

BOB AND WALTER FILIPPI

Interviewed by Harlan Soeten on
June 15, 1983 at Elroy Garage.

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BOB AND WALTER FILIPPI

Bud and Walter Filippi are the owners of Elroy Garage located on the corner of Sycamore and Camino Alto, Mill Valley, California. This interview is about their early recollections of the garages and school in the 1920's and 1930's. The interviewer is Harlan Soeten. The date is June 15, 1983, and the location is Elroy Garage.

Harlan Soeten: You're almost a native son? Going back to when?

Filippi: 1929. We moved to Mill Valley in 1929. The garage was opened in 1928.

Harlan S.: I'm interested in the history of this garage. Your father started it in 1928. Where did he come from?

Filippi: San Francisco. He had a garage in San Francisco.

Harlan S.: What motivated him to come to Mill Valley?

Filippi: Well, he wanted to get out of San Francisco at that time. He had a lot of men working for him and there were problems - stealing and everything. He said he wanted to get a little garage off by itself, where he just had one or two men working for him and that was it.

Harlan S.: Was your Dad native born?

Filippi: He was born in Italy. He came over here when he was 8 years old. He was born in 1892 and came over in 1900. He was here for the earthquake.

Harlan S.: I wonder how he got started in the automobile business?

Filippi: He was in it. He used to build racing cars.

Harlan S.: He was a pioneer.

Filippi: He worked on submarines in World War I and then he was working at the Union Iron Works, and that's what kept him out of the service. In fact, he enlisted and then they sent him back to work during World War I. So then he worked for Doherty Brothers' in San Francisco, who were one of the original Ford dealers in San Francisco.

Doherty Brothers are on Potrero Ave. in San Francisco. When he went to work for them, they didn't have a Ford dealership. I guess they didn't have Ford dealerships then. My father claimed he helped them, or got it for them, for Doherty. He didn't want it himself. He was a mechanic. He didn't want to run a business.

Harlan S.: I remember in the late 20's, living in Pasadena, a big radio program we all listened to was sponsored by Don Lee Cadillac.

Filippi: Oh, in San Francisco?

Harlan S.: Yes.

Filippi: Yes. I used to go to those Blue Monday Jamborees.

Harlan S.: Right!

Filippi: I remember we used to go with my mother when I was a little kid. She used to take us over there and we used to sit around and had a little platform - the kids would sit around the platform while people performed.

Filippi: On Don Lee Cadillac in San Francisco.

Harlan S.: Was your Mother born in Italy?

Filippi: No. She was born in Portugal. She came over when she was only 4 years old. I had aunts and uncles here in Mill Valley. Her sister is in Mill Valley, so she came to Mill Valley for a long time and went to school here, then moved to San Francisco with her Mother. Then later on, they moved back to Mill Valley.

Harlan S.: West Marin is filled with Portuguese.

Filippi: That's right. Costa - they used to have Costa Brother's Creamery. My uncle was one of the Costa brothers married to my mother's sister - the older sister. They lived right across - well, in fact, they lived - - do you know the old post office? Well, there was a house there and the post office took over part of their property and then tore the house down.

Harlan S.: Where did you live when you first came here?

Filippi: I lived right where the Bank of Marin is now. On Sunnyside and . . .

Harlan S.: Where there used to be a grocery store?

Filippi: Correct - - well, before it was a grocery store, it was a creamery. The Costa Brother's Creamery. They had milk and they had ice, and in the back they had coal and wood and milk. Later on, they closed up the Creamery and then they opened a grocery store for a number of years. We lived upstairs. They had a great big apartment upstairs when we first came here. We lived up there about two years.

Harlan S.: Grammar School age - what school did you have to go to?

Filippi: I went to Park School.

Harlan S.: It was a new school then?

Filippi: No. It only went to the 4th grade at the time. Then I went from Park School to Summit School, which is not there anymore. At Summit School I went for one year because 5th grade was in Summit. Summit went from Kindergarten to 5th grade and Old Mill School was 6th, 7th and 8th. So consequently, they were neighborhood schools - see, they weren't like Park School to the 4th grade. When you went to 5th grade, you had to go to Summit School. Old Mill is like a junior high, more or less.

Harlan S.: This is the Elroy Garage. Why isn't it the Filippi Garage?

Filippi: Well, originally, this was the Elroy Subdivision. The lady who owned it

Harlan S.: What originally?? What year are we talking about?

Filippi: 1928. The lady who originally owned all of this property - it went from here to Nelson Avenue and over to Whitefield and back - her name was Handley. I can't remember her first name, her last name was Handley. She had sons Al and Roy. She subdivided part of this property.

Harlan S.: Who was Elroy?

Filippi: Well, she had two sons Al and Roy so she named it the Elroy Subdivision.

Harlan S.: She kind of cheated on that first letter!!

Filippi: See, this was the 101 Highway here at the time.

Harlan S.: Is that right? For goodness sake!! Then where do you go over the hill?

Filippi: You used to go through Corte Madera, Larkspur - to San Rafael.

Harlan S.: It didn't follow that winding road over the hill now?

Filippi: Yes! That was the 101 Highway. It was two lanes. They used to come through where the swimming pool is at Tam. The road used to come through there. Almonte Boulevard used to come right through. The school was separated by 101 Highway. In other words, the School was on one side and the gym, swimming pool and the ball fields were on the other side.

Harlan S.: What year did they put Highway 101 in its present location?

Filippi: 1933, where they changed it and then there was a 3-lane, but they still had the old highway coming through where the swimming pool is. They changed that in the last 20 years maybe - 15 years. Where they put the swimming pool in, they closed the road off.

Harlan S.: When they opened the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937, did that have any major effect on your Dad's business? When did you take over the business?

Filippi: Walt and I took over in 1958.

Harlan S.: Your Dad was working up to then?

Filippi: Yes. It was '58, or the first part of '59 when Walt and I took over the business. My Dad retired. He was 65 and he was slowing down before that. So we were pretty much running the business then, but he still owned it 'til the latter part of '58 or the latter part of '59 when we took over.

Harlan S.: Well, before this place was subdivided here, was this pasture or what?

Filippi: Originally, Sycamore was just a dirt road when my Dad opened up here. Then, they put Sycamore in, and had a nice wide road here before they ever put any homes in. In fact, I was in high school in the '30's, about 1937 or 1936 when they put in Sycamore here - the wide Sycamore. This was the best road in Mill Valley for a long time - all cement. What happened is that they put in a sewer and they fouled up. It wouldn't run up hill, so they had to dig it up again. That really tore up the street. Then the floods didn't help any. The land across the street was all marsh. The old dumps were right across the way here at one time.

Harlan S.: Then the marsh would be an overflow of the creek?

Filippi: Correct.

Harlan S.: Was the land made use of - was there any pastureland?

Filippi: No, not here. It was a dump originally. Then they moved the dump across the way here - out where the school area is - that was the dump later on. There was a pig farm right across the way too.

Harlan S.: Where was the pig farm?

Filippi: Right across the street.

Harlan S.: Where the school is?

Filippi: That's right. Oh, the aroma you got when the wind changed and blew this way.

Harlan S.: What would be the year of the pig farm?

Filippi: Oh, before the War - must have been about 1938 or 1937.

Harlan S.: They had pig farms in the City.

Filippi: Well, that's the time Uncle Sam was paying not to produce too many. I remember the guy said "My gosh, he was paying me not to raise them." That must have been in the middle '30"s. Henry Wallace was Secretary of Agriculture. The end of the depression and things were . . . they always wrote my Dad big checks that he'd get from the government. It seems to me that one of them was for \$5,000. In those days, \$5,000 was something!!

Harlan S.: It would have bought you a big home.

Filippi: Darn right! That's what these homes sold for - less than that around here - the originals. In 1941, they were building them for \$4,500. One of them was more because one of the contractors had built it for his daughter. It was a fancier house - he put more into it. It was worth it-seems to me-\$6,000.

Harlan S.: On the garage, what kind of competition did you have in the early days that is not going 'way back?

Filippi: Well, when he first opened up here, we had up at the next corner here - where the car lot/gas station is - there was a gas station there and they used to do repair work.

Harlan S.: Who was that? What was his name?

Filippi: Santo - no, was that Santos - - it was Santas. He was the last one I remember.

Harlan S.: And where was this location?

Filippi: Where the gas station is across from Der Weinerschnitzel.

Harlan S.: Redwood?

Filippi: Yeah, right. There was a gas station there. They used to do repair work too - light repair work.

Harlan S.: There was a Mohawk there when I came.

Filippi: Later on it was Mohawk, correct. But these fellows had it, Santos was one of them. I can't remember the other - Vic Avilla, I think, was one of them at one time too.

Harlan S.: What was that name?

Filippi: Vic Avilla, he worked for the school district for years and years and he retired . . .

Harlan S.: That sounds Spanish??

Filippi: He's Portuguese.

→ Portuguese

Harlan S.: Santos is Portuguese, too?

Year. Right.

Harlan S.: OK. We are looking at a picture of Walt's First Grade class. This was in?

Filippi: That would be 48 years ago.

Harlan S.: Where are you Walt?

Filippi: Extreme left in the third row.

Harlan S.: Is that it? And where is Art Shallock?

Filippi: Let's see - - right there in the back. I'll mark that.

Harlan S.: I guess a number of these people are still around the Valley?

Filippi: Oh yeah. Several of them showed up at that reunion.

Reverend Moden.

Raymond Modin.

Harlan S.: Who owns the negative of this - the original?

Filippi: We are looking at a Polaroid; Ed Roseveare. I know a Lee Roseveare who lives down the way here. His father had the Egger Nursery. His brother has it now.

Harlan S.: What's the name?

Filippi: Egger.

Harlan S.: Oh! Egger's for heaven's sake! You say Roseveare - there's a Lee Roseveare that lives down in

Filippi: That's his brother.

Harlan S.: Well, he would be 40 years old or so.

Filippi: Yeah, well he's a 45 maybe or close to 50.

Harlan S.: Now, Roseveare owns the original of this. Well, then we can get it from him. I'd like to get a copy so then we can identify the crowds and put it on the back....or the original one. That would be the thing to do. Well, they don't look too much different than they would today.

Filippi: Dick Varney at the Sunset Varney Hardware.

Harlan S.: Where's Varney?

Filippi: Right there.

Harlan S.: He's not connected with the hardware any more at all is he?

Filippi: No, he sold that business out, then he had the Color Center over here on Miller.

Harlan S.: Oh, did he?

Filippi: That was sold to a daughter.....

Harlan S.: Back to a little about the garage. Is there any major difference in the work, the operation, the whole thing in the 40 years you've been involved?

Filippi: No. We try to keep it about the same type of business.

Harlan S.: Neighborhoods around here - are they about the same?

Filippi: No. Times have changed. They are putting out different cars now and equipment is a lot different. Prices are different. You used to file them and clean the plugs and that was it. Well, at one time, I could do a little work on my car. Now, I wouldn't even try to do anything. I wouldn't try to change plugs even. My car would have stalled on the freeway and wouldn't start. Now, they have an electronic control - controls the whole timing - and fuel and everything now.

Harlan S.: Well, is there work that comes in here now that you can't cope with?

Filippi: Oh sometimes. You've got all this equipment for each car. Each make of car has its own hook-up for testing.

Harlan S.: Oh, for testing.

Filippi: You spend \$25,000 for a unit to test; then again some guys call us and want to know if we've had any problems. They have their own equipment and can't keep it in running order.

Harlan S.: Do you work on foreign cars too?

Filippi: Yes, of course, but we didn't have them in the old days. Now about 50% of the business is foreign cars.

Harlan S.: Especially in Mill Valley.

Filippi: If it wasn't for the foreign cars, we would probably be out of business.

Harlan S.: If there were fewer foreign cars, there would be more American.

Filippi: You stand on the corner and watch the cars go by and 80%, 90%, 50%, 60% are foreign - if not more.

Harlan S.: I live up on Marion and I'm one of the few in the neighborhood who has an American car. One of the very few.

Filippi: I bought a Ford and I thought it was made in America - and, found out it was made in Canada. My brother's '72 Dodge is made in Canada. My son has a Dodge van and the rear springs are made in Japan. So there's no such thing as an American car. Those things have changed.

Harlan S.: Yes that change is not only in Mill Valley, but everywhere.

Looking at pictures of Elroy's Garage - now, that's pretty recent. I see a 1970 car there. This is your Dad's garage in San Francisco - that was on what street?

Filippi: I was just a little kid then. I don't remember what street. It was near Potrero?? Something like that. My brother will remember.

Harlan S.: This is San Francisco too, I gather?

Filippi: What was the street that shop was on? San Bruno Ave.? That one there is on Third; yeah, that's San Bruno Ave. right there. It's a garage now. This one here, this was called the Southern Garage; this was his first garage when he first opened up. When he left Doherty Brothers, he opened up Southern Garage and it was on Third Street out in Bay View - Butcher Town.

Harlan S.: Where did you live at the time?

Filippi: Up on Newcomb Avenue.

Harlan S.: I know where that is. That's now the black section of town.

Filippi: It was all Irish, Italian and French. Some of those Germans got in there too.

Harlan S.: That's what is generally known as Butcher Town.

Filippi: My mother used to say "When you didn't know where you were in the fog, you opened your window of the car and you could smell the odor and you could see the cattle lined up to go up those chutes right near there someplace. It used to be Allen's on Third St. - Allen's Slaughter House. Do you remember that?"

Harlan S.: No, I don't remember it as being Allen's, but I remember the slaughter house there and the cattle going up the ramp - going up to the second floor. Terrible stench!!

Filippi: Then they had a tannery. I can remember and I was 4 years old, but I can remember that odor. Then, I guess the tannery smells too. The Marion can company was all in there, so there's a lot of industry

Harlan S.: That is where some of the changes have taken place in the San Francisco neighborhoods from Butcher Town - Irish, North Beach - now, it's black and oriental.

Filippi: By Elko there, my father's oldest brother lost his home in the earthquake and they moved out to Butcher Town. There was a hill called Irish Hill in Butcher Town. That's where he had some cattle on Irish Hill, I understand. Wherever that is! And there were all of these small, little truck farms out there. There was a lot of French/Italian and Maltese out there too. There was a Maltese church on the next street from us. There was a lot of Irish scattered around too. The Queens were Irish.

Harlan S.: What would be a Maltese church? It wouldn't be a Catholic Church would it?

Filippi: Maltese - - it's something like a Catholic Church, but it's Catholic with their own nationality, their own language church. They've done away with a lot of those national churches. Some areas have them still, I guess. Sacramento has a Portuguese church.

Harlan S.: Well there's a Russian Church here in . . .

Filippi: Well, that Russian Orthodox is different. Where is that in San Francisco?

Harlan S.: There's one in San Anselmo. My wife's a Greek Orthodox. One Christmas she suddenly decided she had to go to church. Before they started the one that's in Ignacio now, she went there thinking it was Greek Orthodox.

Filippi: Where was this?

Harlan S.: I can't remember what street it's on in San Anselmo - right off the main street. You go down towards the hill - it's three or four blocks off the Seminary and down that way there. It's small. It's not a big place. You can recognize it as being a church but it's in a residential neighborhood.

Filippi: And you can tell it's eastern with the dome - onion dome. I can't tell Morocco/Turks - who was it that used those originally? I have always identified it with Russians. Before that, because you see it in Spain.

Harlan S.: The Moors.

Filippi: That's it. The Moors started that, I think.

Harlan S.: Started what?

Filippi: Those domes like that.

Harlan S.: I suspect that was farther east. Constantinople and where the religions started.

Filippi: Well, when this building was put up, they had already a little store next door. It started with sandwiches. No, actually it was only a little summer house and they made a sweet shop out of it. When this place was built, they made them put all this tile here. They didn't want an ugly looking building here. So, all this tile had to be put on the front and side.

Harlan S.: Well, that was kind of pioneering in civic architecture in those days.

Filippi: In those days, they were even tough.

Harlan S.: Well, that's Mill Valley. Yeah, well, that's a good idea. Looks nice. What year would that be?

Filippi: 1928.

Harlan S.: That early!

Filippi: Next door here was just a little summer cottage, originally. Then they built a store there. They didn't want any ugly building here, so we put in that tile.

Harlan S.: I was on the Planning Commission a few years ago and Taco Bell was going to put a place on Miller Ave. We said you couldn't use that ugly looking yellow. We had to go and change the architecture and they refused to do it, and they were going to sue the City. I remember the fellow in the Planning Dept.. The lawyer said "We've got 360 Taco Bells and they all look exactly the same and we're going to have one here that's going to look exactly like the rest of them."

Filippi: Well, this McDonald's down here doesn't have the big arches either.

Harlan S.: Sign ordinance says you can only have so many square feet of sign and it can't be above your roof line and all this kind of stuff.

Filippi: Speaking of signs - see this name here over our door? When we had this building painted, they went and painted over that, so we couldn't put the sign back the same size. It had to be brought inside the door. If we had gone out and painted over it, we could keep the same sign. Bureaucracy! You know, that's kind of stupid.

Harlan S.: Well, the rules are this and they don't

End of the tape.

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