yes, Camel Cigarettes.  
CE: You know, I don't understand all this new world, the oil companies buy businesses that have nothing to do with oil and diversification I suppose is the --  
WV: It's getting to be that only -- to the point pretty soon where you'll have just four or five big corporations running everything, than they'll have a period where they'll break them up. Like they broke up the Standard Oil in New Jersey many years ago into many different Standard Oil Companies. Well, the same thing can happen again because they're all grabbing up other outfits now.  
CE: Well, now let's get back to you. What happened during World War II? First of all, did you marry? What year did you --  
WV: 1945.  
CE: Oh, so World War II came along and you felt an urge or were you drafted?  
WV: I was drafted. I tried to enlist in the Navy and I couldn't read the fine print. They gave me a Bible at twenty paces and said, "Read it." I said, "What page?"  
CE: Okay, so you decided you'd join the Army. What did you get into?  
WV: Signal Corps. I went into the Signal Corps. The Signal Corps. Our branch was absorbed by the Air Force. Air Corps, I should say.  
CE: Where did you go for training?  
WV: I went first to Monterey then to Camp Crowder, Missouri and to Orlando, Florida and to New Jersey and then to Oran, Africa, Algiers, Corsica, Lakehorn ?  
CE: You were in Operation Torch, I gather, in North Africa when Eisenhower was there.  
WV: Well, we were there before. See, we were the second group in after the invasion. The invasion was in November of '42 and we came in in December.

CE: Did you keep a diary?  
WV: Yes.  
CE: Good for you.  
WV: I haven't looked at it since I wrote it, though.  
CE: Did you come out more or less unscathed?  
WV: Yes, I was fortunate. Our mission when we went over there was to stop Rommel. The boys in the Pentagon had it all figured out how we'd do it. But Mr. Rommel took the wrong turn and it upset all the plans and we just sat and sat and sat for three, four, five months.  
CE: Waiting for them to regroup back in Washington?  
WV: Yeah, figure out what to do. Then they broke up the company. We were broken up about five times, I think, all of my career in the Army.  
CE: Well, you got home in one piece.  
WV: Got home in one piece, yeah. I was very grateful for that.  
CE: I'd like to see that diary some time.  
WV: Saw a lot of the world.  
CE: Saw a lot of the world. And your mother sighed a deep sigh of relief.  
WV: Yes I'm sure.  
CE: And then it was back to Del Monte?  
WV: Yes, yes.  
CE: And then in '45 you made the big step.  
WV: I made the big step on December 29, 1945.  
CE: And whom did you marry?  
WV: Helen Clara Milner.  
CE: Was she a local girl?  
WV: She lived in San Rafael at that time, yes. She used to live in Kentfield at one time. Her father was a printer.  
CE: Were you married in church or --  
WV: Yes, we were married at St. Paul's in San Rafael. Her mother was a member of St. Paul's, I was a member of the First Presbyterian Church and we went to her place and -- Had two ministers, the Episcopal Minister and the Presbyterian Minister.  
CE: Very good. Then were -- Did you -- You had to get your own house.  
WV: We did. That was a very tough time of year to find a place to live, period of time to find a place to live. We found an apartment in San Anselmo in back of the Seminary. My wife had worked at Marinship during the war and a friend of hers had this apartment so she let us have it. We lived there for five years and then we built our house up on Hilldale.  
CE: You know, I think it's interesting in World War II days the companies kept your job.  
WV: Oh, yes, oh yes. All jobs were available.  
CE: That didn't occur in later situations, in Viet Nam or even Korea.  
WV: I guess not. That's true; I think all the companies held the jobs open for the men.  
AK: That was Jim Leach's place?  
WV: Yes.  
CE: That built your home?

WV: Yes.  
CE: We interviewed that dear man.  
WV: Leach. He was quite a nice man wasn't he?  
CE: Yes.  
WV: You know he felt so bad. He was quite interested in everybody that bought a house up there and he'd come up and talk to my wife and he say, "I want you to come down and look at this house we're building and tell me what color we should paint this wall." Helen would get a big kick out of that so she'd -- But we had a little dog that we bought, it was a Boxer, and the dog got out of the yard one day and Jim was coming up the hill and hit him.  
CE: In the car?  
WV: Yes. And Jim felt so bad, you know, he was almost crying. He just never really wanted to talk to us after that, you know. He just felt so badly. Of course, it wasn't his fault at all; stupid little dog ran out there.  
CE: He built quite a few homes up there.  
WV: And he built good houses.  
CE: He built the home we live in Ross, my sister and I.  
WV: Well, he built a good house. He didn't cut corners, whatever he built was quality.  
CE: What year was this?  
WV: 1950. He didn't build our house. We had a contractor that we engaged, but Leach built most of the houses in that area.  
CE: Do you have a family?  
WV: Yes, I have two children.  
CE: What are their names?  
WV: Andrea Irene Rail, R-a-i-l, and she has two children. Just got a new granddaughter.  
CE: Good. Where does she live?  
WV: Rohnert Park.  
CE: Okay. And another?  
WV: James Newhall Vanderbilt.  
CE: That wonderful name. And where is he?  
WV: Right now he's in Lima, Peru. He's a civil engineer and he's working for Davey McKee operation, it's a mining operation down in Peru.  
CE: Is he your baby?  
WV: Yes.  
CE: All right, now you, as well as your father, have been interested in history, I know that. I've heard the Vanderbilt name before I ever knew about the Marin County Historical Society. And there's another Vanderbilt, is he possibly cousin to you, in Sonoma, or are you related?  
WV: No, no, Jim is --  
CE: Sonoma County Historian.  
WV: Sonoma County Historian. No, we're not related.  
CE: What got you interested in History?  
WV: My father, I'm sure it was.  
CE: Did he collect ephemera and memorabilia?  
WV: Yes, yes. He collected everything.

CE: And you inherited it.  
WV: I inherited it.  
CE: That's like Mrs. Kent, she collects and then she's passing stuff onto me, which, of course, I appreciate. She says, "No more room in this drawer, you take it." But we're trying to do this effort.  
WV: I think it's marvelous that you do this.  
CE: We hope it's going to be of value someday.  
WV: I'm sure it will be.  
CE: Are you currently on the Board of the Historical Society?  
WV: Yes.  
CE: All right, maybe you could share with us a little bit about Elsie's dream of getting a new building. As long as I've known her and the years I was on the Board, she wanted to get out of that Gate House, she's outgrowing. She said, "I can't accept one more picture."  
WV: She really doesn't want to get out of the Gate House.  
CE: Oh, she doesn't?  
WV: No, except that we have to, but we don't want to.  
CE: Well, but she wants more space.  
WV: More space, that's right.  
CE: All right, we fought the battle and Judge Keating was our spokesman before the San Rafael Town Council about having to pay more rent. Were you there that evening?  
WV: Yes.  
CE: You heard Mayor Bettini say, "I can't stand it anymore. We should be paying you."  
WV: Yes.  
CE: Is there an increased pressure on the Historical Society to get that building?  
WV: No, no.  
CE: What is the problem?  
WV: Just the fact that we're crammed; we don't have any room there for people who want to come in and do any research. We don't have enough room to display the material we have and we know that there are many artifacts that we could get if we had a proper place to put them. But again, that's an old house. We want a fireproof building and I just happen to be the Chairman of the Building Committee.  
CE: Mr. Dunshee helping you?  
WV: Oh, yes, Bert's very active.  
CE: And what's the name of that architect?  
WV: Yes, we had a Mr. Chambers. He helped us out and we were all set to request the County to give us a piece of property at the Civic Center.  
CE: That's what I heard, next to the Post Office.  
WV: Well, that was one spot that we liked but the County Administrator's Office doesn't like that idea at all. They had a couple of other sites, one of which I think is pretty good. It's about opposite the parking lot. You know where the main parking lot is to the Veteran's Auditorium?  
CE: Yes –

WV: And back towards the Civic Center is a big corner there; that is one spot they think might be available.

CE: What would the Society have to do, pay a token rent for a year --

WV: Well, that's what -- We haven't gotten that far. We've talked informally with one of the Supervisors and with the Assistant Administrator. But that's beginning to pose a problem because we have to get funds first of all and Buck Foundation will grant funds for that, but they will only grant 50 percent. So if we put up a building it's going to cost us close to --

CE: Quarter of a million.

WV: Oh, we figure half a million dollars. To put up a building you have to meet certain specifications of the County.

CE: It it's going to be an archival depository it has to be --

WV: Fireproof.

CE: It has to be concrete, fireproof.

AK: How do other counties do? It seems to be the county's job.

WV: Well, that's the thing; you see we have a problem there. This is the Marin County Historical Society and the County Board of Supervisors wants a San Rafael Museum and San Rafael says, "That's a county museum," so we're not getting much help either way. Now, the County has in the past given us a grant each year, for the last three years it's been around \$4,500.

CE: Elsie always goes up there and bids low.

WV: That's right, that's right.

AK: Too low.

CE: I know. Well, she said I'd rather --

WV: Well, she's trying to be realistic, you see. You go out there to this meeting on Tuesday and they're cutting that all out

CE: No more of that.

WV: No more, no more. They're dropping all of the, the Marin Symphony, the Opera Guild, the Children's Orchestra, any groups that have been getting money from the County, they're cutting them out, telling them to go to the Buck people.

AK: That's too bad.

WV: Well, they're talking really out of both sides of their mouths because in the next sentence the man says, "Well," he says, "If the Buck people don't help you we're not going to let these organizations die."

CE: Just try somebody else first.

WV: Just try somebody else first, yes. We've already got a grant requesting to the Buck people for \$20,000 to update our photography exhibits. We've got some wonderful pictures but they've got to be redone and --

CE: Inventoried and catalogued.

WV: And properly displayed. We expect to have a reply from them within another month or so. I think it will be favorable, I really do. But then we have to go back again and ask them for \$5,000 to operate for this next year.

CE: Well, I understand through the grapevine that they really have money that they're really looking to get rid of it. And this was something I heard within the last week, that if you have any ideas, step forward.

WV: That's right. I spoke to Peter Behr one time. We had a SIRs meeting, I'm connected with the SIRs in San Rafael, and he was our speaker. I asked him, I said, "Mr. Behr, supposing you have 23 million dollars to allocate each year and you only get requests for 20 million dollars, what do you do? You're obligated to spend all the money." He said, "That's true but," he said, "there's nothing that says we can't solicit." He could come in and ask for money, so that's what they would do if they only had requests for 20 million and they had 23 million sitting there and they had to get rid of three million, they'd say, "Why don't you put in a request?"

CE: It would be very nice if that would happen to the Marin County Historical Society, wouldn't it?

WV: Well, we would like that. Then, as I say, we were -- Well, at that point, we kind of shied away from it now because we don't think that is such a good idea to go out to the Civic Center for several reasons.

CE: I know you're deep into the Marin County Historical Society and hope you'll always give it your continued support and ideas and -- But I know you have other interests. What are the SIRs?

WV: Sons in Retirement. It's an organization of men, it was formed about fifteen years ago and it's spread very rapidly in Northern California. We now have five branches in Marin County and each of the branches has a waiting list to get in so I wouldn't be surprised if what they might form another branch very shortly.

CE: How many members in a branch?

WV: Well, it depends whatever they set. Our -- We have set a quota of 200 in ours.

CE: Two hundred and you have four other branches?

WV: Oh, yes, yes. We have 12 on our waiting list, Branch 22 has a limit of 225 and they have 19 on their waiting list.

CE: How often do you meet?

WV: Once a month for a luncheon meeting, they have a speaker. And then we have different off-shoots of the branch: golf group, card group.

CE: Are you a service club or -- What's your mission?

WV: No, we're not a service club, just a fellowship.

CE: Fellowship. You don't have to raise money for any organization?

WV: No dues to the organization, you pay for your lunch, they pass the hat to collect money to pay for postage and stationery and so forth and that's it. We have to pay an assessment to the state organization, per capita, but --

CE: But it's just to entertain and --

WV: Just to entertain that's right. Provide entertainment. We have tours and trips. We're going to the Canadian Rockies, my wife and I, in June with the SIRs group. They just came back from Yosemite with another bus load down there. They're going to Australia later this year. They just go all over.

CE: Didn't we talk to Francis Rogers, Mrs. Kent?

WV: Yes, Francis Rogers is very active in Branch 7.

CE: It seems to me they went to Reno.

WV: No, Branch 22, excuse me. I went to school with Francis's wife, Ruth.

CE: Did you?

WV: Oh, we went to grammar school and high school together. In fact, we're going to organize the 50<sup>th</sup> class reunion of San Rafael High School next year as soon as Ruth and I get back from our trip to the Canadian Rockies. We're going to get started on that.

CE: Now what's fifty years ago? 1932 you graduated from San Rafael High, then?

WV: Yes.

CE: Were you a good student?

WV: Oh, I got by, I had pretty fair grades.

CE: Did you enjoy school?

WV: Yes, I did.

CE: Would you care to comment on the change in education? You certainly observed it in your two children and it's somewhat deteriorated down the road. Would you comment on what reasons you think might have caused this change?

WV: Well, I think the first thing is discipline. I think that the schools have lost control of the children and it starts right from the small grades right on up. By the time they get to high school they don't have any control over them and I think they've lost respect for the teachers. It's unfortunate, but I also think a lot of these experiments we've had have gotten away from the old three Rs, which were basic and should still be basic. I know in my own children's case they didn't have what I thought they should have had when they finished school. I can't complain about my son, he's a civil engineer now, very successful, but he can't spell worth a hoot.

CE: Well, don't you think the pendulum is beginning to swing back?

WV: Yes, I do, yes, I do.

CE: And we went through that terrible decade of the '60s and some in the '70s those years of dissent, and there seems to be a return on -- Being in the military isn't necessarily a dirty thing anymore.

WV: No, no. They're getting respect.

CE: They're getting respect again. You'll find military academies opening up again. Because they all went sour during Viet Nam. But I have a favorite comment I make about schools today, younger generation. Only one thing wrong with the younger generation, too many of us don't belong to it.

CE: Thank you, Bill, very much for this afternoon.