

**Mill Valley Oral History Program**

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**WILLIAM MASON**

**An Oral History Interview  
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2015**

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William Mason was born on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1921, and moved from Los Angeles to Mill Valley in 1956 to be closer to his work as a seaman for the Standard Oil Company in Richmond. He still lives at 1 Cottage Avenue (West Blithedale), in a house built by Sidney B. Cushing, the son of Blithedale Hotel owner Dr. John S. Cushing. William lived an eventful life, first serving as a sailor, then, after having completed his studies at UCLA, as chief mate on different vessels. Like his brother Samuel Mason he was also an avid aviator, and worked as a flight instructor during WWII. He later bought his own biplane, and has travelled all over the world on his own and with his family.

William recounts his memories of Mill Valley in the 1950s, particularly the downtown shopping experience and its change from sleepy town to vibrant hippie meeting place to the tourist territory of today. William never lost his passion for travelling, and embarked on several freighter trips to Europe and Russia after he retired. He enjoys his historic house painting watercolors and reading books on Russian civilization.

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## Oral History of William Mason

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**Oral History of William Mason**  
**February 3, 2015**

**Debra Schwartz:** Today is February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, and I am sitting here with William Mason who lives at 1 Cottage Avenue. My name is Debra Schwartz. Let's begin with a little background history about you, alright Bill?

**William Mason:** Okay. I was born in Los Angeles in 1921, December '21. I lived in that area, East Los Angeles, until just before the war started, that is World War II. I kind of tagged after my older brother, he was a pilot, and I learned how to fly. He became a flight instructor with the Army Air Corps, as it was called at that time, in Tulare, California, and I followed him up and got more instruction and eventually became an instructor myself there in Tulare. That would have been 1941, the summer and winter. I stayed there all during the war as an instructor, teaching Air Corps cadets how to fly. It was a primary flying base.

After the war [World War II] ended, I went to sea because I had always wanted to do this as a child and I knew nothing about it really, but I just got my foot in the water and never got out again. That was my career for most of my life, at sea. I worked my way up from ordinary seaman to a chief mate working for Standard Oil Company, which is based in Richmond, California, across the bay from Mill Valley.

The reason I came to Mill Valley was because it put me closer to my work, instead of having to go from the Bay Area to Los Angeles when I had time off to visit family, I thought, might as well move up here and live close. And I knew nothing about Mill Valley, we just happened to land in Mill Valley because the wife of one of my shipmates lived here and she found an apartment for us, so we moved in to Mill Valley itself. I had no intention of staying here, I was looking around to see what was available to buy a home in this area. But Mill Valley kind of captivated us and we never moved out, which is, looking back on it, a very fortunate thing.

Our first impression of Mill Valley was, it was like a wonderland because we had come from the asphalt jungle, you might say, down in Los Angeles, and here we are surrounded by trees and mountains, and everything was green and at that time – we moved in here in 1956 – at that time Mill Valley was still a rather sleepy town. In fact, it was starting to go downhill. It was this time when you couldn't even buy an ice cream cone when you got out of the theater because the town kind of closed at nighttime. Anyway, we found our place and the same person that found us the apartment notified us that there was this house up on West Blithedale. We took a look at it and after looking at a few more places, I decided that this is what we should maybe buy, which we did. It turned out that this house was built by Sidney Cushing, the son of Dr. Cushing who started the hotel [The Blithedale Hotel] down the street a ways, much earlier. I've always been curious about this house's history and not knowing a great deal about it, but I remember reading not long ago that Sidney had built a small cottage at the foot of the railroad going up to Mount Tam and maybe this was the place because I know from speaking to the people that we bought the house from –

**Debra Schwartz:** Do you remember their name?

**William Mason:** Yeah, the name was Nelson, I think they all passed away. The Nelsons told us that this house originally consisted of just this living room and the kitchen, and there was a

bathroom in that far corner of the kitchen. In fact, the plumbing was still under the house so I know that was correct. And Cushing expanded the house at some time by putting a bedroom wing on, just attaching it to the corner here, there is no connection underneath or with the attic of the two homes, he just tacked it on. And I think that must have been, I was kind of under the impression that after the '06 earthquake in San Francisco, they came over and expanded this place, but it could have been later, I'm not sure, I really don't know, have to investigate that. And there was a lady, after we had lived there for a while, there was a lady who lived up on Eldridge and I cannot remember her name, unfortunately. She would come down and chat once in a while and she said that she and a woman she called Dolly, that was Cushing's daughter Eleanor, used to as young teenagers climb out of the bedroom window, as young girls would do as a thrill. Eventually Mrs. Cushing, that would have been Sidney's wife, lived here and at the time Cottage Avenue, I don't know what it was called, it wasn't much of a street, apparently, but next door was the laundry for the hotel down the street that his dad started. Let me catch my thoughts here a little bit, kind of getting ahead of myself.

So I really don't know much about the house itself, I'm not sure about everything. I know that Sidney built what was to become Senator Hayakawa's house up just in back. He is of course gone, and that was built as a gift to his daughter Eleanor and her new husband. But Mrs. Cushing lived here when this area was starting to be subdivided and she was adamant that she wanted an address on Cottage. So this lot has a peculiar little corner down there that is on Cottage, which is where the carport is, that is the only relation to Cottage Avenue. She wanted number 1 Cottage, and she was so influential I guess she got her wishes. Well, let's see, West Blithedale was Cottage for a while, all the way downtown, it was Cottage Avenue. So I don't know, what is now called Cottage, we could look on some old maps. I don't know much about her, I know she moved to San Francisco and passed away there. I have an old clipping from the newspaper, it was an interview sometime, I don't know when. She was getting pretty elderly by that time, about some of her life here. You probably have a copy of it down in the Library.

**Debra Schwartz:** Really. I'd love to see it when we are done with the interview.

**William Mason:** I'll find it. I was looking, it is here someplace. I'm such a mess upstairs, as you saw.

**Debra Schwartz:** Well, why don't I ask you a few more questions and I'm sure things will fluff out too in the questions themselves, but would love to see the article, if you find it, that would be great. I'll help you if you'd like. So you first came to Mill Valley in 1956 because you were working in Richmond, and this is after the war, so the ship building has ceased and the town has calmed down. Do you remember any particular neighbors or people that stood out to you at that time in the area?

**William Mason:** Well, next door was Mr. Bode; he was a teacher at Tamalpais High School. Down the street lived a lady who was born here by the name of Jan Upham. She passed away maybe a couple years ago.

**Debra Schwartz:** Did you have friends in the neighborhood that you socialized with?

**William Mason:** Yes, but not greatly because of my work. I was gone so much at that time.

**Debra Schwartz:** So after we talk about town a little bit, let's go more into your work because it is very interesting what you have done. But we will continue with what you started about the town for a little bit. Tell me, you were married when you moved to Mill Valley, right? And your wife's name was?

**William Mason:** Yes, Elizabeth.

**Debra Schwartz:** Elizabeth. Sorry, she just passed away last year right? So, Elizabeth Mason. And you have how many children?

**William Mason:** We had three. I have two daughters that are living.

**Debra Schwartz:** The names of your children?

**William Mason:** Patricia, who is the youngest and lives here with me and takes care of me, and the other one is Elizabeth Junior, she lives over on the coast.

**Debra Schwartz:** Point Reyes, or –

**William Mason:** Near Inverness.

**Debra Schwartz:** I think you told me the other day. Inverness?

**William Mason:** Inverness, yes.

**Debra Schwartz:** And then your son unfortunately passed away, but his name?

**William Mason:** His name was Bill.

**Debra Schwartz:** Bill Mason. So they went to school here in Mill Valley.

**William Mason:** Yes, they all went to school here in Mill Valley, they all graduated from Tamalpais High School. The younger ones went to Edna Maguire. You know, about the town, I remember when we came in '56, Mill Valley was the kind of town where you didn't have to go out of it to get pretty much what you wanted. There was a good hardware store, there were clothing stores, and my wife worked for a while as a cashier at the variety store, the five-and-dime – Bennett's.

**Debra Schwartz:** Where was that located?

**William Mason:** That was on Throckmorton, a couple doors down the hill from the theater. Then she also was the noontime supervisor at Old Mill for a while and in fact the cobbler downtown, he has been there a long time, he was one of her little kids there.

**Debra Schwartz:** The carpenter, you said?

**William Mason:** Cobbler, the shoemaker.

**Debra Schwartz:** Oh, Misak [Pirinjian]?

**William Mason:** Yes, he remembered her. But it was the kind of place, where, like I said, I bought a suit of clothes there. Now there is no five-and-dime, you can't buy anything that you really need here, you have to go someplace else. You can't buy a spool of thread, as far as I know. And so it is pretty much young people and tourist territory now, great restaurants and the town has changed completely. I think when it changed, it was a really low period and the hippies kind of moved in. They kind of changed the way stores were presenting themselves and they started a painting campaign and pretty soon the town came alive and it changed at that time and started, well, of course some of the old establishments disappeared but from that time on, I can't tell you exactly when that was, it will be in the records, I'm sure, it became a vibrant time. But now, maybe it is my age when I look at it, but to me, the town doesn't have much to offer me. It is for the young people.

**Debra Schwartz:** You are how old now, 94?

**William Mason:** 93.

**Debra Schwartz:** So if you had been 93 in '56, would the town have offered you more?

**William Mason:** Oh sure, everything I would need, yes. It has greatly changed, the whole town has changed. The living standards, the types of homes, the people that have come are really different from those days. It was more family oriented at that time. And that is probably one of the reasons why it seemed to me like a vibrant town because the neighbors had children and the children knew each other so the families knew each other, but now they are all gone, the children who live here now, they live a different type of life. I don't want to go into that one too much. It's kind of negative.

**Debra Schwartz:** Yeah. Tell me a little bit about your family. Where did your parents grow up?

**William Mason:** My mother came from Rhode Island. Her lineage was Swedish and French from Canada, and her name was Breard, last name. My dad was, oh, he was Scotch and English and the family had been here a long time. He was – I can't say he was a farmer because he left Kansas when he was a teenager, I think, and came out to California, but he was a simple person. But I get too emotional.

**Debra Schwartz:** Yeah, thinking about those important people.

**William Mason:** Anyway, I was talking to my daughter yesterday and I don't even know when my parents met. They met out here. Her family came out, almost en masse, just leaving a brother out there, they came out here, must have been the late teens. I am talking about 1910s or something like that.

**Debra Schwartz:** Your father's family came en masse in the late teens from Kansas. They came to California.

**William Mason:** Yes, and so did my wife's, her family, on the train.

**Debra Schwartz:** They came on the train into LA, then?

**William Mason:** Yes, to Los Angeles.

**Debra Schwartz:** So you are a California boy.

**William Mason:** [Laughs.] That's right.

**Debra Schwartz:** [Laughs.] You look like a California boy. You are very healthy looking. So you grew up in LA in the early '20s, the '20s, through the Depression, actually.

**William Mason:** Yes. But as kids, we didn't know, when the Depression started in '30, we weren't really aware of it. In fact, there were times when I was pretty skinny but it was almost a way of life. We didn't really know about the Depression, we wore patches in our pants but so did everybody else.

**Debra Schwartz:** What part of LA were you in again?

**William Mason:** East Los Angeles.

**Debra Schwartz:** East Los Angeles. What is that area, that's over by the mountains? No.

**William Mason:** No, you have 7<sup>th</sup> Street – which is Whittier Boulevard from the town out, and then it is between there and Montebello. Atlantic Boulevard is – I guess they still call it Atlantic, it is all freeways there now, the eastern edge of it, it would be the southern edge of it. The area would be 1<sup>st</sup> Street to Whittier Boulevard, Indiana and Whittier, and it was a nice place to grow up. The community was mixed with everything, every nationality, you might say, and that was a good thing, I think, to grow up in. There were not many Hispanics, there were some, quite a few I guess, but now that area is pretty much Hispanic, the whole place. Even some of the streets have changed names. The high school I went to, Garfield on Eastside, is mostly Hispanic now.

**Debra Schwartz:** What were your parents' names?

**William Mason:** My parents?

**Debra Schwartz:** Yeah, your mother and father.

**William Mason:** My mother was Clara, Clara Breard Mason. Her mother was a native Swede, her name was Willamena.

**Debra Schwartz:** It's good you are going back that far, though, my goodness.

**William Mason:** Agafena Willamena was her name, Svensen.

**Debra Schwartz:** Wow.

**William Mason:** And my father's name was Homer Samuel, Homer Mason.

**Debra Schwartz:** Did you have siblings? Did you grow up with siblings?

**William Mason:** One brother, who was four years older than I.

**Debra Schwartz:** His name?

**William Mason:** His name was Samuel Homer, he was a junior, Samuel Homer Mason. Samuel became so interested in aviation that he quit school about sixteen, went down to the local airport, which was called T&A at that time, the corner of Atlantic and Telegraph Road, and he learned how to fly. In fact, the truant officer came looking for Samuel Mason and walked up to Samuel and said, do you know where Samuel Mason is, and Samuel says, "Yes, he's gone to Arizona to live with his uncle." Whether the truant officer knew whether this kid was lying or not, they didn't push it.

**Debra Schwartz:** The truant officer went to your brother and asked him for this kid and your brother just diverted him into some fictitious scenario?

**William Mason:** Yes, they didn't take it any further than that. Satisfied, I guess.

**Debra Schwartz:** So aviation is in your brother's blood and yours. And you also had a fascination with aviation.

**William Mason:** You know, not so much. I had other interests. Sammy, my brother, was zeroed in on mechanics and aviation. I was kind of a dreamer. I dreamed of the sea and faraway places. So I didn't take to aviation right away. I think my first ride with my brother scared the heck out of me, because the first thing he did was roll it upside down.

**Debra Schwartz:** What kind of plane was he in?

**William Mason:** It was a little biplane, okay for doing that sort of thing. But after I learned how to fly, as I was learning, he would do aerobatics with me and I got used to it and I liked it. Actually, the war was what dragged me into really flying. I knew how to fly but didn't have a lot of time, but I became an instructor and got some more time and instruction. So I was kind of locked into it and it was fine, it was a good job and I enjoyed it. In fact, after the war, a few years when the kids had more or less grown up, my wife bought this airplane – the same kind that I used instructing, which we used as a family plane for traveling all over the United States, although it was a slow airplane and wouldn't go any faster than 90 miles an hour at cruise, and it was an open cockpit. But we made it our magic carpet.

**Debra Schwartz:** You and your wife, that was your magic carpet, your biplane that went 90 miles an hour? I saw the picture, it was red, bright red.

**William Mason:** Yes. That gave us a lot of nice adventures. We saw a lot of places. In fact, it opened up our social life tremendously. All over the United States we had friends and acquaintances; we communicated with them for years and saw them. In fact, it even opened up a friendship in Australia. When I retired in 1984, my wife said, “Well, we should make a trip someplace.” “Well, where do we want to go?” “How about Australia?” “Okay, Australia.”

**Debra Schwartz:** You flew to Australia?

**William Mason:** No, no. She said, “Let’s take the train around Australia.” So upon investigation, there is no train around Australia. There is one that runs across the bottom between Perth and Sydney, so she said, “Well, let’s take the bus.” I thought, that’s a terrible thing to do because we would be traveling at nighttime, a lot of it. It turns out there is no bus across the top either. So we ended up renting a camper van and driving. We drove probably 3600 miles across the top and around and then took the train across the bottom. That started really our traveling. We also took many, many freighter trips after I retired. She liked the sea, in fact, when I was working, she could ride with me for two trips a year on the ship, so she became used to going to sea. So we took many freighter trips, mostly between here and Europe which ended us up in Italy and Germany and Russia, mostly. Our last grand trip that we made, and we just made it by the skin of our teeth because that time I had just turned 80 and there was a restriction on age for passengers on those freighters. Usually there weren’t many passengers, one or two or three or four of them.

**Debra Schwartz:** Freighters. Explain to me about these freighters. Talk about this trip a little.

**William Mason:** Freighters are working ships which have some accommodations for passengers, usually less than 12 because if they had 12 they had to have a doctor on board. So, there were often just a very few. In fact, our last trip was around the world, on a freighter, and there were only six passengers. That took about 103 days, I think, to go around the world. That was a marvelous trip, but that was the last one.

**Debra Schwartz:** Okay, so let’s back up a little bit. So you worked, your professional life was as –

**William Mason:** An officer on a ship.

**Debra Schwartz:** So you have this long relationship, although during World War II, you were training pilots, but your main vocation is as a seaman. Okay. So you go on these freighters because they allow so many people and the community people you hang out with are the working men, the seamen. So the other passengers are also in some way associated, seamen or seamen’s wives as well. How many women would be on a ship when you would go on these trips?

**William Mason:** The only women would be in the steward's department, and there weren't always women there, sometimes it was all male, except this last ship was a British freighter, an old Bank Line ship, and the ship was built for the Russians, for their arctic work, so it was built very heavy, of steel. The contract was that they built about four of these and the British, when they bought the four ships, had to retain the crew, it had a Russian crew. So that made it interesting for me because I had always been interested in the Russian language and had studied it quite a bit, so here we had a Russian crew, the captain was British, a marvelous fellow, the chief mate was Russian, the second and third mates were Russian, the stewardesses were all Russian. There were three stewardesses, good looking Russian ladies, and it made a very happy ship because the skipper, he liked parties and although he wasn't obliged to entertain the crew, he was just that kind of a person so we had parties all the time, great times. The crew was invited too, they weren't excluded.

**Debra Schwartz:** Did you drink vodka?

**William Mason:** I don't drink. I made a poor sailor, never ever drank! [Laughs]

**Debra Schwartz:** Tell me more about your job as a sailor, your position, where you worked, the facility, give us a picture of that.

**William Mason:** Okay. Working with Standard Oil on a tanker, so the cargo was oil. It could be crude oil or we had what you called refined ships that carried multi-cargoes, gasoline, aviation gas, car gas, kerosene, chemicals, that is pretty much it. So my job as a chief mate was to supervise the loading and the unloading of the cargo and many times I made out payrolls and I had to supervise the boatswain who was in the charge of the work gang on deck, supervise work with him, and keep track of the stores. Also I stood bridge watches most of the time. In other words, on the ship, the work is split up into three sections, whereas the chief mate, who I was, works from 4 to 8, that is, 4 am to 8 am and from 4 pm to 8 pm. Those were my work hours. And the second mate has the 12 to 4 and the third mate has the 8 to 12, am and pm. That is the way the day was split up. Each of us on our bridge watch would handle the navigation and keep track of the voyage, observations, if you could see the land you filled out a logbook, keeping track of the weather. So at sea, it was sometimes kind of boring if you were on a long trip, there wasn't anything to really look at except the sea life, if you could see any of it. So at port was when our job really came to fruition, to a head, you might say, we were very busy. The ships ran 24 hours a day, they never stopped except when they were in and out of port, loading or discharging. So, our day was often broken up a lot, it was just coming and going in the port. So sometimes the hours were pretty long. You still had your 4 to 8, 8 to 12, whatever your watch was, that was the eight hours, and then you'd also maybe be busy off that time tying up, arranging the cargo for discharge or loading or whatever was going on, so sometimes the hours were pretty long.

**Debra Schwartz:** Did you have regular routes working with Standard oil?

**William Mason:** Standard Oil was mostly the West Coast of the United States, Canada, and Hawaii and Alaska. Occasionally there would be a ship going down through the canal to the oil ports of the Caribbean in the Gulf, that was mainly it. That's why I was so fascinated with my later freighter trips that we went places all over the world that I had never been to before.

**Debra Schwartz:** Did you ever have something scary happen to you when you were out?

**William Mason:** Oh yes. One of our ships, a big ship, blew up in Houston from a lightning strike. Fortunately my wife and I were not on board at the time, and it was the strangest thing – I was in contact with an aviation writer and broadcaster who lived in Texas and I said, “We are going to be in Houston such and such date, come on down and I’ll show you the ship.” Well, he never came down, fortunately, and we came from Corpus Christi to Houston and I didn’t have much sleep, so I was sleeping in the morning. The third mate, no, my wife came in and said, “The third mate is going to shore right after his watch, he wants to know if we want him to buy anything for us.” I thought why the third mate should spend his time ashore buying things for us, so we’ll just go. So I just pulled on a pair of dungarees and slippers and well after that – because the taxi was waiting – he was ready to go. So that took us off the ship and we were in downtown Houston and we came out and got a taxi, it was going to take us to where the ship was. And the taxi driver said, “I’ll take you there if I can get there but there is a ship that has blown up in the harbor.” And I thought, wow, you better get us back because if they have to move the ship, I have to be on board. So we got to the gates and they wouldn’t let us in because the windows were all broken in the gatehouse. They said “No, go down to the next gate.” They wouldn’t let us in either. Came back to the first place and they said okay, it is your ship and the crew are in the next building here. And anyway, we got in and it turned out that there were three fatalities, two radar service men who were just leaving the ship when it blew up, and a sailor who was on deck got killed. The second mate, when he saw the deck rolling up at him, all of the machinery and the pipes coming at him, he just dove over the side, saved his life. The funny thing about it, the boatswain was a Hawaiian fellow, very nice fellow, turned up missing. So one of the people in San Francisco was phoning his wife and said, “Earl is missing, the ship blew up and Earl is missing.” She says, “I know where he is, he is in Room seven in the hospital.”

**Debra Schwartz:** He what?

**William Mason:** She knew his room number in the hospital because he had phoned her right away. He wasn’t seriously injured.

**Debra Schwartz:** How many injured?

**William Mason:** The second mate injured himself diving over the side, Boatswain broke a few ribs.

**Debra Schwartz:** How big of a jump is that?

**William Mason:** Jump?

**Debra Schwartz:** To jump over the side.

**William Mason:** Well, the worst thing was he hit one of the wires when he went over, he hit the wire and went over. But you know, falling over in Houston harbor was probably more dangerous than the ship blowing up. [Laughs.] The water was terrible stuff.

**Debra Schwartz:** Oh no. So this ship was loaded with oil or gas or something?

**William Mason:** It was partly loaded, that was the trouble. That's the most dangerous time, when the ship is just partly loaded, because you draw air into the tanks. If they are fully loaded, there are fumes, of course, but it is so concentrated, much of the time, it depends on the cargo, but it is not as flammable. In other words, you could take a container of flammable fluid and try to put a match right on top of it and it won't blow, may not even catch because there is not enough oxygen. You have to have three things for a fire, you have to have combustible material, heat, and oxygen, yeah. If you don't have oxygen, you don't have a fire. But anyway, the ship was just about destroyed, most of it. So we were so fortunate to not be there, because if I had been on board, I probably would have been walking around on deck and that would be the end of it, think about that.

**Debra Schwartz:** Still, that was a close call.

**William Mason:** Yes. And on a live ship, a couple times when the hull cracked, but it wasn't all that serious, we managed to take care of it before the ship broke.

**Debra Schwartz:** So when you were out at sea, your voyages were how long, generally?

**William Mason:** Well, they could be very short like going to Portland or Seattle, or they could be a little longer going to Canada or Alaska. The Hawaiian Islands – we made a lot of trips to Hawaii – that would be four and a half days to get there, stay there maybe a day, and then four and a half or five days back.

**Debra Schwartz:** And you are transporting gasoline and oil this whole time to all these different ports, or picking up.

**William Mason:** Gas, oil, it just depended on the kind of ship I was on. Sometimes I was on a black ship, in other words, crude or bunker fuel, and sometimes I would be on a ship that was mostly refined cargo, which to me was more interesting because you had to be very careful not to mix any of it, and it was kind of a challenge. You had three grades of gasoline, for instance, and they would all be in the same system, but they would be paneled off, so you had to be very careful not to mix anything.

**Debra Schwartz:** So your wife was here in Mill Valley most of the time with your family.

**William Mason:** She sure was, that's right.

**Debra Schwartz:** Did you have business associates, people you worked with, who also lived in the area?

**William Mason:** Well, one shipmate lived over on Hillside. He was a second mate. He passed away, in fact that whole family passed away.

**Debra Schwartz:** Do you remember his name?

**William Mason:** Vultee.

**Debra Schwartz:** Ah. Wow, you've had kind of an adventurous life, haven't you?

**William Mason:** Looking back, I guess so. [Laughs.]

**Debra Schwartz:** If you were to describe looking back in your long, long life, what mattered the most to you, what would you say?

**William Mason:** Well, when I first went to sea, I knew really nothing about ships, so I had the lowest job on that ship, an ordinary seaman. Then after a year of that I could apply and graduate to be an able-bodied seaman, which was a little bit better, a little better pay, and a little more duty. And after a couple of years of that, I thought, I don't want to do this all my life, I want to be an officer on the ship. So I started studying. I took a navigational course from UCLA, for instance, to start off with. And then I went to, when I could get to it, on vacations, to a few schools that taught what I needed to know to be an officer and very shortly, I had a license. So I was just busy upgrading myself all those years and it wasn't too long, I had a chief mate's license. You have a first, second, and third mate, and it was because I just wanted to keep going on my experience and expertise, although I never became a captain. That is part of it. The other part was flying. Flying was a big part of my life because it was very intense during the war and then after we had bought an airplane, it was also a big part of my wife and my endeavors, flying this airplane. Flying is just special, I can't really explain it. When you can hop in an airplane and just take off and almost be free, but it is not carefree, it is like going to sea, you have to be sure you do things right or you won't survive, you know. It is no more dangerous, or maybe less dangerous, than driving on the highway, but you have to do things right. No matter what your endeavor is, you have to make sure you don't screw it up, you know, and make a lot of mistakes. So mistakes at sea or in the air can be fatal. Same with automobiles, as far as that goes, I see it every day.

**Debra Schwartz:** Almost free but not carefree, very well put.

**William Mason:** Yeah, yeah. Yes, flying in particular. We made a trip around the United States one year. We took off from Sonoma, went up through Idaho, Dakotas, Minnesota, clear to Boston, down the Eastern seaboard, south, went to Charleston, came back the southern route through Louisiana, Texas, and Arizona. We made many, many trips to the Midwest in the airplane, either going over the Donner summit or going a little bit lower through the southern route. But it was a real freedom being able to do that.

**Debra Schwartz:** Where did you store your plane when you weren't flying?

**William Mason:** Where did I store at? At the little airport called Schellville up near Sonoma, put it there.

**Debra Schwartz:** Did you take your children on the plane with you?

**William Mason:** A few times. They didn't seem to be particularly interested. They all got rides in it, but they didn't want to go on long trips or anything. But I have a granddaughter who is now married and has a grown son. When she was maybe 8 years old, she would just enjoy flying, I remember once doing a loop with her and at the top of the loop, there is a mirror up there, the pilot sits in back, and can watch the front passenger, and the front passenger can watch the pilot.

**Debra Schwartz:** This is in your biplane?

**William Mason:** Yes. At the top of the loop, she looked up at the mirror, gave a big smile, put her hands up like this, and she was just enjoying it. [Laughs.] In fact, oh, I have a great picture. I had a Jaguar at the time and the Jaguar Magazine always had a centerpiece, so I sent this one, the Jag was painted green, it was sitting in the grass at the airport, the airplane's right there, the granddaughter is right there, my wife and I. It was entitled "The Best of Four Worlds," the airplane, the two people, and the Jag. That was the centerpiece for that year, I still have the picture, I'll drag it out and show it to you.

**Debra Schwartz:** And the granddaughter.

**William Mason:** Yeah.

**Debra Schwartz:** So can we just take a quick look if we have missed anything here. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you wished I had?

**William Mason:** No, but you know, my mind keeps going back to our first years in Mill Valley. Coming from where we did in Los Angeles, this seemed like a paradise. It was always green. In fact, I remember writing a poem. I could hear the creek down here.

**Debra Schwartz:** Yeah, the Corte Madera.

**William Mason:** I could hear it, and the street lamps were on bales, they weren't locked into position, they would swing. So the wind, it would swing, at nighttime the shadows would dance around the ground and I could hear the creek. It was just an enchanted time, we were just in love. And of course, walking on the mountain. We'd never been to where we could just step out the door almost and go for a walk on the mountain. So our time here has been really wonderful. Like I said, it has changed a lot, but Mill Valley is still Mill Valley, [laughs] special.

**Debra Schwartz:** Well, I hope that if you find that poem you wrote, do you remember it?

**William Mason:** I can't quote it, I've written several poems, I can't quote it. I have it somewhere, I'll try to find it.

**Debra Schwartz:** Poet, pilot, seaman, family man.

**William Mason:** Artist.

**Debra Schwartz:** Oh yes, that's the other thing, you have all your beautiful art. Art of paintings, watercolors. You want to talk a little bit about that?

**William Mason:** Okay. I taught myself how to paint watercolors. Although I took lots of instructions, I never learned much except for one individual whom I learned from, but for some reason I liked what watercolors do. You are never sure what is going to happen with the brush on the paper. You want to get a certain effect, but it may not work out that way, it may turn into something even more marvelous or it may turn into junk, too. But it was fascinating to work with. My fingers are now so numb and I don't have time, I probably won't paint again. I would like to, but – and the rest of these pictures were mostly from places in the world we have been. I have a lot of them upstairs, stacked. I've taken some down, put some back up, and so forth.

**Debra Schwartz:** Well, I can't tell you how nice it is to sit in this lovely old home on 1 Cottage Avenue – sitting in this beautifully paneled room, the whole entire house is paneled, redwood paneling, or is it fir?

**William Mason:** I am not sure if it is redwood or fir. I'm not sure, to tell you the truth, it looks like redwood.

**Debra Schwartz:** It looks like redwood, but it is certainly paneled.

**William Mason:** All I know is it is very hard.

**Debra Schwartz:** Fir is not very hard.

**William Mason:** The wood is.

**Debra Schwartz:** Yeah, then this probably is redwood.

**William Mason:** That could be just due to its age. But some of the setting, I've had to work or renew some of the setting and it is so hard to drill or put a nail in it. Really, it was hard wood, very dense.

**Debra Schwartz:** Wow. Didn't you say that Cushing's name was written down on some of the wood?

**William Mason:** Yes, it is up in the attic, Sidney Cushing's name is stamped in the wood.

**Debra Schwartz:** So we are sitting in this beautifully paneled house with all this gorgeous wood, beautifully hand painted watercolors of ships and landscapes, we have got automobiles, there are books and books and books about everything, History. I know you are very interested in the Russian civilization, you have got books on Russia and language and - this is just any historian's dream house.

**William Mason:** Yeah, I've been living here so long now I don't think of it, but when I do think of it, it is an unusual place, it really is.

**Debra Schwartz:** Yes, this is an unusual place.

**William Mason:** We were so lucky to find it.

**Debra Schwartz:** Yes. And very lucky to meet you, too. So if there is nothing else you want to add, I guess we can say –

**William Mason:** I think we have pretty much covered it.

**Debra Schwartz:** Thank you so much for your time, Bill.

**William Mason:** You're welcome, it has been a pleasure.

**Debra Schwartz:** This has just been delightful.