

**Mill Valley Oral History Program**  
*A collaboration between the Mill Valley  
Historical Society and the Mill Valley  
Public Library*

**CHUCK OLDENBURG**

**An Oral History Narrative  
June 24, 2015**

TITLE: Oral History of Chuck Oldenburg  
INTERVIEWER: None  
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 7 pages  
INTERVIEW DATE: June 24, 2015

Chuck Oldenburg was born in 1929 and moved with his family to the Homestead Valley community of Mill Valley in 1963. Since 2000 he has been known as Homestead's unofficial historian. For many years, Chuck commuted to his job at the Richmond research laboratory of Standard Oil Company of California. His oral history describes his active involvement in the historic Homestead Valley community, including his service on the boards of the Land Trust and the Community Association, and his publication of over 180 historical articles in the monthly *Homestead Headlines* newsletter. Chuck also describes his involvement with the Mill Valley Historical Society, as a board member, creator of 10 guidebooks for the annual "Walk into History," tour guide for 13 years, the author of semiannual Historical Society newsletters as well as biweekly history emails known as "Vignettes."

© All materials copyright Mill Valley Public Library. Transcript made available for research purposes only. All rights are reserved to the Mill Valley Public Library. Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the:

Lucretia Little History Room  
Mill Valley Public Library  
375 Throckmorton Avenue  
Mill Valley, CA 94941

## Oral History of Chuck Oldenburg

### Index

- 2 AM Club...p.2,5  
Austin, Texas...p.2  
Barrett, Geoff...p.6  
Beck, Helen...p.5  
Behr, James...p.1  
Boussy, Henri M...p.7  
Brabo, Mary...p.3  
Brown's Hall...p.1, 4, 5  
California Research Company...p.2  
Candlelight Concerts...p.1  
County Services Area #14 (CSA 14)...p.5  
*Homestead Headlines*...p.3, 4  
Homestead Players...p.5  
Homestead School PTA...p.4  
Homestead Valley annexation...p.5  
Homestead Valley Baby Sitting  
Cooperative...p.4  
Homestead Valley centennial...p.3  
Homestead Valley Community Center...p.2, 4  
Homestead Valley Improvement Club  
(HVIC)...p.1, 4  
Homestead Valley Land Trust (HVLTL)...p.5, 6  
Homestead Valley...p.1-7  
HVCA Community Center...p.5  
INFOGRAM...p.3, 4  
Johnson, Huey...p.4  
Kinsey, Steve...p.6, 7  
Lucas Valley...p.1, 2  
Marin Theatre Company...p.5  
McKee, Lissa...p.2  
Mill Valley centennial...p.2  
Mill Valley City Council...p. 7  
Mill Valley Historical Society (MVHS)...p.2  
Miller Avenue Shopping Center...p.5  
Mozart Festival...p.3, 5  
*mvhistory.org*...p.3  
MVHS Board of Directors...p.4  
Oldenburg, Christina...p.1,2,4,5,6  
Homestead School...p.5  
Homestead Valley Community Association  
(HVCA)...p.5,6  
Kinsey, Steve...p.6,7  
Open Space...p.5,6  
Outdoor Art Club...p.3  
*Mill Valley Historical Review*...p.7  
Rebels with a Cause...p.4  
Robinson, Glen...p.4  
Rosen, Martin...p.4  
Sali Lieberman Theatre...p.5  
Schlesinger, Dr. Kurt...p.1  
Schlesinger, Jo...p.1  
Sietas, Don...p.2  
Spalding, Virginia Stolte...p.1, 6  
Standard Oil Company...p.2  
Steps, Lanes and Paths...p.7  
Stolte Grove...p.5, 6  
Stolte House...p.1  
Stolte, Ann...p.1  
Stolte, Frank...p.1, 6  
Stolte, Fred...p.1, 2  
Tamalpais Land & Water Co. (TL&WC)...p.6  
Tamalpais Valley...p.2  
Three Groves...p.3, 6  
VIGNETTE...p.3, 4  
Walk Into History...p.3  
*Whither Homestead* letter...p.6  
Whole Foods...p.5

## Oral History of Chuck Oldenburg June 24, 2015

Today is June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015. My name is Chuck Oldenburg. I was born in 1929. On several occasions I have been urged to have my oral history taken. I trust that this “pseudo-oral history” will suffice. There is no interviewer, just history.

### Arrival in Homestead Valley

In 1963, my wife Christina, our three sons, the oldest 7 years old, and I moved into the historic Stolte house at 568 Montford Avenue in Homestead Valley. We have lived in this house for 52 years. It has an interesting history. In 1904, Fred Stolte built a one-room bachelor cabin for weekend use. In 1906 the earthquake and fire in San Francisco damaged his living quarters. He moved to his bachelor cabin and commuted to his job at the *San Francisco Examiner*. Since then, he and subsequent owners have expanded and renovated the cabin, which is now a 2,700-square-foot house. Fred Stolte and his wife Ann raised two children, Virginia and Frank, whose oral histories are in the History Room<sup>1</sup> files. In 1963, we purchased the house from Dr. and Mrs. Kurt Schlesinger. They had bought the house from Mr. and Mrs. James Behr (brother of Peter Behr) in 1956. The Behrs had bought the Stolte house from Ann Stolte in 1951 after Fred Stolte’s death. The Behrs moved to 41 Mirabel Avenue in Mill Valley. In 1963, the Schlesingers moved to 328 Ridgewood Avenue in Homestead Valley (see the street file<sup>2</sup> for a description).

In 1963, Jo Schlesinger was president of the Homestead Valley Improvement Club (HVIC). During purchase negotiations, Jo asked us how we felt about participating in Homestead Valley community affairs. During our previous five years in the Lucas Valley Eichler tract (now part of Marinwood) we had been active in community affairs. We told Jo that we hoped to become active in Homestead’s community affairs. Jo told us that she and Kurt had received an offer to buy the house at a price that was \$500 higher than our offer, but they would accept our offer if we agreed to become active in community affairs. We accepted the challenge. A few months after we moved into the house, Virginia Stolte Spalding called to ask me to report to Brown’s Hall, the community center, to set up tables and chairs for a Candlelight Concert. That’s how I began my activities in Homestead’s community affairs. I subsequently worked on Candlelight Concerts for the next 40 years.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Lucretia Little History Room in the Mill Valley Public Library.

<sup>2</sup> The Lucretia Little History Room houses a collection of house and building files organized by street.

### Commuting to Richmond

In 1957, Christina and I moved to Lucas Valley from Austin, Texas, where I was a student at the University of Texas. Christina was born and raised in Austin. I was a Yankee. After completing graduate studies, I accepted a job offer from Standard Oil Company of California in their Richmond research laboratory, California Research Corporation (CRC). While living in Lucas Valley I commuted to Richmond with a ride group. When we moved to Homestead I commuted to Richmond with a different ride group. Most families that we knew at that time had only one car. A ride group of five meant that five wives would have use of a car four days a week. In those days, a whistle at 4:45 pm announced the end of the workday at CRC. At the sound of the whistle, members of our ride group would immediately proceed to the parking lot. Our ride group had rules: anyone who failed to get to the car by 5:15 pm when the car would depart for Mill Valley would have to find some other way to get home; anyone who got to the car after 5:00 pm but before 5:15 pm would be required to buy the ride group a beer at the 2 AM Club on the way home.

### Homestead Valley's Historian

In February 1999, at an MVHS<sup>3</sup> First Wednesday Program, Lissa McKee gave an interesting talk on the history of Tamalpais Valley. My reaction was, "Someone ought to give a talk on the history of Homestead Valley." A few months later, longtime friend and MVHS board member Don Seitas asked me to give such a talk at the February 2000 program. Since Mill Valley was incorporated as a town in 1900, the city planned a yearlong centennial celebration in 2000. My talk would be one of a series of talks related to the centennial celebration. The Homestead Valley community had been established 96 years earlier in 1903. Since I had lived there for 36 years, I realized that I was part of its history. I lived in the house that Fred Stolte had built as a one-room bachelor cabin in 1904. I had absorbed a lot of historical knowledge from his daughter, Virginia Stolte Spalding, who lived in Homestead Valley continuously from the time she was 2 years old until her death. I had been active in the community for 36 years. How could I refuse Don's request? I spent a great deal of time researching the subject in the Mill Valley Library's History Room to prepare for the talk. At my February 2000 talk in the library, there was standing room only, and several people were turned away. I repeated the talk in March 2000 at the Homestead Valley Community Center. Once again, there was standing room only. I was frankly amazed that so many people seemed to be interested in Homestead Valley's history. I decided to write

---

<sup>3</sup> Mill Valley Historical Society

one-page articles on the history of Homestead Valley. They would appear in the monthly *Homestead Headlines* mailed to all Homestead Valley residences. The first article appeared in April 2000. The 180<sup>th</sup> article appeared in March 2015. The series continues. All articles are archived on the MVHS website, *mvhistory.org*.

### Homestead Valley's Centennial

In 2003, the Homestead Valley celebrated its centennial. I arranged several events for the yearlong celebration: the Mill Valley Outdoor Art Club sponsored a tour of the house and garden at Three Groves; Mill Valley's Memorial Day parade included a Homestead Valley Centennial float, and leaders of Homestead's organizations wore early century costumes while riding in a model T Ford; the annual Mozart festival in Stolte Grove featured music composed in 1903; the Fourth of July parade and picnic in Stolte Grove had a centennial theme; in October, there was a Centennial Birthday Celebration BBQ at the community center meadow, and Mary Brabo was honored for having lived her entire life of 93 years in Homestead Valley. Previous presidents of various community organizations were honored. The Mill Valley Historical Society (MVHS) decided that the 2003 Walk Into History would be in Homestead Valley. I wrote the guidebook and trained the guides. The walk began at the community center on Montford Avenue and ended at Stolte Grove. Many of the guides were Homestead residents.

### History Walk Guidebooks

The subject of the 2004 MVHS Walk Into History was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1929 fire that burned many homes on Mill Valley's middle ridge. Carol Budds wrote the guidebook. She had written several earlier guidebooks and announced that 2004 would be her last one. Since I had written the 2003 guidebook I volunteered to write the 2005 guidebook. I subsequently wrote eight more guidebooks, the last one in 2013. All 10 guidebooks that I wrote are archived on the MVHS website, *mvhistory.org*. I trained guides and was a guide at every MVHS history walk from 2003 to 2014.

### INFOGRAMs and VIGNETTES

In 2013 I came up with the idea of sending an email called an "INFOGRAM" to all MVHS members every two weeks. There would be two parts, NEWS and a VIGNETTE. The NEWS section would inform members about pertinent events. I anticipated that the semiannual MVHS Newsletter mailed to members would be abandoned. I had edited eight issues of the Newsletter. From what I could tell, very few members read it. I concluded that it was a waste of money. My hope was that the

INFOGRAM would replace the newsletter with more frequent news reports. The VIGNETTE would be a short description of a specific fragment of Mill Valley history. It would give MVHS members an opportunity to learn something about the history of Mill Valley without having to exert much effort. Each VIGNETTE would be about 200 words long and take only a few minutes to read. All VIGNETTES are archived on the MVHS website, *mvhistory.org*. Many have been published in the *Mill Valley Herald*. As of June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, there have been 50 VIGNETTES sent to members. Feedback has been positive.

### MVHS Website

After 10 years as a member of the MVHS board of directors I resigned in 2014. One of my responsibilities had been and continues to be management of the MVHS website, *mvhistory.org*. Alan Nayer created the website many years ago and archived my monthly Homestead Valley history articles published in the *Homestead Headlines*. When Alan Nayer retired a few years ago, Bob Hemstock completely revamped the website and became the web master. I continue to submit a monthly Homestead history article for archiving. They now number over 180. Nancy Emerson is in the process of creating an index which will make searching much easier. VIGNETTES are also archived on *mvhistory.org*.

### Homestead Valley Community Activities

Christina was active in the PTA at Homestead School and was one of the “hot dog day ladies”. When we belonged to the Homestead Valley Baby Sitting Cooperative I did most of the evening babysitting. I sometimes sat for the families of Huey Johnson and Martin Rosen, who became famous as “Rebels with a Cause,” the story of winning the battle against the Marincello development. I also sat for the family of Glen Robinson, who was a U.S. Marshal and later member of the Marin County School Board.

In the 1960s, I was a member of the board of directors of the Homestead Valley Improvement Club (HVIC). We wrestled with the financial and operational challenges associated with running the community center, Brown’s Hall (now a Buddhist temple), on Miller Avenue. There were many efforts to generate income. HVIC rented the hall for a weekly dog training class and for special events and private parties. There were rummage sales, lectures, concerts, and even an old fashioned box social. The Homestead Players produced plays in Brown’s Hall. On May 6, 1966, it was the American

premiere of *The Obscene Temple* written by famous San Francisco playwright Lester Cole. The first performance was a benefit for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization in the American Civil Rights Movement. Sali Lieberman, a craftsman upholsterer, was the key contributor to the decade-long success of the Homestead Players. He later became the founder of what is now the Marin Theatre Company that presents plays in the Sali Lieberman Theatre.

In 1961 the first Mozart Festival was held in Stolte Grove on the day before Labor Day. Christina and I were involved with this annual event from 1964 until its demise in 2005. For the last 30 years I was treasurer. Since then we have been involved with the annual concerts of modern music that replaced the Mozart Festival. I was treasurer for the first two years. Christina has run the coffee concession every year. The concerts are held in the meadow at the HVCA<sup>4</sup> Community Center where audiences have exceeded 1,000.

At an HVIC board meeting in 1965, Mill Valley Mayor Al White and the city manager made a formal proposal to annex Homestead Valley to the city. We rejected the proposal. Much later in my history research I discovered that this was the eighth attempt by Mill Valley to annex Homestead Valley, the first one having occurred in 1908. There have been no such annexation proposals since 1965. In 1951 Mill Valley had annexed the half-block deep commercial property on Miller Avenue, from Montford to Reed. Included were the 2 AM Club, Brown's Hall and the Miller Avenue Shopping Center (now Whole Foods). Homestead residents opposed the proposed annexation but lost the battle. Mill Valley gained tax revenue from the commercial establishments.

In 1967, HVIC supported the efforts of Helen Beck of the PTA who was working with the County administration to create County Service Area #14 (CSA 14), an entity that taxed Homestead Valley real estate to fund Parks and Recreation activities. Initial funding was for the after school recreation program at Homestead School. In 1969, HVIC changed its name to the Homestead Valley Community Association (HVCA). The creation of CSA 14 turned out to be of great importance to the community. In the following decades, CSA 14 sponsored bond issues for open space purchases and community center capital improvements. CSA 14 is the source of funding for the activities of the Homestead Valley Community Association (HVCA) and the Homestead Valley Land Trust (HFLT)—more about these organizations later.

---

<sup>4</sup> Homestead Valley Community Association



In 1971, HVCA asked Geoff Barrett to be responsible for conservation and environmental matters. In December he wrote his famous “Whither Homestead?” letter pointing out that undeveloped land would be developed if residents did nothing. He began a campaign that resulted in passing a \$600,000 bond issue in 1973 to buy 80 acres of open space land, most of which abuts the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. I was president of HVCA in 1973. Our board was active in assisting Geoff Barrett, Mike Cann and others who managed the successful campaign. Marin County Open Space District added \$200,000 for open space land and park purchases. In 1974, the Homestead Valley Land Trust (HVLT) was established to be the custodian of 80 acres of open space and three parks—Marin County became owner of the properties. I was a founding member of the HVLT board. Private landowners later would donate properties to HVLT that were adjacent to open space land. I arranged for HVLT’s ownership of these properties to be transferred to County ownership.

In 1976, I worked with Bob Middagh of the County Real Estate Department on the Three Groves property split. The house and less than an acre was left in private ownership, and about two acres became a public park purchased with bond issue funds. Soon thereafter Stolte Grove was acquired as a public park. Virginia Stolte Spalding donated her half ownership. Her brother Frank Stolte was paid for his half ownership with bond issue funds.

My Homestead Valley community activities included being a board member of HVIC, HVCA, HVLT and CSA 14, and sometimes president of HVCA and HVLT. Christina and I were active members of the music committee. Christina was also a board member of HVCA for a few years, but we were never on the board at the same time.

The Tamalpais Land & Water Co. (TL&WC) was chartered as a 100-year corporation in 1889. It subdivided Mill Valley, Almonte and Homestead Valley for development. To go out of business in 1988 it quitclaimed all its properties in Marin County to the Homestead Valley Land Trust (HVLT). The HVLT board hoped that accepting the quitclaim deed would result in acquisition of more open space land. In 1995 when I was president of HVLT, the board hired a title specialist consultant to identify the properties that we had acquired from TL&WC in 1988. Surprise. HVLT had acquired ownership of several streets and lanes in Homestead, Almonte and the City of Mill Valley. I convinced our County Supervisor, Steve Kinsey, to have the County accept an HVLT quitclaim deed for all streets in Homestead and Almonte that were maintained by the County’s Public Works Department plus paper streets bordering county-owned open space land. I contacted the Mill Valley City Manager about accepting such a quitclaim deed for HVLT-owned streets in Mill Valley. He opined that this ridiculous

situation would be corrected some day, but he warned, “These things take time.” For almost 20 years both Steve Kinsey and I have been urging the Mill Valley City Council to accept a quitclaim deed for HVLТ-owned Mill Valley properties. Our only success came in 2009, when the City of Mill Valley accepted HVLТ’s quitclaim deed for 40 Steps, Lanes, and Paths<sup>5</sup>. But HVLТ continues to own 60 Mill Valley streets. I continue to lobby city council members on this issue. Steve Kinsey has set as an objective of resolving the issue in 2015.

### Conclusion

In the Spring 1986 issue of the *Mill Valley Historical Review*, historian Henri M. Boussy wrote, “Of all the urban developments that have become Marin County the one with the greatest sense of community has been Homestead.”

---

<sup>5</sup> Mill Valley is home to a network of 175 heritage steps, lanes, and paths.