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MILL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

ALICE CAVALLI

An interview conducted by

Paul DeFremery

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*Alice Cavalli*

*ORAL HISTORY*

*As told to Paul de Fremery  
April 1992*

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ALICE CAVALLI

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*Bickerstaff ranch, Larkspur's first house, built in 1852*

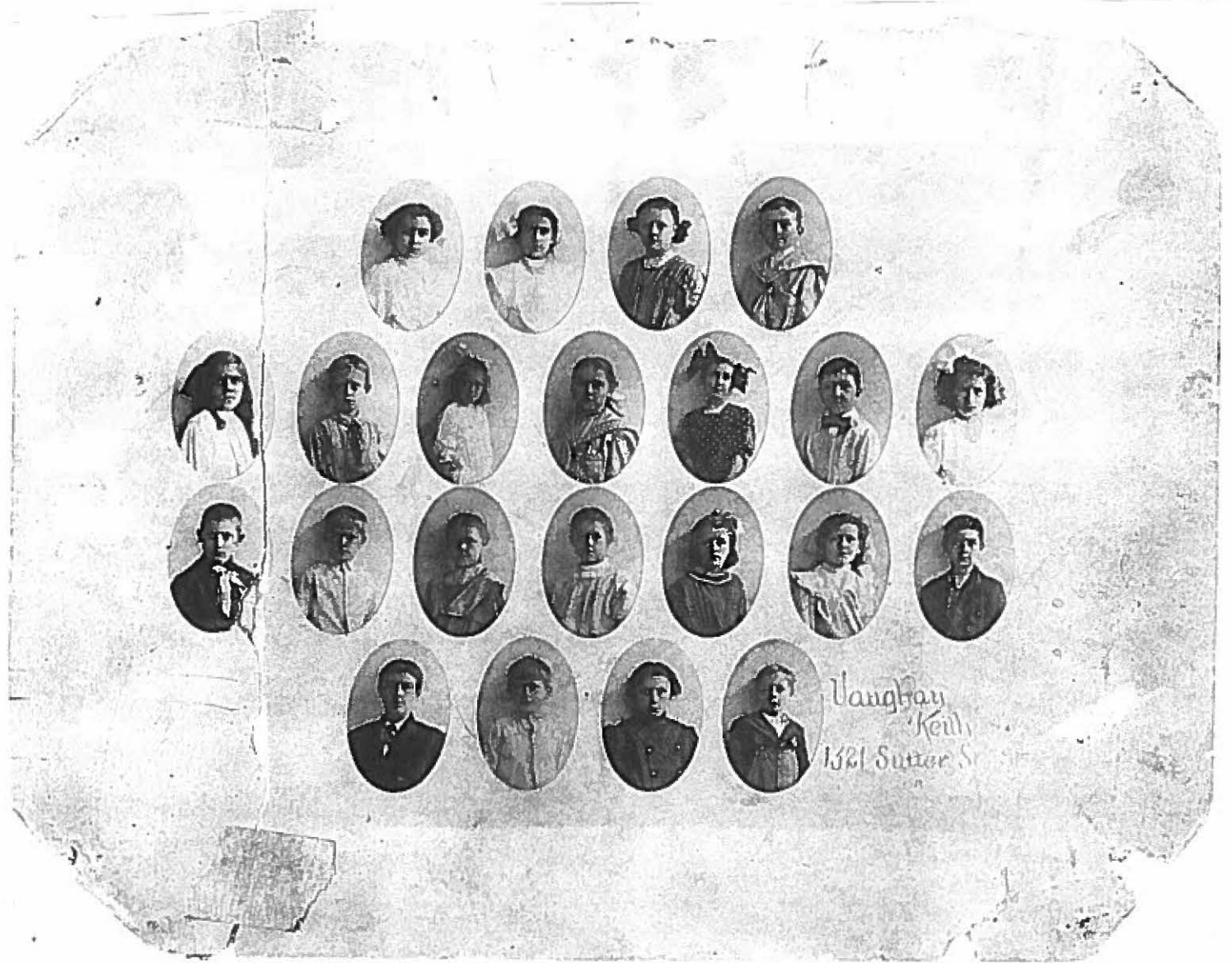
My Grandfather, Jonathan Bickerstaff, was a very early resident of Marin County. Very likely, he came to California before the gold rush of 1849, because he was one of the settlers who took possession of portions of John and Hilaria Reed's Rancho Tamalpais after John Reed died and the United States Land Commission concluded that their grant was invalid. It is said that Jonathan came on to California after serving in the cavalry during the Mexican-American war.

To the best of our knowledge Jonathan Bickerstaff was English, but he must have visited Ireland for he had a sweet heart there, Anna Murphy, whom he brought over here. Jonathan farmed on the Rancho Tamalpais land until Hilaria Reed's daughter, Hilarita, traveled to Washington and successfully fought the government for the land. Hilarita returned to her mother with a grant consisting of the original land plus about the same amount of acreage in addition to it.

After learning that the land upon which he was living belonged to Hilaria Reed, Bickerstaff decided to move to what is now Larkspur, where he bought a ranch that stretched from Magnolia Avenue to the site of Redwood High School. We know that Jonathan sent for Anna, but we don't know anything about her journey from Ireland to California. Was it direct, by boat around South America? Did she sail to Panama, cross the Isthmus and take another ship north to San Francisco bay? Certainly, she couldn't cross the continent alone; so she probably sailed south and stayed on one ship all the way. It is conjecture, of course, but she was on a daunting trip for a young Irish woman. It seems likely that she would have avoided the uncertainties of arranging transportation for herself and her belongings across Panama and negotiating passage north on a new ship. At any rate, there is a story that my father must have told that she and Jonathan found each other in Sacramento, where they were married. Evidently, he had spent a little time in the gold fields while she was traveling.

So, we assume, Jonathan took Anna directly to what was to become the Bickerstaff ranch in Larkspur, and that she never lived with him in West Marin. In 1852, he built the first house erected there. It was located approximately across the street from the Lark Theater on what was then a little knoll. The house was originally built of adobe, but was later faced with brick. Both the knoll and the house are gone now, but we have a picture of the house as it looked after the second story was added to it.

(Facing page)



*Grade Class of 1909  
PARK SCHOOL*

*Above: Tamalpais Park School class photograph,  
taken in 1909.*

*Alice Bickerstaff  
Third row from top - Third from right*

Alice Cavalli - ORAL HISTORY

[Editor's note: In those days, S. F. Bay waters came to within about 50 feet of the house. It is possible that the mound upon which the house sat was an Indian Mound that had been formed from shells and other detritus over thousands of years of human habitation.]

Grandmother and grandfather raised four boys and girls in that house. My father, Joe Bickerstaff, was born there in 1860. It was a prosperous farm with 50 head of dairy cows and 10 or 12 horses.

Father apprenticed himself to a Sausalito blacksmith when he was a young man, but after two years he took a good position as a machinist in the Pacific Rolling Mill Company in San Francisco. Then he joined the San Francisco Bridge company, where he served as storekeeper and clerk during the construction of The Ferry Building and the dry dock at Mare Island. Later, he served in the same capacity for the Coffin-Redington Drug Company.

Father had married New York born Minnie O'Shea early in the years he spent in San Francisco. Together they raised seven of us children. An eighth child, Edward, died as an infant. I was the youngest and am the only one left now. There were two brothers - Joe (Sonny) and Tommy. We girls names in order of age were Kitty, Lulu, Jule, Frances, and Alice. We lived somewhere in the southern part of the city, but we left there when I was too young to remember much about it. It was in 1906 that we left.

The earthquake and fire must have been pretty hard on our family because we came to Mill Valley to live with a cousin (of Joe's) by the name of Walter Allen. He had a grocery store on Blithedale and we lived in a tent on Gardner Street for a time. We named that place "Campanola". Then we moved to a cottage on Hill Street. The family home at 11 Hill Street was built about 1915.

Father became a Deputy Sheriff of the county after they moved back to Marin. For a time, he worked at San Quentin, where he experienced an attempted break out, during which he was hit on the head. He also worked as a carpenter during those years when many houses were built in Mill Valley.

"JOE'S PLACE" On Dipsea Trail was a popular tavern at Muir Woods that my father owned and ran for 25 years. It was at the entrance to Muir Woods. Some of the structure still stands as part of the buildings at the left of the road at the bottom of the hill just before you turn right to enter The Park. My Sister, Frances, and I used to work at "JOE'S PLACE". As the sign in the picture I am giving you for copying says, there were refreshments, good eats & drinks, while dancing was free on the outdoor pavilion. Look closely. You will see a couple dancing at the right side of the picture. Frances and I are at the bottom left behind the seated girl, and Dad's picture is in the inset. He was a part time Deputy Sheriff in San Rafael who always dressed like



"JOE'S PLACE"  
ON DIPSEA TRAIL  
FOR  
GOOD EATS & DRINKS  
DANCING FREE.

REFRESHMENTS  
JOE'S PLACE



Alice Cavalli - ORAL HISTORY

a forester. He truly loved hunting and fishing. I remember many parties at that old place.

Of course, working and partying at "JOE'S PLACE" happened after I was an older girl. I attended school at Summit School, Park School and Tamalpais High. I particularly remember playing basketball at Summit, and making thread from the silk of silk worms we raised by feeding them mulberry leaves.

FACING PAGE CAPTION

"JOE'S PLACE"  
On Dipsea Trail

This was near Muir Woods  
Behind the seated figure at lower left corner,  
Alice is on the left and sister Frances on the right  
Joe Bickerstaff is in the inset

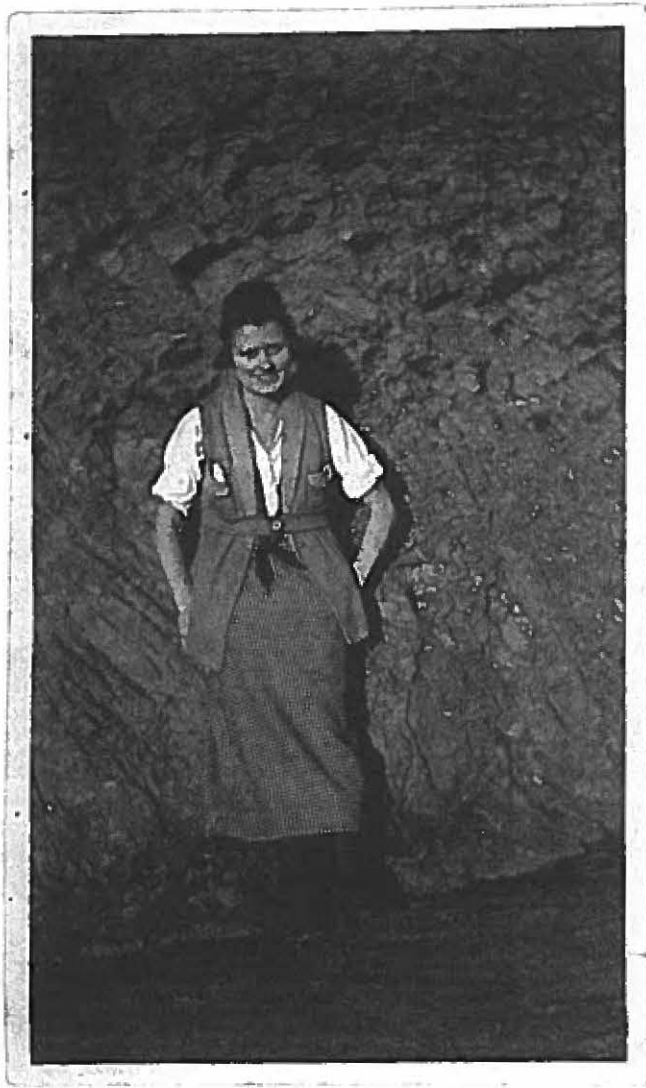
Notice couple dancing at right. Sign over door says "ARGONNE"

You ask how I came to meet my husband? A boy by the name of Hugh Cavalli started coming to the house with my older brother, Tommy. Hugh went to school in S. F. We both worked part time at "JOE'S PLACE", but I particularly remember that he liked to come over and play cards with my mother and me.

Did we marry soon? No! We waited a long time. That was foolish! After Tam, I worked for six or seven years at the First National Bank in San Francisco. It was on Market Street. I commuted by train from here to Sausalito where we met the ferry, which took us to the foot of Market Street. I usually walked from there to the bank because it wasn't far. By the way, the First National Bank was bought by Crocker Bank, which is now part of Wells Fargo.

Hugh Cavalli and I were married on July 6, 1925 and moved into a house in San Francisco at Gough and Francisco Streets. It is part of the Marina District. It is interesting, I think, that both Hugh and I were descendants of people who came to California before the Gold Rush of 1849. I stopped working after we were married, except that the bank still asked me to come in as a part time replacement when they were busy.

In 1915, we moved to 11 Hill Street in Mill Valley in time to be here for the 1928 fire on Mt. Tamalpais. That stays in my memory. It was frightening. One of our big purchases in our early married life was a Chinese rug. I remember rolling it up and putting it in the car so it would be saved if we had to leave in a hurry.



ALICE BICKERSTAFF  
Muir Woods  
March 16, 1919

Alice Cavalli - ORAL HISTORY

Now, we settled into married life. Our two children, Glenn and Carol were born and grew up. Hugh commuted to San Francisco, where he worked for Liggett & Meyers. They had a cigarette factory at Fourth and Bryant for many years. Hugh was traffic manager there during the very busy years of World War II. After some years, we built a house on Montecito near the golf club. Both Hugh and I loved golf. I also loved the game of bridge, though Hugh didn't. For vacations we liked to get in the car and go someplace like Reno. Because of Hugh's position during the war, a steamship company gave us a free trip to Vancouver on a freight line. There were only 12 passengers.

Besides these things I have been telling you, do I have any glimpses of life in Mill Valley that deserve to be mentioned just because they live in memory? Even though there is no special story to tell with them? Well, yes I'll try:

The candy store across from the bank on Throckmorton -- Kingwell's!

Costa Brothers Creamery. They had milk in cans. Also, I did some bookkeeping for them before I was married.

Outdoor dances at The Larkspur Rosebowl. We went over in Dowd's jitney.

The Crookedest Railroad. Steaming up & the gravity ride down.

The Thoney boys that worked on the train.

My brother, Tommy, returning from World War I

\* Montecito was part of SF area