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COLIN MENZIES, JR.

An Interview Conducted by
Ruth Wutke Lescohier

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Mr. Colin Menzies, Jr.

Lifelong resident of Mill Valley, born
April 21, 1911.

Interviewed August 1970 in his home at
417 Magee Avenue, Mill Valley.

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MR. COLIN MENZIES, JR.

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COLIN MENZIES, JR.

My dad¹ moved to Mill Valley from San Francisco in 1906, and this property² has been owned by the family ever since. He came over right after the earthquake.

When the Panama-Pacific Exposition³ was over, he had several of the large trees from the grounds brought over and planted on this property, and they are still here. This orange one came from India. This one is a swamp cypress, and this is a cedar deodora. They brought the trees over by horse and wagon, crossing by ferry.

Many cypress trees -- and also poplar trees -- were planted by early residents in Mill Valley to mark property boundaries. Nobody had had any surveying done; neighbors would just get together and decide where to put up a fence. It didn't matter whether it was a foot too far this way or that way. This is what made all the trouble in future years, when they started surveying and selling lots.

My dad helped in the first laying out of Golden Gate Park, but he was in real estate, actually. When I was growing up, I was around landscape gardening at all times. My first job was with Herman Hein,⁴ who was a landscape gardener. I stayed with him and became foreman after a number of years. Then I went to work at the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo as foreman of the grounds. From there I went to the Mill Valley School District, and I've been there ever since. I'm now superintendent of buildings and grounds.

¹Colin Menzies, Sr.

²417 Magee Avenue, Mill Valley.

³Held in San Francisco in 1915.

⁴Well-known landscape architect, resident of Mill Valley, who died in 1964.

Herman Hein did the landscaping on Miller Avenue, for the City of Mill Valley. I don't know whether he donated this service as a gift, or whether he was reimbursed for it.

[Mr. Menzies was asked to comment on the changes in Mill Valley during his lifelong residence.]

There was an awful lot of barren land in Mill Valley 60 years ago, although there were a lot of trees, too. There were a lot of grassy areas, which are now covered with houses, of course, and shrubs and trees.

One of the biggest changes is in the landscape. People don't have the yards that they used to, with the big lawns and different kinds of flowers. People's yards are small now, because of the land cost and taxes and the cost of a gardener.

We used to be able to hunt -- rabbits or anything we wanted to. There were no laws at all at the time. The place was just alive with rabbits. And there were lots of other things then, deer and so on.

Which reminds me that my wife saw a mountain lion up by the Double Bowknot quite recently. I had gone up the trail, and she walked up the road. We were going to meet at the Double Bowknot. I waited and waited, and she didn't show up. Finally she came around the corner and told me what had happened, although she didn't know at the time what it was until Joe Canet told her. To make it worse, he told her they always come in pairs! So she doesn't walk up there alone any more. I really think they're more afraid of you than you are of them.

I can remember when we had to come up the hill by horse and buggy; there were no cars. The first taxi in Mill Valley was a Model T Ford that Mr. Roth purchased. The first time he brought my mother and me up to the house, I remember he took us over on Molino first, to take someone else home. It was his first day with the car, and he didn't know how to drive it. He pushed the wrong pedal to back up, and my mother started screaming. She was sure we were going to go over the bank, but he said, "That's all right. Those redwood trees will stop us if we go down."

Then of course there was Tail Light Andy, who was the local cop at the time and used to direct traffic at night downtown. I believe his name was Bickerton. He was quite a character.

The boys growing up in Mill Valley used to dam up the creek in Blithedale Canyon to make a big pond. Then we'd make rafts and float around. This was right across from the intersection of Hillside and West Blithedale. There was a long channel that we would dam, and the water would back quite a ways up and really make a pretty good-sized pond. We'd do this in the spring. We'd try to keep it all summer, but every once in awhile somebody from the City would come along and break the dam. Then we'd have to build it back again.

I never did swim in Cascade Reservoir, like the kids do now, and I never did hear of anyone who swam there. It was fenced in and used for the city water supply.

The only devilment we got into was to go up Summit Avenue to where Tamalpais Avenue takes off and then roll tires down the flight of stairs, right into town. We'd watch them go down and bump right into the station. People would jump out of the way when they saw them coming. Mrs. Letitia Evans used to catch up with us once in awhile, but the police never caught up with us. The Police Department used to be where the Fire Department is now. They had an old car at that time that they had to crank to get started. We could hear them cranking it, so we'd be long gone by the time they got up on Summit. I think we must have been around 10 or 12 years old then.

Another thing we did from time to time was on the old mountain railroad. There was a bend that it used to make at the top of Summit Avenue. Summit went up about to the bridge, and then there was a trail that went up and crossed the track. We used to go up there and throw grease on the track so the wheels would skid, and the train would practically stop. We didn't do that too often, though, because it was too far to walk.

[Mr. Menzies was asked about the 1929 fire on Mt. Tamalpais.]

The 1929 fire burned property all around us here on Magee. I took my mother down to Sausalito to stay with

my aunt, and then I came back to help my dad save our house. We pulled the shingles off the roof as they caught fire. The hillside around us was completely involved. The wind was terrific; it would pick up a big glob of fire and lift it through the air and throw it down on a house. Then, a house that was completely surrounded by trees might not even be bothered.

Fire departments from other towns came in to help, but it didn't do much good because they had the wrong fittings and couldn't attach their hoses to the Mill Valley lines. It wouldn't have made much difference, because there was no water pressure by that time. There were so many lines out, all over, that there just was no water at all. Another thing was that the roads were just old wagon roads, very narrow and not properly surfaced. Summit Avenue, for example, was just an oiled road. San Francisco wouldn't let their trucks even try to go up Summit.

Fort Baker had sent a lot of army personnel to fight the fire. They couldn't really do a thing, because there was no water left in the pipes. So they were all out on our lawn. They had swiped all my dad's liquor, and they were out on the lawn drinking liquor and making bets on whose house would burn next.

The only thing that saved our house from the fire was that the wind changed direction completely. It turned around and blew the fire back up the hill.

One of the houses above us¹ was saved because they took the water out of the fish pond and carried it in buckets to throw on the roof whenever burning material would land.

It seems to me that the people who left their houses -- nine out of ten of them lost their houses to the fire.

People would drive up in trucks and ask you if you wanted your furniture taken downtown. Everything was down in the main square, bedding and everything. It was just loaded with stuff.

Sometimes the people who would drive up and ask you if you wanted some help in moving your furniture would

¹403 Magee Avenue.

be strangers -- and you'd never see your things again. They'd just take off.

The fire started way up above Ralston White's place, the Garden of Allah. The City Council was having a big fight at the time with the Fire Chief, so the Fire Department just more or less waited down at the intersection. By that time the wind took the fire and just swished it down through town.

I'm a volunteer fireman now, and have been since about 1939. The weirdest fire I've ever fought was over at the Sausalito distillery. All the barrels of alcohol blew up. They'd get to a certain temperature and then explode. We were wading in burning alcohol to our knees. We were walking through fire, but it was a cool flame from the alcohol, just below the tops of our boots. It didn't burn, but it was a weird sensation to be walking around in all this flaming material. This was on the outside of the building. They couldn't get near the inside; it was too hot.

My mother was the one who raised the money to buy Mill Valley's first fire siren. She went to the City Council, and they practically laughed her out of the place. She told them she'd get ten cents from everybody in Mill Valley. They just said, "Well, good luck!"

She went to the Bank of America and set up a fund, then she got on the phone and called every house in Mill Valley. In a short while she went back to the Council and told them she had \$870 for a siren!

At first the Mill Valley Fire Department had horses, no trucks. And they had an old fire bell. Unless the wind was blowing in the right direction, the volunteer firemen couldn't hear the bell at all. The thing that was instrumental in starting a drive for a siren was a fire on Magee Avenue. It burned a house down to the ground in nothing flat. Mr. Thoney,¹ Fire Chief at the time, told the woman that if the Fire Department had a siren that the volunteer firemen could hear, they would have had the help to save her house.

¹Clinton L. Thoney.

[Mr. Menzies was asked about conditions in Mill Valley during the Second World War.]

I think Dr. Hartman¹ was the only doctor in Mill Valley during the war. You had a long wait in his office whenever you went to see him.

I can remember when he first came to town. He had a brand new 1935 Ford coupe. That was really something at that time! I always meant to get that car from him, but I never did get around to doing it.

He was a real young, up-and-coming doctor. He had his office up in the Keystone Building, and we just thought he was it! Still do, as far as that goes.

¹Rodney H. Hartman, M.D.