Mill Valley Oral History Program
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CAPTAIN JOSEPH CANET

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Helen Dreyfus in 1981

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INTERVIEWER: Helen Dreyfus
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Capt. Joseph Canet was born in Cayucos, California, on November 25th, 1895. Canet left Southern California after 1910 and travelled with a captain up the coast to San Francisco's Barbary Coast. Canet's oral history describes his paternal lineage going back to his great-great-great-great grandfather, his early years living on a ranch by Diablo Canyon, his travels to Chile, his career as a policeman in Marin County, and his memories of Mill Valley, including the Fire of 1929.

Lucretia Little History Room
Mill Valley Public Library
375 Throckmorton Avenue
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Oral History of Captain Joseph Canet

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Helen Dreyfus: This is Helen Dreyfus and I'm talking with ex-Police Captain Joseph A. Canet in his home on Mountain View Avenue in Mill Valley. Well, Captain Canet, let's go back to your great-great-great-great-grandfather. Here we are, here's the ship [Capt. Canet gestures to an old newspaper article about Vicente Canet, and the ship *Asia*, on which he arrived in Monterey.]

Joseph Canet: Yes, this is the ship, the *Asia*.

Helen Dreyfus: So, your great-great-great-great-grandfather came out on a Spanish naval vessel, the *Asia*, in what year?

Joseph Canet: That was in 1833. He came around the Horn, with a mixed crew, different nations--Swedes, Danes, and everything else. He went around the Horn and he came up to Monterey, and the reason for him coming out was because there was a lot of English ships exploring on the West Coast here, and they were gold-mining and like that, see, and the pirates used to get them after they got loaded. So, the Queen of Spain sent this ship out that my grandfather and the crew was on, and they came to Monterey. At that time it was Mexican. California was all Mexican. Their job was to go out and overhaul these pirates, which they did, and after they got loaded, they went back into Monterey and they were there for quite awhile.

The crew wanted some money to go ashore with, and the captain wouldn't give it to them, so my grandfather ran away from the ship. He went to the Mexican government, and he didn't tell them it was a Spanish ship, but he told them that he wanted to stay in Mexico. He stayed there for three or four days, and they talked it over. They said, "You can take a Mexican grant, but you'll have to marry somebody here to get this grant." So he married a gal by the name of Buitron, and the Spanish grant was from Hearst Castle at San Simeon[1], and down the ridge to the Cuesta Grade, to San Luis Obispo, out Los Osos Valley to the ocean below Morro Rock. Los Osos, as you know, means the Valley of the Bears. There were a lot of grizzly bears there, and they'd dig big pits in the ground, and put a kid in the center of crossed poles. The bears couldn't get at the kid, but they'd go after it and fall in the pit, and then they would pickle them just like pickled pork, and they would sell that to the sailing ships.

He finally married the Buitron girl. She was part Spanish and Dutch, and they went to this grant. His ship left, and they heard afterwards that the captain did kill all the crew. My great-great-great-great-grandfather had the Indians build him an adobe, which cost about $15 or $20 thousand. It was a big tract. These Indians lived right on his grant. He had asked for so many

[1] Canet was referring to the location of Hearst Castle, which was a landmark at the time of the interview in 1981.

horses – I think it was 50 or a 100 horses – cattle and sheep, and he went right to business on it. Then, later on, my other grandfathers came over.

My grandfather, he went to Mexico with my other grandfather, and they finally settled in Morro Bay. There's a castle there and that cost about $20 thousand. That one's pretty ramshackle, because the adobe doesn't last long in this weather. It gets wet and then these slabs – the way they make adobe, they make a big pool of mud and the squaws get in there and tromp around and then they cut straw and in these bowls they pound abalone shell and they put that in there, and they make these big flat spaces about a block long, and scrape it with the log sharpened on one side. Then they would put horses on that and keep tramping, take their shoes off, and that would make it just as hard as—and they used to thrash beans on that, and thrash barley, and like that. Then they made the adobe and when they have a hole about the size of this room, 15 by 30 feet, something like that, the Mexican squaws would work on this mud and then they'd spread it out in squares, about 3 feet by 2 ½ feet, and that's the way that it was laid. And it was laid, and there was no nails in adobe. They would take a skin of a cow, and they would throw it on a log and let it dry, and then they would make thongs about half an inch wide, and they'd soak these in water. The way they used to do that: they used to cut a notch in a log like that, and then start this skin, and it would cut a long thong. Now, they could use that thong for lots of things. They used them sometimes if they wanted to kill somebody: they would just tie a raw thong around their neck and when the sun dried it, it would cut right to the bone. And with all of the logs and beams which had no nails in them, they were fastened with this thong, and then twisted through and over one and under one, wrapped in again, and they did that with a horse with a saddle on, and they would pull it with that saddle, and when that dried, it would dry right into the log.

Then when my grandfather came to this adobe in Morro, he was the majordomo of the Catholic Church, and the Indians built the San Carmelita Church in San Luis Obispo, and that went to about 120 acres in that. They had their own cattle, their own milk cows, and they raised their own vegetables; San Miguel the same way. The Indians built all those. Another thing, you know the tile on the roof? Well, they would take this adobe, and mix this red clay with it, and when they made these slabs – did you ever notice that on these old adobe buildings there's tile that long[2] from the top of the roof down, the ones against the edge are only that long[3]? You know why this is? Because young squaws, they would take this piece of mud about that thick[4] and cut it out and it would be wet, and they'd lay it on their thigh and roll it like that, and that's why – the old squaws would make the long ones and their daughters would make the short ones, and that's why you see Catholic churches with four or five rows up – the tile is only that long. They made their own oven, like a beehive and baked them in there.

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[2] Canet shows a space of about 30 inches

[3] Canet shows about 14 inches.

[4] Canet shows about 1 inch.

Helen Dreyfus: Then your grandfather was in San Luis Obispo, and your father was born in San Luis Obispo?

Joseph Canet: No, my father was born up by the Hearst Ranch. Then he came to San Luis Obispo. That was my grandfather, and then when my father was born, he was born by Cayucos by the old Adobe. At that time it belonged to the Americans. And he had the Sinsamer Ranch[5] in San Luis County. The San Luis Hot Sulphur Springs – well, we lived right across from them. The Pacific Coast Railroad was the only way that they got provisions down, like sending to San Francisco and like that, unless they sent them on the Southern Pacific, it was a narrow gauge. That was way back when they started that. Then they had Port San Luis; passenger boats used to come in there – the *Santa Clara* and boats like that, and some would have lumber – the Dollar boats came in. And we lived in what they call the Sinsamer Ranch. It was right across from the San Luis Hot Sulphur Springs. They used to come there and bathe in this – what they did, they drilled for oil and the oil drill broke off, and in those days they didn't know how to get the drill out of a hole, and so they made it into this sulphur well. And this water smelled like rotten eggs, and a lot of people got cured of rheumatism.

Helen Dreyfus: And then you were born in Cayucos?

Joseph Canet: I was born in Cayucos. And then when we came to Sinsamer Ranch, my dad had about 250 acres of beans, and about 250 acres of barley, and we had plenty of cattle. We had about 50 head of horses. We had pigs and geese. And this was all adobe ground, and we had an old-fashioned apple orchard, that we never pruned, big tall trees, big red apples, like that. They don't have apples like that these days. After I got older, when the trees were gone, we'd planted beans where the trees were. We could have grafted those apples and kept them on growing. It would have been a wonderful apple to have.

Helen Dreyfus: Did you go to school down there?

Joseph Canet: I went to two schools. One school was on our ranch. Well, both schools were on our ranch. One school was at the Sea Canyon Road, and this was a canyon that went up and wound around and came around where they put that electric plant, Diablo Canyon. And we lived right next to a ranch called the Ray Ranch, and it was from Avila and Port San Luis clear up to Devil's Canyon.

Helen Dreyfus: There was no road along the coast then, was there?

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[5] Best guess of the name of the Canet ranch.

Joseph Canet: No. There were very few people allowed in there, and I was the choice one of the bunch, because their hogs used to get out and run wild – they had wild hogs that weighed 200 or 300 pounds – and they were mean. When we went to school, lots of times they used to tree us on the fence, to keep the hogs from coming after us. They'd hide in the brush like a dog, and when you come by, they come out growling. And there were a lot of wild horses, and my family was the only family around there that they would allow in the ranch. We could go anytime we wanted. Abalones that big, and we didn't even have to get wet to get them. And other people were not allowed in there at all, and the reason we were allowed was because whenever the cattle were out, we used to call them, we'd go down on horseback. It was about three miles down, by Avila. Just lately, my brother, my next-to my-oldest brother who was just 90, he owned practically all of that.

Another thing I want to tell you about this plant [Diablo Canyon] – that's a lot of baloney about this plant not being able to run. Because, you see, when Ray granted them a right-of-way, with a big, high fence so they couldn't go down and go over to the ocean and go up that way for 19 miles, that's what they call Devil's Canyon and my brother had about 12 acres right next to the government land. He sold it to the nuclear plant, but the reason that plant doesn't yield is because the people that put it up didn't know what they were doing. You could go in a bar and hear them talking, "I'm getting $14 a day, $16 a day, and I don't even know what I'm doing. They tell me what to do and I do it." And that's why it's all gone on the bum. Like they put a high-powered line from Devil's Canyon clear to Santa Maria, over the mountains, with a big helicopter that would take great big poles and put them up in there, and they put four big poles up and then put this huge transformer on the top, and then go to another one, with a cable that big.

Helen Dreyfus: Well, Joe, now we've got you pretty nearly through school, and then you went in the Navy when you got out of school?

Joseph Canet: No. I'm still home. Yes, I graduated when I was about 12 years old. And then my mother died; that was in 1910. I had always been the cook. We had a hired girl. When we used to cook bread, we used to cook bread in a pan about this wide, about two feet wide and about three feet long, and we never used flour to roll the rolls; we had our own lard. We made our yeast first, and then we would take a piece of lard, wash your hands good first, clean your fingernails, and then you'd roll it out like this, and then you'd make the rolls like that, with lard, and then it raised. You see, at that time, when we first went on this ranch, when I first was big enough to make bread, we were still next to the school. I'd been going there for about a year down a block and a half to school. And I used to set the bread when I went to school, and then at recess time, instead of playing, I'd run home and put the bread in the oven. Then the maid, the hired girl, would take it out, and that was it. I used to help with the cooking, and after my mother passed away, I was all alone in the house.

I had three brothers and a sister, and the sister lived with my aunt in San Anselmo. We had about six working men and my dad and my brothers, and they worked and I did the cooking, and in those days, a workman when he came in, sat down at a big long table with oilcloth on it. He wouldn't just have a pork chop and a piece of potato and maybe two slices of bread, he would have about four pork chops and maybe six, and he's still hungry. Then I used to hurry up and get through, and there was a stream where I used to go fishing. I used to get trout about that long, and I'd give the men trout and all like that. I knew how to make enchiladas, Spanish beans, and like that, rice, chili rice, empanadas you can make out of beans and out of fruit.

I had lots of time on my hands and I used to read quite a bit, and you know, I used to hear the sewing machine run, and so it was like that, and there was a captain that used to come and buy eggs for an oil tanker called the *Whittier*, and he said, "Why don't you take a trip with me sometime?" And I said, "Where?" And he said, "San Francisco." He said, "I go up to Oleum. You could go along, and stay in the cabin with me?" I said, "I'll ask my father." And so, I was like that for about six months, and I couldn't stay in the house. Every time I'd get in the house, I'd sit there and hear the sewing machine going, you know they pumped it with their feet. He come up again after eggs, and I said, "My father said I can go with you." So I went, and I never came back.

I'll tell you how green I was. You know the first place that sailors would go would be to the Barbary Coast, of course, and the Barbary Coast wasn't bad in those days; like I would rather go to the Barbary Coast than I would down Miller Avenue after one o'clock. That's right! You think I'm kidding? Well, I went with another fellow, and I left these mates standing in the street and here were these railroad rails, on California Street, and here comes a street car, down the hill, nothing in the middle, the middle was vacant, but both ends was seats. And after the car passed – he went ahead of the car when it was coming down, but I'm going to wait, so I took a good look at those rails, and I ran and I jumped over all three of them, because my cousin had told me that people got killed on the third rail, and for a whole year I jumped over the third rail. So then, when I came back, I told my dad what I'd done and he said, "Well, that's all right." He knew what the score was.

Then I ran away again, but this time I went to Antofagasta, Chile. One thing, I didn't know how to fight, because I never did fight. My brothers used to fight, but they never bothered me. And I was awful small for my age, and I got in a fight with a couple of mess-boys – I was a mess-boy on the *Colinga* – and I got the hell kicked out of me. There was an old Greek sailor who said, "I want to talk to you. You don't know how to fight, huh? If we ever go to Japan, I'll take you and show you how to fight." So we finally went to Japan. And at that time, they called it jiu-jitsu, and they called it stick-fighting, and they had long sticks that they'd fight with. Well, I didn't know nothing about yawara, or karate, or anything like that. I learned that, and I got pretty good, and I got myself a broom handle and I kicked the hell out of some of those big guys. They couldn't hit me because I was so damned small!

The *Colinga* was an English ship with an American crew on it. In those days, when they struck oil, way back you know, in Santa Maria, they piped that oil all the way to Port San Luis,

and that was their first refinery down there. They had two refineries: the Union Oil Company and the Standard, and then they ran out of oil. I talked to some drillers down there, and they said that if one of those oil wells stopped flowing, that if they didn't take big pine logs and drive them down with a pile-driver, they would drive the oil 45 miles a year out of the county, and that's what happened. Santa Maria, and all like that, that used to be all oil.

Well, then I went to the *Bear*, the *Beaver*, the *Rose City*, the Portland Steamship Company. I went as a steward on there, a waiter. You had so many people to take care of, and that ran from San Francisco to Portland and back to San Francisco and down to Los Angeles. And I did all right on it.

Helen Dreyfus: Was that a passenger line?

Joseph Canet: Yes. The *Beaver* and the *Bear* and the *Rose City*. The *Bear* went ashore in Eureka; it wrecked on this beach. And then the *Beaver* was taken over in the first war for a submarine mother-ship. Then I went on the *Northern Pacific*, the big boat, and I didn't like that because it went too fast – well, you'd lie on the bunk and your teeth would rattle. The only way you felt good was when you were on your feet. They went so fast, you see, they used to beat the train in from San Francisco to [word difficult to discern from recording] to Astoria.

[Editor's note: Thirty minutes or so of the recording appears to be missing here.]

Joseph Canet: When I first went into the [Police] Department, we used to have one policeman at night. There was only about five policemen, and two of them were specials. So that left you pretty well alone. So, the trouble was if you hit somebody, you had no car, either, you know, and this Taillight Andy, if you didn't have a tail-light, you got a ticket. Also, the first time I went, well, I had to go on a week's probation, and I was on hobo detail: live right with the hoboes, dress like a hobo; and I caught two guys from San Quentin that way. Well, then came my time to go on duty, on day watch. Reported in at 8 o'clock and were through at four, so everything was all right. I was doing all right. Down at the station they had a light, and when Central got a call, she had a log-book there, she'd write down what the call was, and when I saw the light on I'd come in and she'd give me the call. All right. So I was that way for a whole week, and that was fine, but I stayed right by the station, by the bell. So then the Chief told me, "Get around to the stores, and go in and tell them who you are. They like to have you come in."

So there was a pool room right up the street, with an opening as big as this room, right next to Esposti's. There was a door here and a door here, and a bar along here, and it was about that far from the street, and out here they had a gate that closed up, iron, with the locks on it. And I was going along, and – we called them pool room rats – a whole bunch of rats in there, waiting to see a stranger in town, and they'd try to coax him in and they'd take his money away from him. So, as I went by – you know what a raspberry is? The sound? I went as far as Dowd's, Dowd had about 15 head of horses in there. I had to check them every hour at night. So I was

going along; everything was fine. I thought, "Well, I've got to go by them again, because if they think I'm scared of them, they'll really give it to me." I'd go up every afternoon at 2 o'clock and get my raspberry, and then they'd have some strangers come down. So then I was that way for two weeks. I got the raspberry every day. Then I went on nights from 8 'til 4 in the morning, and I checked all my doors and everything, and then walking up and I met Roth, Freddy, the young one. He said, "Hi!" And I said, "Hi!" And he had one of those raspberry mouths. He used to be around the pool room all the time when he wasn't driving a taxi. So, I was right opposite the alley [going down into the back of Dowd's stables.]

"Would you come down to the alley?" I said, "I heard a couple of horses kicking in there." And when we got down in the dark, I gave him one of those pitty-pats, pushed him up against the side of the house and said, "If you ever make that noise again, I'll knock it right down your throat." And he got up and he run away. Along about two nights later, and I got another one. I got three of them, and I told every one to tell it to the rest of the guys, or "I'll give you some more." And after that, they did tell each other. They said, "I ended up against that building and I never even knew what hit me."

Helen Dreyfus: It's very handy for a policeman to know jiu-jitsu!

Joseph Canet: It was, all that time, and this finger here is all the hurt I ever got. This finger here, and that was my fault. I thought I was a fighter, and this Irish soldier from Ireland, he used to come in as a hobo. I met him as a hobo, and he used to come to the Catholic Church, and he'd come up to the Father, and the Father'd say, "Hello, Pat. How are you?" Princess Pat, we called him. "Eh, fine," he'd say. "How much do you want this time?" "Oh, $5 ought to do it." He'd go down to Quinn's, and he'd go in there, and then he'd be drunk, and then I had to take care of him.

Helen Dreyfus: Was there a hobo jungle around here, somewhere?

Joseph Canet: Sure. Down there to the left of where the Chinese market is now. There were a bunch of willows, and a big spring in there. Well, that was all willows. We never used to bother them, because we had the places marked where you had a dog, whether you're mean, whether you got something there or not, whether you had to chop wood, all marked. But anyhow, one thing about it, there were really some cooks there, though. One guy would bring bacon, one guy would bring a potato, one guy would bring vegetables, and they'd get a great big pot, and they'd put that on and boy! They'd really make a stew. And I saw one Portugee there. He took a Folger's coffee can about that big, and he made cornbread by setting it in a pail of water and putting it over a bonfire, and putting a cover on with some holes in it for the steam to come out. When he poured that out, it was the prettiest cornbread you ever saw in your life.

Helen Dreyfus: Once I asked Dan Terzich what he was going to do when he retired, and he told me, he hoped he'd do as well as you did, because you had a career cooking for people.

Joseph Canet: Well, yeah. Well, I used to cook for the Optimist Club. I never charged them. The Outdoor Art Club used to slip me something once in a while, but I used to go over there and cook for them.

Helen Dreyfus: And the Lions, I think?

Joseph Canet: No. How I come by the Lions, how I come to cook for that, when I retired – you remember the fellow that owned the market next to the flower shop?

Helen Dreyfus: DeLasaux.

Joseph Canet: DeLasaux! Well, DeLasaux was the one that got me in the Lions, and I went to visit or something like that, and he said, "Why don't you join?" And I said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "I belonged to the Moose one time, and I didn't like that. There's too much drinking." "There's a lot of drinking in the Lions, but you don't have to drink." Well, they talked it over and they said, "You're going to retire, well, we'll tell you what we'll do: we'll give you a life membership in the Lions for nothing." But I said, "What do I have to do? You going to have me out on the corner selling apples, and stuff like that? I won't do it. Bulbs? White canes? I won't do it. I don't like –"

Helen Dreyfus: I didn't know they did that stuff.

Joseph Canet: Sure they do. Well, they used to, and they do if they have to now. But anyhow, they have lots of things they sell. It's all for a good cause. And they said, "Well, you want to try it?" So I said, "I'll try it, but I'll tell you, I can make more money in one day than you can make in a whole month, out on the corner." "How you going to do it?" I said, "You just leave it to me." They said, "All right." So I said, "I need four men." So I got four men. I went to DeLasaux, who was on the Council, and I said, "I need a piece of ground out there in the park about 24 feet long, 4 feet wide, and some haydite bricks. You can use the haydite bricks afterwards, I just want to use them this one time." So I went out and these four guys helped me; DeLasaux was one of them, and Dan Terzich. So then we got some roll sticks, about that big around and 4 1/2 feet long, and made a ring around them, and we had chickens. I'll show you. It was $2.

Helen Dreyfus: [Reads from a leaflet] Joe Canet's Famous Barbequed Chicken with All the Trimmings. Adults $3.50, and then it was $2?

Joseph Canet: So we had the barbecue, and we made $500. Do you know how much we made at the second barbeque? $1,000.

Helen Dreyfus: That's when they gave up selling the apples and the white canes, Joe. They were on to a better thing.

Joseph Canet: Last year, they paid $3.50, and we took in $1,100. And we're in charge of the park now. All the playthings, all like that, we pay for. Fences, and everything like that, and we take care of the grass.

Helen Dreyfus: So you don't remember any stirring crimes that went on in Mill Valley while you were here?

Joseph Canet: Yes, there was one. We had a big fire here, the Big Fire, 1929, when it burnt half the town. I saw a piece in the paper where this Rita Burns, the old gal, you know, and another gal wrote an article where they were up watching the fire, and every time that the fire would hit a house, the chimney was the first thing that would explode. I got to thinking about that, so I read it over again and that's what it said, and you know what happened? I knew why it exploded. Because there was a still in there and the coils going up the chimney. At one time, they said that in Mill Valley, there were so many bootleggers that they had to wear stars to keep from selling it to each other! That's so.

Helen Dreyfus: I remember that there were a lot of bootleggers. Did you get off the force before the drug thing was coming up in Mill Valley? Did you ever have any trouble with that?

Joseph Canet: Not much. We had some trouble with it, not much.

Helen Dreyfus: Well, I think the Mill Valley police have always had pretty good sense. If people weren't bothering anybody else, they let them alone.

Joseph Canet: Well, I'll tell you. You know, if you talk to fellows like Dicky Varney, Jack Varney – go down to the Fire Department. Well, there were some in the Police Department. But, back when I had this traffic patrol, there was not one thing ever happened in the school. They had their own laws that they had to abide by, and from the time they started, to the time that they quit – I'll show you.[6]

Helen Dreyfus: Did you start that patrol?

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[6] Canet shows Ms. Dreyfus a scrapbook with pictures.

[Editor's note: A portion of the recording appears to be missing here.]

Helen Dreyfus: You were downtown at the time of that 1929 fire. What's your theory about what started it?

Joseph Canet: It started up from the railroad. They had coal – clinkers used to drop out.

Helen Dreyfus: They used to throw hot things in the brush?

Joseph Canet: No, you see, that was a clinker that fell out.

Helen Dreyfus: When did you start that Mill Valley School Police Patrol?

Joseph Canet: Let's see, I'll have to check that. Now, these uniforms used to cost nothing.

Helen Dreyfus: Oh, really!

Joseph Canet: Do you know who did that?

Helen Dreyfus: No.

Joseph Canet: A Jew named Links, that used to run Albert's.[7] Now all these fellows have got families and jobs.

Helen Dreyfus: You don't remember just when it was you started them?

Joseph Canet: No.

Helen Dreyfus: How long did it go on?

Joseph Canet: Oh, for years. Well, before the Edna Maguire school was opened. I had about 50 at a time [in the school patrol.] But this is the one that started. Well, Jack Varney now is retired, a long time. Well, when he went to the Army, when he was drafted, you know how long it took him to make captain?

Helen Dreyfus: No.

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[7] Mill Valley's first department store, on the corner of Miller and Throckmorton. Later, Meyer's and then the Casual Corner.

Joseph Canet: Three months.

Helen Dreyfus: No! Really?

Joseph Canet: He knew the drilling. All right. Now here, this is in front of the Masonic Hall, all these uniforms, and these uniforms, and these uniforms [Looks at pictures].

Helen Dreyfus: All given by Mr. Links?

Joseph Canet: Art Links.

Helen Dreyfus: Well, I don't think he ever got credit for it.

Joseph Canet: No, sir. He certainly did not.

Helen Dreyfus: They were good uniforms, too. That's very interesting.

Joseph Canet: Do you know how we made most of our money?

Helen Dreyfus: No.

Joseph Canet: The Portuguese Lodge! They used to give us $150 for a three-hour parade. The Greyhound Depot, run by Bond then, a bus would hold 45 people, and we had a bus and a driver. We paid him $5 or $10, the bus nothing.

Helen Dreyfus: And where did you parade?

Joseph Canet: Sausalito, Sebastopol, Cloverdale.

Helen Dreyfus: For heaven's sake! They just like to have a lot of kids in a parade.

Joseph Canet: And besides, we were fed and everything.

Helen Dreyfus: Joe, I've got to go. Thank you for giving me all this time.