

Oral History Committee
Mill Valley Historical Society

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ELIZABETH MULLER MIELENZ

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

GENE STOCKING

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH MULLER MIELENZ

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Today is June 5, 1998, and I am Gene Stocking and I am with Elizabeth Muller Mielenz, better known as Betty, at the Drake Terrace in San Rafael.

Gene Stocking:

Where and when were you born?

Elizabeth Muller Mielenz:

I was born in San Francisco, but brought right over to Mill Valley, on August 30th in 1912.

G.S.

How and when did your family come to Mill Valley?

E.M.M.

I think my folks came in 1905 and they rented a little house at 114 Hillside Avenue. And then they bought a lot and built on Buena Vista and Oakdale...two street frontages.

G.S.

And what were your parents' names?

E.M.M.

My father's name was William Muller...no middle name, and my mother's name was Elizabeth Haste Muller. My brother's name was William Haste Muller.

G.S.

I remember you telling me that your folks bought the lot between Oakdale and Buena Vista and they came over picnicking.

E.M.M.

That's right, and then they built a little summer home on it...on the upper part of the

property so that they would have a view of San Francisco.

G.S.

Tell us a little bit about what your mother and father did at the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

E.M.M.

Oh, that was funny. They were at the 1915 exposition...my father had a regular job in the insurance business, but he helped my mother at night while my mother worked at the exposition which she did all during the fair. They sold Penkala Pencils which were made in Yugoslavia, and they did quite well and enjoyed it a lot. We lived in San Francisco during that time and I was taken care of by a nursemaid.

G.S.

I believe you said that Penkala Pencils were the first automatic pencils in the United States.

E.M.M.

That's right.

G.S.

Who were some of your neighbors when you lived on Oakdale?

E.M.M.

Mrs. Loudon, of course, and Mrs. Helmore, the Seymours, the McConnells...

G.S.

And my mother...

E.M.M.

Oh, Mrs Roseveare was my good friend. When I was a little girl, even...Lillian Roseveare.

G.S.

Right. What was Mill Valley like when you were a little girl?

EMM.

It was so different...the streets weren't paved very well, and one thing I always remember is that I used to like to play in the mud puddles. It was just really rugged.

G.S.

Do you recall any particular event or celebrations at that time?

E.M.M.

Well, Mrs. Loudon used to take us on May Day up to Kentfield and we used to dance around the May Pole.

G.S.

That was quite an event, wasn't it? I believe schools from all over the county attended that. And how did you get there?

E.M.M.

I believe we went on the train.

G.S.

What Mill Valley schools did you attend?

E.M.M.

I went to Old Mill, to Park School and to Summit.

G.S.

And what teachers stand out in your memory?

E.M.M.

Oh, my gosh, I had lots of them. Belle Abraham, in particular, she was a wonderful lady.

G.S.

Do you remember some of your classmates?

E.M.M.

Well, the Loudon girls...Eleanor Loudon...and so many others...there were Lotta

Sporleder and Elizabeth Swearingen who lived on Catalpa, and Elizabeth Reed who lived on Roosevelt.

G.S.

What did you do for fun after school?

E.M.M.

Oh, in those days we used to go to the store on the way home and we would buy candy and then we would walk home eating the candy...nothing special. I do remember that we used to go up to the Russian river camping in the early 30's. You, Gene, went with my father and me. My father worked a half-day on Saturdays as did most men. We would meet him at the train station in Mill Valley with the car loaded for our camping trip. We stopped in Sebastopol and bought porter house steaks which my dad fried in a cast iron frying pan on a coleman stove. They were served with fried potatoes and onions. We had helped our selves to windfall apples as we went by the apple orchards in Sebastopol and made applesauce for dessert. We camped near the train tracks at Guernewood Park and waved at the trains as they passed on their way to Duncan Mills. Later my folks bought a cabin and then a lot and built a cabin on the lot in that area. It was a popular vacation area at that time with many Mill Valley families owning summer cabins there...including the Seymours and the Helmores.

I believe, after we sold the cabin that my parents built, that the cabin floated away in one of the bad winter storms.

G.S.

What was Tamalpais High School like when you were there?

E.M.M.

I thought it was the best school in the world...Mr. Wood was always there looking out for us. The students from other towns came on the "special" which was the train that came

down to Tam High and we took the train from Mill Valley...that was when we could get it on time, otherwise we would walk. We wore uniforms...navy blue skirts and white middy blouses that had navy blue sailor collars.

G.S.

Who were your special friends in high school?

E.M.M.

Eleanor Loudon, Mary McCurdy and Aida de Veuve.

G.S.

Mary McCurdy later became the Dean of Women at Tamalpais High School.

E.M.M.

Yes, she took a temporary job there and by that method she got in because the next year a teacher died.

G.S.

Where did you go on to for your higher education?

E.M.M.

Well, actually, I ended up at the University of California, but before that I tried different things. I went to College of Marin for a year and got my secondary teaching credential at U.C. Berkeley and my general elementary and junior high credential at San Francisco State which I attended after graduating from U.C. Berkeley.

G.S.

Where was your first teaching job?

E.M.M.

In Mill Valley at Homestead School.

G.S.

Who were some of the teachers and administrators at that time?

E.M.M.

Mr. Huffman was the administrator...Pearl Hildebrand was one of my favorite teachers
G.S.

And you substituted for her for one year when she was ill, didn't you? In fact, when you did that, you taught me. And then later, you taught our children.

E.M.M.

That's right!

G.S.

Did you have any outstanding students?

E.M.M.

You for one! Chip Collins became a famous doctor and Jane Marsh, the opera singer were also my students.

G.S.

What schools did you teach in?

E.M.M.

I taught at Old Mill, Park, Edna Maguire and Homestead. I started out teaching Fourth Grade, then I taught Fifth Grade, and then I taught Seventh...those are the grades I taught. I taught remedial reading and started the library at Old Mill. I was art supervisor at Edna Maguire School, too.

G.S.

I can remember children telling about the wonderful trip they had to Old Mill Park...they were studying California History.

E.M.M.

That's right...they had the Old Mill there and so I colored a lot of rocks gold and placed them in the creek...Mr. Kott, one of the parents, made a gold cradle and we went down to the creek and panned for gold. We got a write up in the Independent with pictures.

Oh, we had fun...the kids all remembered that.

G.S.

Was Marion Scotio your school secretary at that time?

E.M.M.

No, not when I first taught at Old Mill, she was there later when I taught at Old Mill in the 1950's...she retired in the late 1970's.

G.S.

Do you have any other interesting tales about teaching school?

E.M.M.

Oh, there are lots of them, but none come to mind right now.

G.S.

What do you recall about the Mountain Railroad?

E.M.M.

That's something else again! Eleanor and Joannie Loudon's grandfather was the superintendent of the Mountain Railroad at that time so we would get to go up to the summit free...we went up on the railroad and then down to Muir Woods on the gravity car and we would play down there all day and then they would pick us up when they brought the gravity cars back up at the end of the day.

G.S.

Do you remember his name?

E.M.M.

Yes, William Thomas. He was Mrs. Loudon's father.

G.S.

I understand that he had a brilliant mechanical mind. Do you remember the big fire in 1929?

E.M.M.

Oh, do !! We didn't get hit, but my aunt did...my Aunt Lou...that was my mother's sister, Louise Odgers...she lived at 219 West Blithedale Avenue. The roof on her house caught on fire twice during the 1929 fire. We took all her furniture out and brought it to our house. I remember the embers...the red embers just covered our place. I thought we were going to have a fire for sure.

G.S.

Are there any particular shops or stores that stand out in your memory?

E.M.M.

Pritchard's...I liked the daughter...we went out together a lot. It was a dry goods store.

Lynn Pritchard and his sister Florence.

G.S.

Where did your mother buy her groceries? At Pacific Market?

E.M.M.

No...she bought some things at Suey Kee's and also the Mill Valley Market which was Charley Cervelli's Market in those days. They were easy going...we charged candy on our way home and would treat everybody...finally that got taken care of and I couldn't do that anymore.

G.S.

What was downtown Mill Valley like when you were growing up?

E.M.M.

Oh, it was more fun...a nice place. It had the train depot and the mountain railroad depot, Lytton Square...all those things. Pritchard had a dry goods store there right near Lytton Square.

G.S.

You said that you had a brother named Bill. Who was he married to?

E.M.M.

He was married to Ruth Ziegler. They had one daughter who lives today in Mill Valley...her name is Susan Basho.

G.S.

What is your husband's name?

E.M.M.

Harvey Mielenz...we were married over fifty-six years ago...fifty-seven years coming up.

G.S.

What are the names of your daughter and your grandchildren?

E.M.M.

My daughter's name is Carol Edmiston and she had two children...a boy who is now married...his name is Robert. And her daughter's name is Lisa. Robert lives in Sacramento. He graduated from Sacramento State. Lisa is getting her teaching credential in another week from Sonoma State University, having graduated from the University of California at San Diego. My daughter Carol is a teacher in the high school in Terra Linda and she teaches computer and computerize accounting. Both my daughter and my niece Susan Muller Basho are past honored queens of the Mill Valley Job's Daughters, a Masonic organization for young girls.

G.S.

Looks like you're going to have three generations of teachers.

E.M.M.

Actually, we have more because of my father's family...they were teachers in Germany.

G.S.

And what year did you leave Mill Valley to come up to Terra Linda?

E.M.M.

It was thirty years ago that we moved into the Terra Linda area.

G.S.

Are there any other facts that you would like to tell us about growing up in Mill Valley?

Going back to your childhood, were there any girls' organizations that you belonged to?

E.M.M.

I belonged to the Campfire Girls and Mrs. Hedwig Sporleder was our leader. I belonged to Job's Daughters in San Rafael...I went up there by train. When I was at Cal I belong to the Beta Phi Alpha Sorority. When I was a teacher, I belonged to the Marin County Teachers' Association, and I became president of the Mill Valley Teachers' Association. I was a long time member of the Outdoor Art Club, serving as President in 1974-1975.

G.S.

You spoke about Mary McCurdy Baker. Can you tell us a bit about her father...he was a Mill Valley police chief, wasn't he? Also, what about her brother?

E.M.M.

Yes, her father was Alex McCurdy. They lived in Homestead and had a beautiful ranch there. Mary's brother was Bill McCurdy. He was a track star at Harvard University. After graduating from Harvard, he taught there at the university.

G.S.

Another one of your friends was Aida de Veuve Burke...and Aida was also a teacher, wasn't she?

E.M.M.

Yes, she was. She lived in Larkspur and she passed away recently.

G.S.

I believe you had something to do with the naming of Edna Maguire School, didn't you?

E.M.M.

I was president of the Mill Valley Teacher's Association and we were at dinner one

evening with Edna Maguire and I got to tell her that the new school was to be named after her. She said, "You mean I am still alive and I am having a school named after me?"

G.S.

Who were the Helmores that you mentioned.

E.M.M.

They lived on Oakdale Avenue and he was a judge in Sausalito...his name was Paul Helmore. His wife was Ada. Dorothy was their oldest child, then Stanley and then Mary Louise.

G.S.

And about the Seymours?

E.M.M.

The Seymours lived next to the Helmores...it was Kent Seymour and his wife Minnie...they were good friends to me. There were the McConnells who lived next to the Seymours. Down the block on the corner of Hill Street and Oakdale were the Pimlotts...George and Nellie...the younger George was head electrician on the Golden Gate Bridge. And Bill Provines was a great friend of my brother's...he is still going strong and he's older than I am.

G.S.

I should have asked you about your father...where did he come from?

E.M.M.

He came from Germany when he was 12 years old. He lived in Portland with his mother who was a widow. When he grew up he came to San Francisco to get a job. He got into the insurance business at Commercial Union and he became Chief Accountant at Commercial Union...William Muller, Senior. My mother grew up in San Francisco and her mother was one of the deYoungs of the deYoung family...her name was Laura de

Young. My mother was Sarah Elizabeth Haste. And my grandfather was Julius Haste. Haste Street in Berkeley was named after his father, my great-grandfather.

G.S.

You spoke about Albert and Florence Loudon. What do you remember about their home?

E.M.M.

Oh, it was always open to the kids...she was a real mother to all the neighbor kids. We would go there and have candy pulls and she would take us out on Halloween...it was just the place we wanted to be.

G.S.

I believe that at one time your mother had a business venture in Mill Valley.

E.M.M.

Yes, she had the Marigold Gift Shop with this other lady...Marion Lewis.

G.S.

We talked about that on our walk into history this year.

E.M.M.

Oh, did you? They had this little dress shop and did quite well. I had fun because my mother took me to the wholesale house and my mother let me buy what I wanted...I was a teenager then.

G.S.

I think it was a much needed enterprise. Tell me a little about your telephone when you were living at home with your mother and dad.

E.M.M.

Oh, our number was 336 and we had to get the operator in order to make calls. She would say "number, please?" and then connect us.

G.S.

We forgot to mention that you were a member of the Honor T Society when you were at high school.

E.M.M.

Oh, that was big stuff at Tamalpais High School and I was an Honor T member right Through...that meant that you had to maintain certain grades to belong. Margaret Woodruff was the teacher in charge of the group...when she left my good friend Mary McCurdy Baker was in charge. I also belonged to the California scholastic Federation..."CSF"...at Tam.

G.S.

Tell me a little about the Mountain Play.

E.M.M.

Well, my husband was in charge of ticket sales for many years and we had wonderful time going up there and selling tickets...the tickets didn't cost as much, what were they five dollars? I know they are much more today. We had eats up there and we got to be with all these people that we knew...we had a wonderful time. People parked their cars at Rock Springs and we sold the tickets at the entrance to the Mountain Play. It only ran on one Sunday, not like today.

G.S.

If I recall right, we used to go up very early in the morning and have breakfast at Rock Springs...and the Mountain Play Association provided all the workers with lunch.

Do you recall any of the plays that you saw?

E.M.M.

There were so many...Girl of the Golden West...and there was an Indian play called Tamalpa, the legend of Mount Tamalpais.

G.S.

I believe your husband was interested in athletics.

E.M.M.

He was...he ran the Dipsea race four times and came in seventh once and Charles Harvey Mielenz...we call him Harvey...he loved that and he is mentioned in an historic book on the Dipsea Race.

G.S.

What did Harvey do for a living?

E.M.M.

When I first met him, he was with American Express...selling money orders...and then later he went to Union Pacific and became a travel agent. After thirty years he retired from that and then he went to work at the Fairmont Hotel at this travel bureau named Nob Hill Travel. He did that for twelve years. It gave us a lot of opportunities for us to travel all over the world.

G.S.

I remember Harvey raised beautiful roses in your garden in Terra Linda.

E.M.M.

Oh, yes...that was his joy and his love. I think that there are still some of his roses there.

G.S.

Are there any other events that you would like to tell us about? Any parades that you remember?

E.M.M.

Our daughter Carol was in a lot parades for high school...she was a mascot when very young and later became a drum majorette and then top majorette. She went to Tamalpais High School and then San Francisco State. She was married before she

finished there then she went to New Mexico State where she got her credential. Then she came back to Marin County where she started teaching...first at Tamalpais High and then Terra Linda High School.

G.S.

Going back to your father...I believe he was also very active in Mill Valley civic affairs.

Was he on the Planning Commission?

E.M.M.

Yes, he was, for two or three years, I believe. He was also very active in the Masonic Lodge...he got his fifty-year pin. My brother was also a Mason. Our neighbors, the Seymours were very active in the Masonic Lodge. For years I belonged to Eastern Star...until we moved to Terra Linda and it became too difficult to drive to Mill Valley at night so I gave it up after nearly forty years.

G.S.

You are very happy here at the Drake Terrace, aren't you?

E.M.M.

Oh, I like it...it is a retirement home. Before I moved to San Rafael I continued to live in the same area in Mill Valley...I lived in a little house on Buena Vista, a little white house with a blue trim at 80 Buena Vista...it was across the street from our family home where I grew up at 75 Buena Vista. I lived for many years at 71 Buena Vista which was the house that originally belonged to the Gilbrides. Mr. Gilbride was in the lumber business and the home was well built...all the uprights were of redwood.

G.S.

Do you remember the Saxe family that lived across the street from you? There were Romona, Teresita and Juanita.

E.M.M.

Oh, yes... they were very musical...very Spanish. Romona played at

nightclubs including Marvel Mar and Sabella's.

G.S.

Also across the street from you was the Eziekel family. I believe you also had neighbors by the name of Sydney and Stella Rhodes...they came about in the 1930's.

E.M.M.

Yes, they had two children...Peggy and Peter...they grew up in Mill Valley...they had an English background. Mr. Rhodes was export manager for Hills Brothers Coffee.

The son Peter has an import-export business.

G.S.

Peter's wife Jean was one of our guides at our historical walk this year...she did an excellent job.

Unless you can think of anything else to tell us, we thank you for your time and we wish you well here at your Drake Terrace home.