

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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ABBY WASSERMAN

An Oral History Interview Conducted by

Stella Perone

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INTERVIEWER: Stella Perone

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Abby Carol Wasserman was born on May 30th, 1941, in Berkeley, CA, and grew up in Mill Valley, attending Old Mill, Park School, Alto Grammar School, and Tamalpais High School. In her oral history, Abby describes in rich detail, her school experiences, Mill Valley friends and neighbors, serving in the Peace Corps in Bogotá, Columbia, living abroad in England, Honduras, Turkey, and Nigeria, her involvement in theater, and her career path as a teacher, writer, and editor. She recounts the numerous sights and sounds of Mill Valley, as well as its influential residents, many of whom she knew personally.

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Oral History of Abby Wasserman

February 11, 24, March 16, 2015

Stella Perone: This is Stella Perone with Abby Wasserman on February 24th at 2:00 at Abby's home at 101 Reed Street in Mill Valley. Abby, would you like to talk about your parents and your early years?

Abby Wasserman: Yes. So my parents came here in the mid-1930s to Mill Valley. Both of them initially from the Midwest. My father Louis Wasserman was born October 12th, 1906, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He was the seventh child of my grandparents Samuel Wasserman and Bertha Pykle Wasserman. There were in all 14 children who lived. There were 17 births; 14 lived and grew to adulthood. My father's father's middle name was Hirsch – Samuel Hirsch Wasserman – he'd been born, as far as we know, in Common, which is a Byelorussian town, not far from Minsk. The name Wasserman for Jews in Russia probably stemmed from the period when Catherine the Great invited German Jews who were agricultural workers to come to Russia and settle, from Germany. My grandparents, whom I never knew, were married in the old country at the age of 18 or 19 and migrated almost immediately to America in 1898 or 1899. There's some question about this, the ages that they were. My grandfather Wasserman died in 1921 of a heart attack near Estherville, Iowa, where they were living at that time. And by the newspaper accounts, he would have been at that time 49 years old, which means that he would have migrated here more like the age of 27 rather than his early 20s. At any rate, they had one child and other children followed of course, as I said. Three of the children died, I think, right after birth, or were stillborn.

The reason for my grandfather and grandmother's migration was probably because he faced being conscripted into the czar's army, and young men could be kept in the army for up to 25 years. And there was apparently a most unfortunate and difficult effort to proselytize and convert them to Christianity during that time; it was a very unpleasant thing for a Jewish young man, and a lot of Jews migrated at that time. So members of my grandmother's family had already settled in the Midwest, in Minneapolis. That was the pattern, that people would help the new ones in their families to find jobs

and to have housing when they first came to the United States. Very little was ever told to their children by my grandparents, so for a long time they thought that their parents were actually from Poland and not from Russia. There was a hierarchy among the immigrant Jews – German Jews were at the top of the hierarchy, Polish Jews next, and Russian Jews at the bottom; so they may have told people they were from Poland just for, you know, to get along better with others, I don't know. Anyway, it wasn't the habit of the older generation to tell their younger members much about their lives.

My grandfather was very hard working; he held many jobs including owner-manager of a broom factory in Sheboygan. They eventually came to Estherville, Iowa, but had first moved to Minneapolis. In Minneapolis, my grandfather owned a small movie theater, and later on he traded in furs and also in metals. That would have been during the first World War I would think. My father was the second child in his family to be able to go to college. He entered the University of Iowa after his older brother, John, was already at the university. His brother suffered from epilepsy, and my father has written about the difficulty of having to be very vigilant to help his brother when he had seizures. He remembered waking up before his brother and watching him as he prepared for school, for classes, in case he should have a seizure; and eventually my uncle Johnny did die during a seizure when he was already an adult and a married man. He was swimming and drowned.

All of the boys and girls in my father's family – and there were seven of each of the living children – learned to play an instrument, and were sent to school through high school. But the two who were in the middle, Johnny and Lou, were able to get through college.

My grandfather died in 1921, and at that point, they owned a general store in Estherville. My grandmother called one of her sons to come back to help manage it, but he was not a very good manager; he led a dance orchestra and he would much rather be playing music, so the business deteriorated and the store had to be sacrificed at sale.

When my grandmother died when she was 45 of breast cancer, the children were – some of them were already married with children, some of them were very, very small; and the older ones had to take care of the younger ones. One of the youngest was Dale,

who became a playwright¹. My father, being the middle son, and his younger brother Bernard took in their three sisters who were younger than they were. The girls were about at adolescence, and that apparently was a very, very trying time for everyone. Difficult for teenage boys, young men (at 17 and 15) to take care of the younger girls. They knew nothing about how girls ticked, even though they had sisters, and their efforts at discipline were apparently traumatic for the girls.

In 1929, my father started west on his way to Australia when he was a young man. His mother had passed away; he had gone through those turbulent years with his siblings, and now he was on his own. He was on halfway there when the stock market crashed. He had done some investing in an oil company, and all the shares became worthless. By that time, he was in Los Angeles, and that's where he aborted his trip. For a long time then, he was in the Los Angeles area. He went to work as an underwriter in an insurance agency, a large part of whose business came from Hollywood stars and directors. He was also interested in politics, and he started out managing a campaign of a politician, but decided he didn't like that. Over the years, as many of his brothers and sisters came to join him in southern California, he did various jobs. His brother, Bernard, became a furniture salesman. My father had very little income, but he did a variety of jobs.

He started to write his first book, his *Handbook of Political Isms*, and engaged in that political campaign I talked about. He worked on Upton Sinclair's gubernatorial race, and he tried to defeat Richard Nixon, who was making his first run for Congress. And that would have been against – I think that was against Helen Gahagan Douglas, who was a many-term congresswoman. He met my mother in 1936 or '37 in Los Angeles. She was introduced to him by one of his housemates, Morgan Harris, who had known her for some years; and as my father said, "Who declared that since she wouldn't have him, she should at least have the next best." My father was at the time doing graduate school in political science at UCLA. And my mother was a Y [YMCA] secretary in San Jose. So they had a commuting relationship. They were married on May 6th, 1937, at my mother's home – her parents' home in Berkeley.

¹ Dale Wasserman wrote *Man of La Mancha* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (the stage version), among many others.

So now going backward, my mother was born in Minnesota, she grew up in Minneapolis. She came with her grandmother, her mother's mother, on a trip to California the first time when she was 11 years old to visit relatives already in California – her grandmother's other siblings. Her grandmother's siblings were living in southern California. So my mother came out and that was her first time in California. Her parents then decided to move to Oakland, California, when she was 12. So that would have been the next year. She had spent the previous summer, I believe, in southern California. And they settled in the area around Piedmont Avenue on Kingston Avenue in Oakland when my mother was 12.

My grandfather was a very interesting guy. My mother's father. He was from Zanesville, Ohio. He had grown up, part of his teenage years apparently because he had a very, very difficult relationship with his father, he had grown up partly in Anoka, Minnesota, in that region outside of Minneapolis. And that's where he met my grandmother, who had been born in Beardsley, Minnesota. So the two of them knew each other as friends before they got married. My grandfather was very, very interested in Native American culture, and he became a salesman for Weller Pottery, which he would have known as a boy in Zanesville because Weller was headquartered in Zanesville. He would have been surrounded by ceramics businesses there, and also glass factories around the Zanesville area. And he went to work for Weller, and he traveled the Great Plains selling pottery. He would take his samples with him, he would drive around, and make sales, and the orders were then fulfilled by the Weller company. He made a very good living, and my grandparents, even though they were both from very modest backgrounds, became certainly upper middle class in their finances, in their economics, and my grandmother kept a beautiful house with lovely objects in it, meticulously kept a household. My grandfather bought her a grand piano when my mother was a little girl; my grandmother never played the piano except perhaps a few hymns; she was a devout Methodist churchgoer. But my mother took piano lessons from the time she was very young, and became quite accomplished on the piano. My grandmother had that piano, which was a Steinway – 1917 Steinway Model M – until her death, and then it came to my mother here in Mill Valley. The piano was then here until after my mother died.

Stella Perone: Is that it?

Abby Wasserman: No. That piano is one that I traded my mother's piano for. This is a larger grand that belonged to my first piano teacher. I did that years after my mother passed away.

So my mother was a musician, and from a child, she had had a very wonderful life in Minneapolis. And she made a good life in California. She was a very flexible person who just made the most out of whatever environment she found herself in. And my father, too, both of them, which I think they passed on to me, because I've moved around a lot in my life, and always found something to like about the places I'm in.

So my parents were married in 1937, at my mother's parents' home. It's interesting, in family mythology, there was always the idea that my grandparents did not approve of their Jewish son-in-law; and I know that my mother cried on her wedding day. But from what I can glean looking back on their papers and memories, it wasn't such a big problem as I used to think. It was more that my father and the minister were very late arriving at the house on the day of the wedding, because they had been held up. And perhaps my grandmother was disappointed that her daughter didn't get married in the Methodist church, and that a very liberal minister who was more progressive Protestant married them, Dr. Robert Whittaker, and that they wrote their own marriage service. But they came to love my father and to admire him. And to depend on him in many ways. And they were also very generous when my parents wanted to buy this property at 101 Reed Street.

The first place that my parents lived in Mill Valley was – and it's interesting, these numbers – they first lived at 229 Eldridge Avenue. And I heard recently that that little cottage at 229 Eldridge was torn down perhaps some 10 years ago, and a new house built on it. It turns out a friend of mine, Catherine Flaxman, lives next door to that place. So I never saw that cottage unfortunately. Never had the curiosity, I guess, to look it up. But the next place they lived was 229 Marguerite. So they moved from one 229 to another 229. And it was about that time that Oscar Lehman, here in Homestead Valley, subdivided his land at the corner of Reed and Ethel over to what became Lehman Lane, which was the Lehmans' driveway, just a short block away. And the land was on the – let's see, this is going west, so on the east side of Reed Street. And this was the first property that sold, the corner lot at Reed and Ethel. My parents purchased it, and the

price, from what I understand, was \$550, which my parents could not afford. They didn't have that kind of money. My father was still going to school even though he was also working. So they bought the lot, and the money was loaned to them by my grandfather and grandmother, and they found an architect named John Meigs. I've looked for him – the History Room doesn't have the phone books from 1941 or 40; they're missing a bunch of phone books. So I haven't been able to find John Meigs yet in the Mill Valley phone book, but I understand that he was a Mill Valley architect. And apparently the house cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000 to build. I have the plans right there, the blueprints of the house, and of the subsequent addition to the house that was built in the mid-'40s.

My older brother was born in 1938, so that was just a little bit after my parents had been married for a year, and he was – his was not a planned birth, a planned pregnancy. Because my parents had so little money. But they always had very generous support from my grandparents, which must have cut both ways sometimes. And we went over frequently to Berkeley apparently when we were all very little; the frequent visits and back and forth. So while the house was being built, my parents lived at 81 Marion, they had part of a house at 81 Marion at that time, that they were renting. And moved in here in 1941. My brother Johnny, John Leland Wasserman, Leland was my mother's maiden name, Caroline Leland was her name – when my brother John was born they would have been living in one of the cottages on Marguerite, I would think, Marguerite and the Marion house. And then after I was born in Berkeley in 1941, I was brought home to this house at 101 Reed Street.

The house originally had two bedrooms, a kitchen, one bathroom, a living room that was also a dining room, that where we're sitting now, Stella, was the original dining room. The house ended at the kitchen with those stairs that you came up from the Reed Street side; but the front door was supposed to be this door over here that comes directly into the living room, so there's a little concrete porch there that really should be redone and made beautiful, but at this point I haven't gotten around to that. The house is pretty much the same– the footprint of the house is as it was. It had a lower part of the house which was a little substandard room which became my father's study, and then a basement where the laundry facilities were. And in about I guess 1945 or 1946, the rest of

the house was built, which would have been the master bedroom and a dining room – a separate dining room, which was on the right as you came up the stairs.

I do remember having my own room while my brothers had to share. I think they probably had bunk beds in that bedroom there that is now my husband's office. And I remember Ethel Lane, the life on Ethel Lane, was pretty sparse. There weren't many houses. But the Heckmans, the Albert Heckmans, lived right across Ethel Lane. And it used to be that the Heckmans were one of the most important landowning families in Homestead Valley, but these are the Heckmans that I remember, very modest people. And there was also a family named Hackney which was up at the end of Ethel Lane. Ethel Lane was a dirt road, and is now a paved road and has about 11 or 12 houses on it. But back then, there were just a few. I remember my brothers and I on a Saturday morning or a Sunday morning, heard clopping – we heard the sound of horses coming down Ethel Lane. And this was great, great excitement. There were about four or five horses, by themselves – there was no person with them – and they were clip-clopping down Ethel Lane, and they turned onto Reed Street and went out to Miller, and my brothers and I, you know, we were probably listening to "Let's Pretend" if it was a Saturday, or some other radio program on Sunday; we got dressed and we ran after them, and they went down to where the Safeway is now, at Camino Alto and Miller Avenue. There was a big lot. And that lot was used when carnivals came to town. Carnivals would come there to that huge empty lot, which would have gone way over to where Wells Fargo is, and you know it was big. And they would have set up there. I remember one carnival in particular, the freak show and things like that – that's where the horses stopped. They stopped and they grazed. And in the meantime, I think probably my parents called somebody, or somebody called, you know, "Do you know who owns these horses?" They would have come down from Laverne – would have come down the hill. And their owner did come and pick them up and take them back. That was great excitement.

I was thinking about the sounds that I could hear – there were so many wonderful, wonderful sounds here, some of which are gone; they don't exist anymore. One was, there was a frog pond on the corner of Evergreen and Ethel. Evergreen and Ethel had, on one side of the road, the wonderful, old house, a two-story house, that as far back as I can

remember belonged to Joseph and Maidie Moore. And Joe Moore was one of the many doctors in Mill Valley, and a wonderful guy. And Maidie was terrific, and they had three daughters who were our ages. And across from them, on the east side of Evergreen, was an empty lot. There's a little tiny, red-shingled house next door. There's a big stucco house on the corner of Evergreen and Ethel; that's where Sam Shepard lived with his wife O-lan Jones for a period of time when I was not living here in Mill Valley. And there was this little red-shingled house which is one house on the same side of the road toward Whole Foods. And you've got to go and look at it – it's just – you know, it's the way things used to be. And it's never been changed on the façade that I can see, and a very nice couple lives there. But the empty lot was where we children would wait for the school bus. And that is where there was a frog pond. It is a flood plain down there, because Reed Creek is right practically next door, so it flooded and it really – even now it still floods back there. Anyway, I could hear the frogs at night, and I loved that sound so, so much. And I'm sure that with the windows open, we could hear the creek. I could hear the foghorn from the bay. It had two notes – one note and then it went down; both bass notes. And I loved that sound.

And then of course there would be the cars coming by, but very few. Now it's like a highway out there. [Laughs.] When I first came back to Mill Valley in 1984, I actually sat out at the corner of Reed and Ethel, counting cars. And in high dudgeon. [Laughs.] I was so upset by the amount of traffic. But when I was growing up, there were few cars. I just remember the arc of the headlights coming down Reed Street or up Reed Street, or up Ethel Lane, lights right on my ceiling – I remember watching the arc of those headlights. I learned how to ride a bicycle here on Reed Street; almost got killed one time when I went heedlessly down the walkway on my bicycle and right into Reed Street and a car fortunately stopped short.

Whenever I have dreams about Mill Valley, I dream about this area and about Miller Avenue up to where Hickman Service Station used to be, where my friend Jane's father owned the service station during so many years. I dream about the Quonset huts, the Mill Valley Shopping Center – sorry, Miller Avenue Shopping Center is what they called it then, when it opened in 1947. That would have been a property owned by Mr. Ferrera, Louie Ferrera.

But there's something that I found in my mother's letters that I'd kind of like to go back to, but I want to add a couple of things about my grandfather Leland. His name was John Charles Agustin Leland, and my grandmother was Agnes Vera Cranmer. They're the ones who were both from the Midwest, he from Zanesville, she from Minnesota, and they met as young people, as teenagers in Minnesota when he was staying with a family friend who was related to my grandmother. He became a scholar, an amateur scholar of Native American artifacts, and as he traveled around the Great Plains, he would collect, sadly, things that had been pawned or sold by Native Americans who were down on their luck. And so he amassed a beautiful collection of Indian things. And at the same time, he researched Indian place names. He did this in the Midwest, but he continued to do this when they moved to California. So he had a great, great curiosity about Indian cultures, and admired them tremendously. He looked himself like he could have been Native American, but I don't think he was. There's nothing in the genealogy – he was also a genealogist, and he did a genealogy of the Leland family.

Stella Perone: What happened to his collection?

Abby Wasserman: Oh, my brother and I have it.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Abby Wasserman: Yeah, we have it put away. I have to – I keep thinking about what I need to do with that collection, because it's precious, really precious.

So, now back to Mill Valley. So I was looking up what I was named, because you asked me about it last time, so I looked up in my mother's letters. I was actually named after the wife of H.B. Charmin who you wouldn't have heard of, but I remember hearing his name as I was growing up. His wife was named Abigail, and her middle name was Lyon, which is interesting because I've just been reading about Laura Lyon White who was the founder of the Outdoor Art Club. Spelled the same way, but not necessarily any relation. H.B. Charmin had developed a seminar format for studying the records of the life of Jesus. And one of the things that brought my parents together was that they were both interested intellectually – they were both intellectual – they were interested in the life of Jesus, but not in the way that it was usually taught. They were interested in other interpretations of it. And the records apparently have been, are still being studied, but it involved the Socratic method of using probing questions to engage the gospel materials,

and that would have been right up my father's alley. And my mother, too, would have been very interested in it. They were both interested in the life of Jesus and the way that one could extrapolate the gospel— in a very humanist way. My mother had studied at Asilomar with H.B. Charmin, and admired his wife Abigail, and so that was one of the sources of my name. And another was another woman they knew named Abigail who was an author. I was looking up the name, what the name means, because they decided not to name me Abigail, but to name me Abby Carol. And so really, even though Abigail means something – it's kind of ambiguous. It means, "My father is joy" in Hebrew. And I'm not sure if that means that the girl child is the joy of her father, or if her father is the joy of the girl child. But that certainly was true in both our cases, I think. My mother wanted to name me Abby Gail, but I was named Abby Carol.

So down to – let's see. My father took a long time to get his Ph.D., but he worked steadily over the years. He was hired to teach at Tamalpais High School, and that was great good fortune. And the way that he got the job, he was hired by E.E. Wood who was the principal, after my father had given a speech in Mill Valley, and this could have been at the Community Church on Geography and Military Political Strategy. This was in the late 1930s, after they'd moved here, obviously. And my father was working on his *Handbook of Political Isms*. So he made the speech, and E.E. Wood came and asked him if he'd like to teach at Tam. And so my father was very happy about this.

Stella Perone: I'm sorry, Abby, I lost track – what was he doing right before he taught at Tam, work wise?

Abby Wasserman: Work wise, let's see. He was supervisor of the adult education project for Northern California of the WPA, the Works Progress Administration.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Abby Wasserman: And he covered a district that extended from San Francisco to the Oregon state line, although there were only 20 or 30 teachers to supervise, each of those were offering adult extension courses in a particular school district for free. So he kept administrative records and helped the teachers organize and recruit classes and visited them and so on, so that was 1937 to 1939. And he also was offering a once a week evening school course in world affairs and current events at schools in Marin and Sonoma counties as far north as Geyserville. And Geyserville was where he had a couple

of visitors to his class who afterwards, he says, “Congratulated me and introduced themselves as Harry Overstreet and Bonaro” and he doesn’t remember Bonaro’s maiden name, but Bonaro married Harry Overstreet, and they co-authored a bunch of books. And that’s another name I grew up with. They lived a few years in Mill Valley later on, the Overstreets. And that’s a good-- that would be a good thing for somebody to research, because they were really very distinguished thinkers and writers.

So after the speech and this new job, my father left the other job, transferred to Tam in the fall of 1939, offering courses in geography, English, and argumentation and debate. My father loved argumentation and debate. In fact, just so long as his children didn’t disagree with him, he was the best person to discuss something with. With his children he had less patience than he did with his students, and that was of course when we were grown and we wanted to assert ourselves. But he formed a debate club at Tam, and the club entered district tournaments and won most of them. And he writes in his own autobiographical notes, “The most notable being the defeat of Lowell High School in the finals of the San Francisco State College Tournament.” So that must have been a real high. And I think now about the mock trial team at Tam that just wins year after year after year. They must have a marvelous teacher. Some of his best debaters from Tam High School were lifelong friends. And again, names that I knew. And his geography courses –

Stella Perone: Wait, are you going to say who some of these people were who were his debate stars?

Abby Wasserman: Sure, his students. Absolutely. The twins, Pat and Mike Doran; their mother was named Vee, and although they left Mill Valley and moved to another town – not too far away in the Bay Area, they were lifelong friends, and I remember meeting them, going to visit them, and Mike and Pat were both in the military during the Second World War. Beautiful young men. Another student was Irwin Mann, whose mother Dorle lived over here on Scott Street in Homestead Valley, where my friend Ginna Flemming lives now, which is delightful to be able to visit her. Jack Hancock and Malcolm McAfee, I don’t remember him or Jack Hancock, but I did know Irwin and Mike and Pat over the years. And then, my father writes, “As for the geography, many were the letters I received from former students who found themselves stationed during

the Second World War in faraway places they'd first learned about in their geography courses." He writes that he needed a secondary credential for Tam, so he squeezed in what courses he could in the summer of 1939, now at UC Berkeley. And simultaneously finished his work for the MA and junior college credential; he wrote his thesis on the federal government and adult education. He did his practice teaching for the junior college credential at the College of Marin. So then, he says political geography was one of his five graduate sub-fields at the College of Marin, so he was asked by Dr. Wallace Hall who later was County Superintendent of Schools, to give a course in economic geography, and so he did that.

Right on top of that, fortunately my father had a good job. My brother was born, John Leland. And he was delivered –my father says he was delivered at Cottage Hospital in San Rafael, and of course that no longer exists. And our friend Dr. Don Fowler who lived on Cornelia and Lovell in that wonderful big house right at the corner on the downhill side. Don Fowler was the attending physician for that birth. So then almost three years later, I was born May 30th, 1941 at Alta Bates in Berkeley, and then my brother Richey – Richard Cranmer Wasserman was born July 8, 1942. Just a word about Cranmer. My grandmother's name was Agnes Vera Cranmer. She is a direct although very distant descendant of Thomas Cranmer the Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII. It's kind of interesting in my family to see these two – as it is in all of our families – to see two branches coming together. On my mother's side going way back to ancient England, and certainly one distinguished relative way back there, even though he was burned at the stake for heresy; and on my father's side, the really humble people who grew up in a *shtetl*, which would have been a Jewish neighborhood where – you know, a very rich, textured life, but not a lot of status. So I just think it's very interesting how two immigrant families came together in my parents.

I wanted to say something about the Fowlers. My parents had the most interesting friends here in Mill Valley, really marvelous people. They met Don and Carol Fowler, Carol Donnen Fowler, in about 1937-1938. They probably met them before my brother was born because Don Fowler was the doctor, so let's say they met in '37-'38 at the Fowlers' house on Cornelia. The Fowlers were hosting a concert that was a fundraiser for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which were Americans who had chosen to fight in the

Spanish Civil War against Franco. So the Fowlers, the Wassermans, later on the Strongs – Ray Strong and Betty Strong, and many other families here were of the progressive, liberal left political point of view that would have been represented by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and also would have supported it. And there were many left causes that my parents did support.

Now, another doctor was extremely important to us. It's interesting how many doctors there were. Dr. Rudolph Wolf was a German refugee, Jewish, who came with his wife Joan to Mill Valley; I don't know by what circuitous route, but he was our GP. And he was the most wonderful man. He had an office at the top of Millwood at East Blithedale, in a building that's been altered, but it's still there, it was never torn down.

Stella Perone: Is that the one on the Lawson and Dyer side, or the Cagwin, Seymour and Hamilton side?

Abby Wasserman: On the – it's on the Scout Hall side².

Stella Perone: So it might have been that building? Or right there, adjacent?

Abby Wasserman: It was that building that – it's actually a corner building, there's a little lane that goes there.

Stella Perone: Oh, got it.

Abby Wasserman: Millwood dead-ends right at that building. So Dr. Wolf would make house calls. You had asked me before about polio in Mill Valley, and I – first I'll tell the story of my brother, and then I want to go back a little bit because there's some more facts I have for you about that. My brother Richey was six years old when he was diagnosed by Dr. Wolf with polio. I think he had a terrible stomachache, and there were some other symptoms. Dr. Wolf came to the house and he immediately diagnosed polio. Now why would he know that? Well he would know that because polio had been present in Marin County – this was 1948, polio was present in Mill Valley in 1945. And in 1945, Dr. Wolf was already our family GP. I was four years old then, and my brother Richey was three years old. There were 18 cases of polio in Mill Valley in 1945 in the summer, July. My father was away in the Army from 1944 I think to 1946. He would come back to visit us from time to time, but he was pretty much gone those years. And my mother

² Scout Hall is located at 177 East Blithedale Ave.

would take us, as my father had taken us I guess before this, to Clear Lake to vacation. I found a letter from my mother from July 1945 where she writes about coming home from Clear Lake to Berkeley where her parents were, stopping at her parents' because it was almost my brother Richey's birthday, July 8th, and talking to Dr. Wolf about the danger of coming back to Mill Valley at that time because of the contagion, the 18 new cases that had been reported. My mother was advised by Dr. Wolf not to bring us home, but to stay a little longer in the East Bay. So you know *Appointment in Samarra*: Death met somebody on the road, you know, and he tried to escape Death by going to another place, and Death met him there, too. Well, polio met my brother here in Mill Valley, even despite this, but not until 1948.

Stella Perone: A few years later.

Abby Wasserman: A few years later. So the polio – I think the epidemic spread during these kind of high contagion periods, and one of them would have been '45 in Marin County, another one '48. And that one I think was all over America in '48. Before the Salk vaccine. So Dr. Wolf has our undying gratitude for that, but also just because he was such a wonderful, loving man. He took care of us so well. There was one time when he thought I might have meningitis, and they took me to Kaiser, we were early members of Kaiser Permanente, and he had me taken in an ambulance to Kaiser San Francisco. It turned out I did not have meningitis, thank goodness. But he was very vigilant. His wife Joan was a violinist, and she would make chamber music with Carol Fowler who played the piano, and Betty Strong, who was also a violinist, Ray Strong's wife. I would say there are a lot of themes of one's childhood, and one of them in mine certainly was music, because my mother would play the upright piano that we had, and later of course the Steinway of her mother's. She would play many nights, and she would be playing while we were falling asleep. I remember that sound as being as beautiful a sound as I've ever heard – to hear my mother playing the piano at night. And the other sound I would hear, and this is back to sounds I loved, was my father's typewriter immediately under me in the study, because my bedroom was right above the study. So the clacking of the typewriter and the playing of Chopin or Rachmaninoff, those were among my favorite sounds.

A little bit about my parents: they were people of depth. My mother was very loving. She was a very creative mother. She was also sometimes unable to handle having three children and her husband away; and at that point, neighbors around here in Homestead Valley would help out. This was a very, very neighborly place. And in many of my mother's letters sent during the war, there are parts about the Heckmans helping out or Virginia and Bob Elliot who lived right up the lane at Laverne on what would be the extension of Ethel Lane if it did go all the way through (but it doesn't) and other friends who would step in to help. Among my parents' friends were Ada Clement and Lilian Hodghead, who were the founders of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, both of them pianists and piano teachers; Sybil Schneller who was a piano teacher and taught my brother Richey. She was also a poet, and she ended her days very creatively baking beer bread, which I tried after I read her recipe in her oral history, very good and very easy, and writing poems at the Redwoods. Mildred Mancha, who was raised in Mill Valley – I never knew this – she was raised right in the area of Elma and Lovell, and she lived in Mill Valley until she was a young married woman and beyond that. She moved to Stinson Beach, and I remember her as my mother's dressmaker when she lived in Stinson Beach. And I had no idea that she had this amazing history in Mill Valley, that she'd grown up here and she'd moved because like many people who moved from Mill Valley, they didn't like the way the town was going. The newcomers didn't have the right flavor for them. [Laughs.]

Oh, I have to share with you what I just heard yesterday. There's actually a new term that is out there, there are some people who refer to Old Mill Valleyians as Millbillies. I was incensed when I heard that, but now I think it's funny. Millbillies. Well I'm a proud Millbilly then. [Laughs.]

A little something about growing up right here. There were kids all over the place; there were the Fosses across the street. Carol Foss was the oldest daughter of Fred and Martha Foss, who were from South Dakota and had come – had migrated west during the Dust Bowl. Fred worked as a volunteer fireman, and I believe he was an electrician and he was kind of a big bluff presence in my life. Martha was the salt of the earth, the most wonderful, generous, loving, welcoming person. And always with an apron on and always offering cookies. And she did my mother's ironing. My mother paid her to do the

ironing at one point, really probably for several years. Across the street there at Ethel and Reed were the Eshelmans, Jack Eshelman was a journalist; his wife Hilda was a wonderful, bright, bright woman who became a very strong activist during the Vietnam War, and their son Alan Eshelman, and Alan became a doctor; he lives in Berkeley the last I heard. So Alan and my little brother were of an age; Carol Foss and I were of an age; down the street were more people, up the hill were more kids, and it was just – this was just an enchanted place to grow up.

I wanted to say something about Clear Lake, because I just love what my mother wrote about it. And it has to do with that early love of music I felt. My mother wrote about this to my father this when he was in the Army. It was around the time that their friend Don Lindheim had died in Germany. My mother and father had met Don and Mary Lindheim here in Mill Valley when they lived on Ethel Avenue. Mary Lindheim is the artist, the ceramic artist in one of my books, it was actually a book I edited, but also partially wrote³. And it's all about her life and her art. So she was a lifelong friend for me from the time I was a very little girl, probably two or three years old. My father and Don Lindheim were close. Don was a plant geneticist, and he enlisted for the Army, and was a Ranger. In Germany they were mopping up in 1945 when the Germans had surrendered, and apparently there was a munitions accident, and Don died. So my mother writes about the night in May of 1945 that Mary called her and told her that Don had died. And my mother obviously was in very strong grief for their friend, and also for Mary. And so Mary came over here for comfort. My mother writes, "Last night she came for about three hours. A simple supper, helping get the children to bed, a walk up the hill [that would have been up Ethel Lane with Johnny and me]. It was very beautiful last night, or rather last twilight, a warm, quiet feel in the air after the rain of the day, with slow mist covering the distances. And then home again and Johnny to bed and then Mary read aloud excerpts from Don's letters." And then she says, "The children were really wonderful, so loving toward Mary, so anxious to be helpful, and to ease her heart. Not a question, not a word about Don, not a demand; just loving and funny." And then later on she says in the same letter, "It is interesting that the first thing Johnny [who was then

³ Wasserman, Abby. (Ed.) (2007) *Mary Tuthill Lindheim: Art and Inspiration*. Petaluma, CA: Cameron + Company.

seven years old] said when I told him Don had died was, ‘I wish I could take his place.’ And I’m sure he must have sent his thoughts up to God.”

Now what strikes me about that is how little we were, and yet how we knew about the death of Don. And that was very typical of my mother. She would have told us that. Not every mother would; they might try to shield the children. I don’t think it was a bad thing, but I just find it interesting. Of course I wonder about my brother saying that, how he would have thought something like that – “I wish it had been me,” so strange.

Anyway in June of that year, I had my 4th birthday. My father was gone, but he gave me a doll’s high chair and a doll cradle painted blue – light blue, and trimmed with shell pink and little decorations of yellow ducks and the three bears. I love that. And I love what Mother wrote next. We were going to Clear Lake, and I will try to imitate my childish lisp: “That morning Abby said at breakfast table, ‘Mommy, you are my sweetheart, because we’re going to Clear Lake.’” So you know – I mean, this is an enchanted childhood in many ways, and yet, tinged by sadness, too, when we were very small.

Stella Perone: Well you’re going without your father.

Abby Wasserman: We were very sad about not having my father. Here’s something else she wrote to my father, and that would have been in July when we were at Clear Lake. She wrote – I mean, knowing Clear Lake now, which is – it’s a very polluted lake, and it’s not doing well at all, so I think this is kind of interesting. This was 1945: “Today we are going over to our ‘private beach’ for an early swim and picnic. Maybe we’ll fish a little, too. This lake is crammed with catfish. Last night was wonderful; we were all in bed about 10:30, stars bright, when the most beautiful violin strains came from the porch next door. Jerome Kern, Romburg, Strauss, Gershwin, on and on, with almost faultless intonation, beautiful tone, lilting rhythm, and a tiny melancholy shade. I heard little sobs beside me and turned to find our little Abby [laughs] crying. ‘Why are you crying?’ ‘I’m crying because it’s so pwetty.’ (I’m sure that’s the way I said it.) [Laughs.] A little later she said, ‘I’m crying too because I’m sad that Roosevelt died.’”

So these are kids who were taking from their parents, you know, really just we knew everything that was happening; children do, you know. But also I think we were very empathetic children as children are, you know they just take in all this stuff.

When Roosevelt died, my mother wrote extensively about spending a whole day listening to the radio – all the programs were just music. They just had music all day in his honor. She just sat and cried listening to the music all day when Roosevelt died. So you can see who their hero was.

So anyhow, what should I talk about next, Stella? My first experience in school would have probably been at the old Congregational church that is on Summit Avenue, you know toward Lovell, the one that's owned by Marilyn and Ed Stiles. It was an early nursery school, right across the street from Summit school, which would have been higher –

Stella Perone: Okay, the church is down below that old building, it's now kind of turned into apartments?

Abby Wasserman: Right.

Stella Perone: That's owned by the Stiles?

Abby Wasserman: Yes.

Stella Perone: From –

Abby Wasserman: From up the, up on the mountain, yeah –

Stella Perone: Yeah, yeah – the crazy place, excuse the term.

Abby Wasserman: No, I know what you're talking about, the place where people just have a lifetime lease –

Stella Perone: Yes, yeah. Got it.

Abby Wasserman: – Then the land goes back to – but yeah, very Bohemian, very interesting place and Ed –

Stella Perone: Druid Heights.

Abby Wasserman: Druid Heights, is that what they call it? Okay.

Stella Perone: They still in that, to your knowledge?

Abby Wasserman: They're still there, yeah.

Stella Perone: They live there?

Abby Wasserman: Yeah. Ed and Marilyn live there.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Abby Wasserman: It's a wonderful place; I've been there. So –

Stella Perone: So you went to a preschool in the church?

Abby Wasserman: So I went to a preschool there, yeah. I believe I also went to preschool at a place almost right across the street from the Carnegie Library⁴ on Lovell. There was a little house there that I have a vague memory about going to nursery school.

Stella Perone: When you went in the school on Summit, did you just have a small portion of the school? Was it just like a few kids, or did they have the whole main floor?

Abby Wasserman: I think there was certainly the main floor, but I don't remember, really. I just remember that that was a nursery school that we went to. So then – but in kindergarten, I went to Old Mill School. And if memory serves, my teacher was Mrs. Wright. And oh, my – was she ever a Mrs. Right – she was, as I recall her, she had an ample bosom which was comforting and loving, and she was just the best teacher. So I was very happy as a little girl, in her class at Old Mill.

And then I went into first grade; and I believe my teacher's name was Miss Smith. Might there have been a Pamela Smith or a Pam Smith? I don't remember; I should find out from the archives at Old Mill if they're kept. I hope they're kept. So I was in first grade, and as was the custom with some children, they decided to skip me into the second grade. My second grade teacher was I think Miss Kelio, but I may have all of this mixed up. I know that Miss Kelio and Miss Spaulding – Mrs. Spaulding, Virginia Stolte Spaulding of the Stolte family – were my teachers at Old Mill. So perhaps that Miss Smith is – maybe she was the teacher of one of my brothers, because Miss Kelio, I believe, was my first grade teacher, and I think Virginia Spaulding was my second grade teacher. Anyway, I was very disappointed about that switch, because it happened right when we were preparing to do a circus, my classroom. And I think I might have been – I think maybe I was going to be an acrobat or something wonderful; even though I didn't know any gymnastics, maybe I could somersault. And you know we were preparing our costumes and so on, and then I was taken out of the class and I was disappointed about that. But I loved my second grade teacher also.

I do remember that there might have been some time of unhappiness or at least a day when I wasn't feeling like staying in school because another doctor friend of ours, Rod Hartman, who lived on Bigelow, and his wife Zeta, Zeta and Rod, had two children,

⁴ The Carnegie Library in Mill Valley was located at 52 Lovell Ave. It has since become a private residence.

Harriet and Nick. And Nicky Hartman was my best friend around this time. We were the same age. And Harriet has told me that she knows the story about my encountering Nicky or convincing Nicky that we should walk to my house; and so we left school, the two of us, without letting anybody know, and walked down Throckmorton, turned onto Miller, walked down Miller – you know, this is a long walk for short legs. And yeah, I remember that. And I also remember that there was wonderful fun at Halloween where I dressed up as a gypsy, and how much I enjoyed that. I remember being on the play yard and liking that. So I think that those first two years, plus kindergarten at Old Mill were very happy years for me.

I was then transferred over to – unless I spent third grade at Old Mill, which I don't remember doing – I know I had Mrs. Gladys Hart for the third grade, whom I loved. She lived on Montford, right near the bottom of Molino. And I liked her so very much. So she was my third grade teacher, wherever it was. It might have been Homestead School, might have been Old Mill.

And then in fourth grade I had Blanche Lewis. Mrs. Lewis was my fourth grade teacher. I remember some of the things we did in school on the playground, and I also remember being in her classroom. On the playground we traded cards. I remember starting to tell you about this. The cards were – they were specifically for trading. They weren't playing cards; they usually were blank on one side, unlike playing cards. And they would be sets that you could collect. You could collect a set of say, of winners of the Kentucky Derby. There was a horse named O'Lavery and another one named Whirlaway. And I remember having those cards. They might be floral bouquets from the National Gallery, and you know, from paintings. They might be Dutch landscapes or they might be – oh gosh, there were so many different kinds. And you would trade with your friends, and you'd try to get sets, sets of four usually. Or sets of two.

I also remember having a terrific crush on my friend Phil Richardson who was the son of Hope Wheelright, and stepson of George Wheelright. And we were very dear friends with the Wheelrights. And Phil was a redhead and I thought he was wonderful, and I still think he's wonderful. And always loved seeing him. So there was that; and then there was Donnie Miller, who was – maybe that was the poorest family in Homestead Valley. I know that Donnie would come to school with clothes that had not

been washed properly. And he was a very sweet boy, but his clothes smelled bad. I don't remember people bullying him, but I have a feeling that he was kind of sad. He had several siblings and one little brother, Bobby, was in my mother's class when she was teaching at Alto School, and she was very fond of Bobby. That would have been fifth grade for Bobby, so that was years later. And it was just tragic to know that Donnie and Bobbie both perished with their father in a drowning accident when they were out fishing in a small boat.

Stella Perone: In the bay?

Abby Wasserman: Yeah, I'm not sure where they were fishing, but that would make sense. I don't know – maybe they could have been on a lake, maybe a storm came up; maybe the father – I don't know what happened. You know there are these threads that you would like to be follow in your childhood, and don't know how to do it.

But I think that Homestead School, again, was a kind place to be, you know, a place that was where people were pretty good to each other. Now maybe that's the age of being in the fourth grade, I don't know. Fifth grade is where I began to encounter meanness. In the fifth grade I was sent over to Park School. Now my mother taught at Park School for at least one year, and so but this would have been a time when she was not at Park School, because she taught for many years at Alto, and she was teaching fifth grade at Alto that year, so I was put into fifth grade at Park instead of going over to Alto with most of my cohorts. I later joined them at Alto, the year after.

I remember at Park School, a couple of notable things. I had Louise Fisher as my teacher, and she lived up, right off Molino, not too far from Montford, and she was pretty elderly at that point. And I was very fond of her. It was a fifth grade/sixth grade combination at Park that year, so she was teaching both of us, you know, at the same time. I remember I became interested in drawing, especially interested in drawing; and I was also becoming interested in boys. That's when I attended my first boy/girl party was in that fifth grade. It seems awfully young to me now – gosh, nine or ten years old; because I was younger than the other kids, a little bit younger because of skipping that grade. But I remember playing Spin the Bottle, and Post Office in that boy/girl party. And was thrilled when Eddie Mauroni gave me a stamp, which was a kiss on the cheek. It was really sweet.

I remember that Edna Maguire, Mrs. Maguire, was still teaching then at Park School. She was in a separate building. They were on the same grounds of course, and just, you know, 50 feet away or something like that. Some of the older girls in the sixth grade were talking trash about Mrs. Maguire, and I was very easily influenced I think, so I spoke up and I said some trash talk about Mrs. Maguire, whom I didn't even know. And the girls went and told Mrs. Fisher that I had said this. And I got in bad trouble. The principal, Stephen Parodi, chewed me out about that, you know. I hope at that point I learned that you have to be careful whom you trust. I don't know, though, if I did. It might have taken me more lessons. So that's something that I regret, because years later I would find out what an awesome person she was, and how accomplished, and you know, she – children are so ignorant.

I remember also that it was post-war; that would have been around 1950 maybe. And there was a book that was being circulated around the classroom that had cartoons that were kind of sexy, innocent by standards today, but they would always feature voluptuous, Vargas-looking women, you know, and then GIs, and one of the GIs had a wolf's head. And this was circulating all around the classroom; I don't even remember who brought it in. But Mrs. Fisher found it in my desk. And I was again chewed out by Mr. Parodi. So I, you know, I remember being a child who was very – I was a compliant child, and yet I was so stubborn when I was being bawled out. I remember you know kind of that stance of – “No, I have not done anything wrong, and I'm going to sit here and seethe.” But I was upset by those things. So the fifth grade was a mixed bag, but I did love Mrs. Fisher, and I think she was a very good teacher. We were very lucky to have such good teachers, so well trained.

Anyhow, then I went into sixth grade, and I had Esther Hessel, and this was at Alto, my first year, and I loved Miss Hessel. She was the first teacher who communicated the idea that I might have writing talent. I remember we were supposed to write something in the letter form, and I wrote a letter, and she commended me on the letter, and said that she thought that I had writing ability. And so many years later, it was my great pleasure to meet her again in Oakland. She was a docent at the Oakland Museum where I was working. We became reacquainted, and it was so nice because by then I was

a professional writer. [Laughs.] And I could thank her. You know, I could thank Miss Hessel for her faith in me.

I remember very nice things about being in her class. I remember new kids who would come to the class, and if they were girls, I generally was, you know, was always extending friendship to them. I liked meeting new people. That was also a period where my mother suffered a miscarriage, and I remember that I felt such confidence with my teacher Miss – I think it was either Miss Hessel or Mrs. Mack, who was my seventh grade teacher – and being able to go to them and tell them that. You know, not really knowing entirely what it meant, but having them, you know, hug me and express their concern and so on. Of course they knew my mother because she was teaching at Alto. And that was a sad time for me, because I knew my mother was pregnant, and I was hoping so much she would have a girl and I would have a sister. I even had the sister named; I had named her Brenda, and it was years later my mother told me it was a boy; it wasn't a girl. So, I never had a sister at all, except in my imagination.

I had a pretty good time in the seventh grade with Mrs. Mack. I liked her very much. I began to cartoon; I would draw at great length. I would draw, copy Little Lulu and other cartoons. And I made up a little comic strip to put in the school paper about a parrot and a pirate, I think. What did I know about pirates – but I still remember how I drew the parrot's beak. And I also was singing at that time, and there was a school rally where I sang "Wheel of Fortune." I think that may have been in the eighth grade.

I was put into Miss Jane Adams' class in the eighth grade. And she was a very tough teacher; very, very good, very solid and tough. But she also had a sharp tongue, and she had a pet also, teacher's pet.

Stella Perone: Who was her pet?

Abby Wasserman: Mary Jane Letsen was her pet. And Mary Jane, whom I love and admire now, because I got to know her way after high school, got to know her again for the amazing person she is, but in the eighth grade, she was a mean girl, and there were a few sad things that happened. But it's interesting that she was Miss Adams' pet, because she probably needed to be somebody's pet. She was perky and she was cute, and she was fast in her thinking and she could be – she could say very mean things and bratty things,

but she probably basked in the friendship that her teacher had for her. And I think that was probably a great thing.

I remember one thing Miss Adams used to do. She would have us put our heads on our desks for a quiet time, and we would listen to music. And I remember hearing "Victory at Sea" and how – I'm going to close the shade here so that the sun is not in your eyes. Is that better?

Stella Perone: Yes, it doesn't bother me at all. I like the warmth.

Abby Wasserman: You do? Okay. We'll leave that one. Yeah, and there were other projects I liked during the eighth grade, but I did get in trouble, and I believe that I mentioned to you at some point that I had spread a rumor about a friend of mine, and been called out by the principal for that. So my visits to the principal's office seemed to have made quite an impression on me. And I – you know, I guess you have to learn things the hard way; about not gossiping.

The other thing that was very important to me in the eighth grade was that I was asked out to the eighth grade dance by the boy I had a crush on. And Mary Jane also liked this boy. His name was Paul Simonson, and I have seen him at our high school reunions. He was also a redhead, I think I had a thing for redheads. Paul asked me out to the eighth grade dance when we were on the playground and we were – it must have been after people had been called in, or we met by accident on the playground, because nobody else was around. And I didn't get it at first when he asked me to go to the dance. And then I said, "Sure." And then he didn't get it. Was I saying yes or no? And so he said, "What?" or "What do you mean?" And I said, "I would love to, Paul," in my most lady-like voice. Mrs. Mancha made my eighth grade dress, my graduation dress. And Paul came and picked me up, he walked over here and I remember being out there in the yard, and my parents out there, and Paul picking me up, and we walked up to Park School for – that was where our graduation dance was held, for the eighth grade, at Park School, in the auditorium. Alto didn't have an auditorium. All the rallies were held in the hallway.

And that reminds me, I should go back, but first I'll just say that Paul and I danced the first dance, and then he went off to be with the boys, and I went off to be with the girls. And he never came over during the whole evening. And I got into such a funk that I went into the kitchen and I asked the mothers if I could help, because food was

being served that evening. I remember glaring at Paul, some manner of glare, when he came through the line for his food, because I don't believe I ever went back into the room to, you know, nor did I ask somebody else to dance, nor did I – you know. I gave up easily.

So years later at our 20th anniversary reunion for Tamalpais high school, I was talking with Paul and his wife, and I wanted very much to ask him why he had not danced with me anymore, or walked me home, because friends of mine walked me home that night. It wasn't because he was angry at me for anything; there was no falling out that had happened. It was just some sort of crazy boy adolescent thing that you know, happens. And so I decided I wasn't even going to put him on the spot. I decided that I knew the answer because I had by then raised two boys. But I was a very sensitive child and I wasn't popular with boys. I had a lot of friends, but I was kind of a slow bloomer I think. So who knows what it was.

But I was going to go back a little bit. When I was in Miss Mack's classroom in seventh grade, I entered a contest for Junior Scholastic magazine, where we were to write what we thought about our hometown. And so I wrote a little essay which my father helped me beef up a bit, with a couple of facts. The essay won the second prize in the junior division, and that was just – that was the height of my life up until then. And this is what I wrote. It's very short. "I think that I live in the most wonderful place in the world. It's a place where you can stretch your toes and think, 'This is home.' It's a town that has just about everything – rolling hills, beautiful streams, pleasant weather most of the time, and plenty of space to keep pets. At night time it's especially nice. I always drift off to sleep to the lullaby of the crickets that live in a little marsh nearby. Long ago Mill Valley was just a small lonely town, but now it is a much bigger place with new buildings going up every month. Until 1939 [that should have read 1937], the only way to get to San Francisco was by ferry boat. But since the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, we can go there much faster." And that, of course, is not necessarily true. But anyway, I digress. "Just outside our town is Muir Woods, a lovely spot where tall redwood trees shadow little streams and pretty wildflowers of every color grow along the paths. Every winter when snow falls, my friends and I climb up to Mt. Tamalpais to marvel at the glistening whiteness, and of course, we throw snowballs. I am very happy these days with

my friends, and I wouldn't trade my home in Mill Valley for all the money in the world." I won \$50 and a gold plated typewriter for that masterpiece of writing. But that was really the way I felt. I really, really loved it here. It was totally from the heart.

I graduated from the eighth grade, and went to Tamalpais High School. Do we have some more time? Because I could speak now about my mother and kind of fill in – fill in about her.

Stella Perone: Absolutely.

Abby Wasserman: My mother's full name was Frances Caroline Leland Wasserman. And she was born, as I believe I've said, in Minnesota. She grew up in Minneapolis, she had one brother who was younger than she. And she played music; she loved the piano and she also had nearly all of her dresses made by a dressmaker in Minneapolis, whom she's written about; a person who was just a magician with a needle and thread and fabric. Her father was a traveling salesman for Weller, and so the family had a nice house and there were many children in the neighborhood that she played with and Minneapolis at that time still had a lot of area to roam free.

She moved, as I believe I said, at 12 to Oakland, and she attended for her high school Oakland Technical High School which was one of the best high schools in the Bay Area. She loved it there; she went four years to Oakland Tech. She was very active in music as well as in school activities. Her nickname was Lelie – L-E-L-I-E, I think is the way that her friends spelled it. And she was popular and she was friendly and bright.

She graduated and went to College of the Pacific in Stockton, was there for four years, she joined a local sorority there. She majored in elementary education and minored in music, specialty piano; did a recital in her senior year, and I think she was extremely happy there, because later on when I was applying to colleges, she was convinced that COP would be the best place for me to go, and in fact I did decide to go there for two years.

My mother graduated from school and was hired by the Ripon public schools down in southern California to teach music. And she taught for a number of years, and then she became a YW secretary in San Jose, and that's during the period where she met my father.

She was 29 when she married. So that was a little bit later than many women were marrying. And she was very much in love with my father. It truly was a match – a love match for her especially I think. For him, too; but I think my father was more of a loner, my mother really needed and loved people. She was very emotional, she was extremely intelligent, very, very well read, very creative person.

After having children, before she went back to teaching, she made hand-puppets out of papier-mâché, clay forms, clay heads which she would sculpt, and then she would lay papier-mâché over the clay, let it dry, cut it into two sections, papier-mâché them back together, and then she would paint the faces and put on hair and make costumes for them. We had a neighbor named Eva Hinkley who lived directly across the street on Reed Street, and Eva Hinkley and my mother formed a puppet theater, and they would present puppet shows for young children who had birthday parties. Some of the puppet shows they would present were Snow White and Rose Red, there was a story called Donkey Skin, which was about a prince who'd been changed into a donkey. They did Jack and the Beanstalk; let's see, what else – Cinderella was another one of their plays. My grandfather carved the hands for a lot of the puppets, because he was very, very clever with wood. And he also carved the pumpkin coach for Cinderella and other props that my mother needed. Oh, and I remember in Snow White and Rose Red there is a bear who's a character – a prince, of course, who's been turned into a bear. And my grandfather carved the paws and the claws for the bear.

A few of the things that my mother did that were very creative and that we children loved, she had a drawer in our Japanese chest, the bottom drawer was full of dress up clothes that we could take out and put on, you know, old scarves, and skirts and shirts and so on, and make ourselves up to be any character we wanted. She had a rainy day box that was full of activities for children; things to draw with, sewing cards, many other things. She read to us; she read so many books to us, and we were all, I think, at least my older brother and I, were very quick readers and we all loved books tremendously.

She took care of our pets. We had a series of dogs. We could never have cats because my brother John suffered from asthma. One time I brought home a cat, a kitten that I'd found that was all wet, it was in the rain, a little stray kitten. I took it home and

we kept it for one night, but my brother's asthma flared up and so I had to – I guess we took it to the pound, the Humane Society.

My mother was a wonderful cook, as my grandmother was, and she made our meager finances go a long way. She cooked a lot of things in the pressure cooker. The leaner cuts, the cuts of meat that were tougher, in the pressure cooker could be transformed into a lovely beef stew. She would cook tongue with cloves and onions and a sweet sour sauce, also in the pressure cooker. She cooked liver and onions and bacon. She cooked wonderful apple pie and lemon meringue pie, and cakes when we had birthdays. She was really a good mother.

And I think that those years when my father was gone – and they weren't the only times my father was gone – he also would be gone for months at a time on tours when he later started teaching at San Francisco State College. He would lead tours to Europe, to Russia, to the Middle East, one time to Mexico. So my mother was left with the three children quite a bit, and I think it was hard on her. She would get impatient with us. But most of the time she was a really, really patient mother, and you know, did a lot of things for our well-being. I remember we would go on vacations without my father because he was gone. There was one summer that he was teaching summer school and he came to join us up at the Tuolumne Berkeley Family Camp where we would go every summer. Do you know that, Stella?

Stella Perone: I've been there.

Abby Wasserman: I loved it up there. Oh, my, it was enchanting. And we would stay in a tent cabin. And we would perform puppet shows for the camp. Mother taught us how to make stocking puppets. There were so many mice in camp that she helped us make mouse puppets. There was a mama mouse, and then there was Tooeey, Wally, and Mimi. I was Mimi, my brother John was Wally, and Richey was Tooeey. So that must have been post-1948; post-my brother's bout with polio.

When he caught polio, the polio virus, my brother was immediately hospitalized, and I believe that he may have been as long as three or six months in the hospital. And he endured a lot of spinal taps, and at one point his roommate died. He had partial crippling in his leg when he came home.

When my brother did come home from the hospital, he wasn't able to walk. And it took a long time of physical therapy to restore his muscles. I remember watching my mother exercise his legs on the dining room table. But I found out subsequently that it was so painful for her to hear him crying when she tried to do the exercises with him to stretch his legs and make them work again, that she hired a physical therapist. Perhaps someone that Kaiser Permanente was able to send, and so, she would just go into her room and close the door so she couldn't hear his crying. She knew it had to be done, but it was terribly painful for her.

The interesting thing is that I don't remember much about my parents and how they reacted to my brother's illness. I do remember visiting my brother once over in San Francisco at Kaiser where he was. But it must have had a great impact on the family – on family life. I know that my brother came back feeling very vulnerable. I remember seeing him in bed. He was very clever with his hands, and he started to take things apart and put them back together again. He made a ham radio. It may have been at the time of his confinement when he wasn't able to run around, that he started to be so clever at what he does beautifully, which is to make things, to fix things. He's done a lot of remodeling of houses, historic buildings, and he works renovating old sailboats. He's working on one now, he's been working on for several years. He loves to bring something back to life, and then go on to another project.

Stella Perone: How is his walking post-polio? What impacts did polio have on him?

Abby Wasserman: Well, it seems – as far as walking, it seems to have had no impact ultimately; he was never strong in athletics, as our older brother was very, very good at tennis. And I didn't do much in athletics, but I was also probably – could have been an athlete if I had wanted to be. Because I'm very fast and have good balance. But Johnny was the only one who really went into tennis, and even he tired of it. I see the athletic ability in my sons, which is considerable; both of them are very, very fine athletes. So I know it's in all of us. My father was an athlete. He was a runner, and he was also a boxer for a time.

I think Richey's problems have probably been same as some other post-polio, that they have certain physical symptoms that come up later in their lives, but he's been extremely active. He's still working, building and – not building so much as renovating

structures, and working on his boat and so on. We were very fortunate that he didn't have long term consequences. And he's lived a very active life.

He lives up on the north coast in Point Arena. He was one of the owner-developers of the Gualala St. Orres Inn, which you pass on the highway, you know, with the Russian dome. He rebuilt that place, built some of the cabins with another Mill Valley owner, Eric Black. They were partners in that enterprise. And then he went up the coast to Point Arena and rebuilt, remodeled, the Coast Guard house, which was the life saving station up in Point Arena right near the cove, right at Arena Cove. He's meticulous and really skilled and loves historic buildings.

My older brother, John, had the quickest wit of all of us. He thought very, very quickly. He always had the repartee; by the time he was a teenager, he and his friends were very witty, very funny, they would always have the quick, witty remark to make. And he became a writer, a very, very talented writer. Pretty much self-taught or mentored, because he never went through college. He did some studying at College of Marin, and my younger brother also never went through college. He did some study at College of Marin as well. I was the only one who graduated from college, and I went on to get a master's degree later.

So you can imagine, here my mother got a master's degree late in her life, and my father had a Ph.D., two scholarly parents who have to learn to tolerate and accept what their children do. Our parents to a great degree really believed in personal freedom. But I think nevertheless we were a bit of a chore for them.

There were things here at the house that we – we were all pretty sloppy; and the house always looked very lived in, although I never thought of my mother as being sloppy, I think she was just constantly trying to keep one step ahead of it. She would do things to motivate us, positive reinforcement. This was a time when people were looking at positive reinforcement in all kinds of early self-actualization and Pavlovian dog responses and all kinds of psychology. And my mother would do things to motivate us, like she would make a beautiful chart, with all of the chores that we were supposed to accomplish. And then she had different colored stars, and she would put a star, you know, gold star for this, a red star for this, a blue star for that. And that was a beautiful thing to look at, but I don't know how much it really, seriously motivated me.

I do remember that once in a while, my father who was mostly in his study working, planning his classes, which by now were at San Francisco State— oh, gosh, I'll have to check the date that he started at San Francisco State – but I think it was 1947. Once he was there, he was constantly preparing for his classes, and so we would pretty much leave him to himself. But once in a while he would come upstairs, and if he happened to go into our rooms, and didn't like what he saw there, that is, the clothes on the floor and so on, he might take an armful of the stuff he found on the floor, take it downstairs, and deposit it in the trash can. [Laughs.] And that was – you know, you get two parents who have such very different sort of motivational approaches; it's quite amusing – from this vantage point. I remember I would go and get my stuff out of the garbage can, and you know, kind of sigh at my father's, my poor, clueless father, not in his presence though – and I would bring them back up and put them away and keep my room neat for about two days.

My father did in fact start at San Francisco State in 1947. And my mother would have started teaching again at Park School and then Alto, probably around the time that my little brother had recovered from the polio. So that would have been 1949 or something like that. When my mother was a fifth grade teacher, she was also very closely involved with human relations workshops through San Francisco State; I think probably Asilomar seminars, too. She was part of a wonderful group of elementary teachers who were breaking new ground in education philosophy and new techniques. And among them were Hilda Taba, John Robinson – these were not Mill Valley people but San Francisco people – Violet Robinson, Ardele Llewellyn, Rob Moore, Sally Simmons, and other teachers at State – amazing people, people who were looking at interracial kinds of education, at things like sociograms in the classroom where you could track who the popular kids were and who the kids were who were least popular and try to team them up and see how you could help to alleviate personal problems; home problems, and teach the kids better. My mother was a marvelous teacher and her students still talk to me about how good she was when I see one or another of them.

When she went to teach at San Francisco State years later, she was a supervisor of student teachers, and Russ Kiernan of Mill Valley was one of her student teachers, and spoke of her very, very highly. And I've recently been in touch with another one of her

student teachers who remembers her as being an extraordinary teacher. By this time my parents were divorced; that would have been around the late 60s, they separated in '67 –

Stella Perone: Which would make you like –

Abby Wasserman: I was already married and had a child then. I was married in 1966, and my first child was born in November of that year. I was living overseas. So their split happened when I was gone. But my mother would bring her classes from San Francisco State – her teachers, she would teach them in the classroom over there, and then she would observe them in their classrooms here in Marin. She would bring them here for discussions and really, it was a very rich time.

One of the outstanding traits of both my parents is how much they knew how to speak with younger people, and how much they were admired by younger people, by their students. They were extraordinary that way. Didn't always know how to talk to their own children, [laughs] but anyway – that's the way it is.

So my mother was easily as intelligent as my father, and probably even had a higher IQ. But she was a traditional wife in many ways. My father was from a very patriarchal background, and I think sometimes she didn't feel from him the kind of validation that she would have loved, that she would have soaked up. And there were – they were temperamentally really not suited well for each other. But they did love each other, and after their divorce they liked each other, they continued to be friends.

So it was in many ways a good match, but it was also a troubled match because my father wanted so much to be a scholar and to be kind of alone and in the intellectual life. And my mother was so much more engaged with people and with her emotional life. And she was very interested in psychotherapy and in psychology and mental health. And my father – I don't believe he ever had any ambition to go to a therapist. I never knew of it, if it ever happened. My mother was effusive, encouraging; praised I think even too much, you know. You don't always have to praise your children, because their own satisfaction really is the most important thing. But my mother always praised us for what we accomplished. And on the other hand, she wanted validation from us, too. I know that feeling from my own children. And so for her, it was a give and take; my father didn't need so much from people. And I think what probably worked in their earlier years just didn't work all that terrifically later on.

My mother and my father – and we can talk about this later, and I think I have in the other tape, but they both found other partners after they were divorced. My father found an old friend, Carol Fowler. Carol was a pretty unemotional person who didn't ask from him the kind of approbation that my mother asked. As a consequence, my father I think was deeply appreciative and loved Carol but probably never spoke of it, because that wouldn't have been something that she even wanted to hear. Whereas my mother always loved to hear that she was loved.

My mother found a man in Sweden in her 60s who didn't speak her language, who was 25 years younger, a farmer. She had grown up partly on a farm in Minnesota. A man who could do everything with his hands, and who read very little. And was in no way an intellectual, but was a person who could give love and appreciation for her, and where she could feel that she was admired and where she could also make a new kind of life in Sweden. Which she did, you know. Amazing. She made a new life, she learned a lot of Swedish, she made puppets and did some puppet shows. She met people who were of her ilk who spoke English with whom she forged wonderful relationships, younger people, filmmakers, artists, teachers.

But I think that their bond together was always meaningful to both my parents. One of my happiest times was a Thanksgiving when we were altogether again.

Stella Perone: With new spouses?

Abby Wasserman: No, no spouses, just us. Well, my spouse.

Stella Perone: And your parents after they remarried.

Abby Wasserman: They didn't – remarry –

Stella Perone: Oh, they didn't remarry –

Abby Wasserman: Neither of them remarried. No, the Thanksgiving I'm thinking about would have been when my youngest son was about three or four, and my oldest son was six. We all got together at my father's house in Anchor Bay up on the north coast where he had gone to live. And it was my mother, my father, Johnny, Richey and me, my husband Bill Rayman – my first husband, and my two sons. To be able to be together with your family again really meant something to all of us.

And my father never spoke against my mother. One of the things I appreciated with them when I was growing up, when they were really together and getting along well,

was that you never could go to one parent and say, “Mommy won’t let me do this,” and have him say, “Oh, well she’s wrong; of course you can do it.” Never. Never happened. They always were a united front. And I think that’s very healthy for kids.

My father was more apart, distant from our day to day discipline; my mother was the one who disciplined us more. She was the one who kind of kept us in line or tried to, and my father was more detached from that, but he would always back her up if there was something that she, you know, thought was right.

I remember this room used to feel a lot bigger than it feels now, now that we have the big grand piano there. There was an open space in the living room – how many feet would you say this living room is, Stella?

Stella Perone: From wall to wall, what is it, 25 by 15? Am I off base?

Abby Wasserman: You would know better than I. 25 by 15, let’s say. Well there was a lot of space, especially when we had the new dining room built, when this was no longer the dinette here, part of the living room.

My parents had wonderful records and we would listen to these 78 records. I remember the Grand Canyon Suite was one of them; Hansel and Gretel, with Basil Rathbone as the witch, which was a wonderful recording. They had "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" by Rachmaninof. Oh, “Peter and the Wolf” was a great favorite. And other recordings like that. And especially with the Grand Canyon Suite, we would put the record on, and then when the time came with one of the movements that sounds like donkeys galloping – it’s called "On the Trail" – we would gallop and slide across the rugs, [laughs] and we would – you know it was just happiness. Music was so important. They had records of Theodore Bikel and Geula Gill, folk songs from around the world, Josh White, Burl Ives, just wonderful records, so music was very, very much part of our upbringing. Music and books. Typewriter and piano. Puppets and dress up clothes. Sitting in front of the fireplace watching the fire.

The one difficult time of year was always Christmas, and that was because my mother loved Christmas, and she loved to decorate. She loved to buy presents, she loved to wrap presents; she wanted to make it as enchanting for us as possible. And my father, who had grown up Jewish, in fact his family was the only Jewish family in Estherville, Iowa when he was a young man, didn’t ever feel that Christmas was his holiday. And

moreover, he had lost his beloved mother at the age of 45 on the 21st of December, though that was something he never told us. We never knew why he got into a funk every – probably the 20th or 21st of December. I didn't know the reason until many years later. So my father would be gloomy and grumpy, and my mother would be running around making the house beautiful and trying to pretend all was well. And it was a very difficult time for them both.

But I do remember that on the 24th of December, on Christmas Eve, my father would go out and do shopping, and he would have things for us on Christmas. We always had stockings on the fireplace. We went through all the Christmas festivities despite the doom and gloom. And I think probably our mother felt the doom and gloom the worst. It impacted on her. And then it was like Christmas morning our father would be restored to his good-humored self again. But it was a difficult time always.

There was something that I found that I was going to share that my father wrote. I don't know if I put it out here. But I'll do it another time if I don't do it today. He wrote a poem after his mother died. And it really gives the sense of how things were. He also had a copy of the Kaddish that he gave to me, the prayer for the dead. And he has his thoughts, the thoughts expressed in the full Kaddish in English. The Kaddish is in Hebrew, and then on the back, he took the time to write thoughts expressed in it. "All that is honored is transitory, God alone is everlasting. This body returneth to its source, God, from which it came. Those who survive and mourn assert their faith in the absolute and unfathomable justice of providence. The soul of each of us is divine and immortal, and we continue life in a spiritual universe. There is a judgment day at which each of us is judged regarding the lives we lived as human beings. There is a final resurrection of the dead. Salvation will come to both Israel as part of a Messianic awakening, and to each individual."

As my father got older, he started going back to Judaism. He'd been extremely secular as we grew up, and never taught us anything. The most Jewish my father was when we were growing up was this Christmas thing, which was a trial for him, and bagels and salami. He liked nothing better than bagels and salami. And once in a while he would buy some matzo ball mix, and it would just sit in the cupboard. In one of the letters my mother wrote him during the war, she says, "I want to have more Jewish customs in our

family. I want – you know, it’s important that your faith, the faith of your parents, is observed also in this household.” But he didn’t pick up on that, and so we really didn’t learn anything. The first time my brother went to a bar mitzvah, he didn’t know what to make of it. But we had family of course, we had cousins, all of them were observant. We loved them. And so, what we inherited was a wonderful, big family. So, maybe that’s enough for now.

[Part 1 recording ends here; Part 2 begins]

Stella Perone: This is Part 2 of the Abby Wasserman oral history. It is February [*should be March?*] 11th, this is Stella Perone and Abby Wasserman.

Abby Wasserman: Well we talked about going back to eighth grade graduation from Alto School. What I remember about the eighth grade graduation was that we were given a song to sing, and the song was based on the Gettysburg Address. The song started out with the Gettysburg Address, the first part of it, and then the words, “Thus spake the man from” – can’t remember all the words, but it was a very affecting song, very beautiful. And I believe it was at graduation that we performed that. Graduation was at Tam High, in the gymnasium maybe. The gymnasium wasn’t yet named for Gus Gustafson, because he was still living and teaching when I was in high school.

I entered Tamalpais High School in 1954, when I was just 14. And a lot of the same kids that I’d gone to school with, either at Park, Old Mill, Homestead or Alto were with me. We entered Tam, and it was very interesting to see how people broke up into groups. We also were in school for the first time with African American kids from Marin City. Our friends who went to Richardson Bay School from Sausalito who were white had gone to school with these same kids, during their elementary school years. So they knew them.

Stella Perone: The kids who went to Richardson Bay school, were they Mill Valley kids?

Abby Wasserman: No, Sausalito and Marin City, as far as I know, were the only two places. Richardson Bay was an elementary school.

Stella Perone: The reason I’m asking is, I did an oral history on somebody, and she was telling me that her kids, that some kids from Mill Valley were shipped out to go to Richardson Bay School. Comments?

Abby Wasserman: Yes, that would have been, I think it was around 1964, although that would have to be checked. But in 1964 the first black teacher in the Mill Valley schools, Shirley–

Stella Perone: Hasley.

Abby Wasserman: Exactly. Shirley Hasley. I don't think she was married at the time, so her name was probably her maiden name. She was in her very first year at Park School, she had just been hired. She was asked to be one of I think two teachers from Park who went over to Marin City, to Richardson Bay School, to have an exchange of students. The interesting thing about that is that none of the black kids were invited to come over to Mill Valley schools, it was the white kids who went over to Richardson Bay School. And I don't know the details of that, but that she was the teacher.

Stella Perone: It's kind of interesting that they had the black teacher –

Abby Wasserman: Exactly, yeah. Well there had been a certain amount of – and this of course I didn't know firsthand because I was gone, I was out of the country by this time. But there was some unpleasantness. I was reading Shirley's oral history; I've never met her, but she sounds like a marvelous woman. She taught 26 years at Park School, and then was laid off from Park and was picked up by Edna Maguire and taught more years at Edna Maguire and was really one of the great teachers I think for students of that generation. But she said in her oral history that there were parents who were objecting to having their children in the same class that she was going to be teaching that first year, and the superintendent who had hired her basically said, "You don't want your child to be in her class? He will have to go to another school." And I thought that spoke very well for the school system. She wasn't able at that time to find an apartment or a place to live in Mill Valley. No one would rent to her. Oh, the one person who said he would rent to her had some of his windows broken, and some threats of burning a cross on his lawn. And she decided to withdraw from that.

Anyway, in a recent reunion with some of my classmates, some of my friends from Tamalpais High School who had gone to school at Richardson Bay with their African American counterparts, knew so many things that I didn't know. Their taste in music was way advanced. They knew about gospel music, they knew about blues, they just had a very different experience as young kids. But when we all came together at

Tam, people split up into factions. But the nice thing about Tam – and I think this is even more true when you get to college – everybody found their niche. Everybody found their group to be within. At Tam, we were kind of divided between the senior bench crowd-- well, when we became seniors – the kids who were going off to college, who were college bound, who were taking the X classes, many of them –

Stella Perone: What do you mean by X classes?

Abby Wasserman: They were the more advanced classes. And the kids who were going into auto mechanics, wood working, print shop, there were wonderful vocational classes, too. But everybody was fairly friendly, you know. You didn't maybe hang out with the kids, but you had friends across the groups. At least I did. And there was – speaking of black and white – there was a certain amount of reluctance to date, for example, across the races. Very few people did that. But that was much more likely to happen among the kids who had been with, you know, in an integrated school from the time they were very young. And Mill Valley had some kids who were Latino background, some of course Portuguese, many of them from families who had been here from way longer than my family had been here. And so there was some diversity. But not a great deal in elementary school.

Stella Perone: Who were your best friends at Tam High?

Abby Wasserman: Ah, my best friends. My best friend was Jacquie Maggiora, and that was in our senior year. And Jacquie was incredibly talented in art. She was funny and delightful and she and I would have pajama parties at each other's homes and we would make pizza. There was a packaged pizza that we would get, and we would make pizza together, and talk and talk and talk. And I remember one time we went to her stepfather's place I think it was, in Oakland. And he had an indoor swimming pool, so I remember swimming with Jacquie at night in the indoor swimming pool. I loved her very much, and we were very tight. And then after high school we didn't see each other, and then she died in an auto crash when she was I think only 19.

Another very good friend was Kathy George, who was the daughter of John George, who was the dean of boys at Tam when I was there. And I remember again, overnight party with Kathy who was a little bit younger. She's still a friend; still lives in

Mill Valley. And we were would listen to Frank Sinatra records the whole evening, probably having cocoa and cookies that her mother brought us. It was just lovely.

Carol Foss from across the street was always a friend; even though we went very different directions in high school. Carol became a majorette, and she knew how to twirl a baton. We'd been friends growing up because she was just across the street. But in high school we didn't hang out very much together. But Carol lives in Mill Valley, and she's still a friend. I felt very grounded in the friends that I made in those lower grades in high school when I came back to Mill Valley.

Other friends were people I knew through the Community Church, which is the United Church of Christ affiliated, but was then the Congregational Church in Mill Valley at Olive and Throckmorton. As I said before, my mother was from a Methodist family and my father was Jewish. But both of them were agnostic, and they had actually a great interest in common with the Synoptic Gospels, and the study of Jesus as Teacher, and writings by H.B. Charmin and by other people who had studied the Gospels and were approaching the Bible in a different way, more progressive perhaps. And so they affiliated with the Community Church. My mother more than my father, but one of my father's best friends was Gordon Foster, the minister of the church. And I think Lou and Gordon met on many different levels, but the chief one was that they both were interested in dialog. They loved talking about things together and hashing over ideas and scholarship. Gordon was a wonderful minister, endlessly kind, and he led that congregation for many, many years. He and his wife Marjorie lived on the corner of Elma and Throckmorton, in that marvelous 3-story house.

Stella Perone: Wait – on the Lovell side or the – oh, on the Throckmorton side.

Abby Wasserman: On the Throckmorton side.

Stella Perone: The big brown shingle, with the orange tree.

Abby Wasserman: Yes. Mildred Mancha, who has an oral history in the History Room, who was born in Mill Valley, was our seamstress, had lived right there. I think her brother may even have owned that Elma house. So everything begins to come together, you know, once you start studying the history of the place.

What the Community Church offered us was a community. My brothers John and Rich and I all went to the youth group. They had a wonderful program for young people.

The advisors were Millie and Ben Young, a long time Belvedere-Tiburon couple, who were pretty young then. They were just the best chaperones, the best people to talk over problems with, the best people to do any study of religious thought with that we could have possibly had. The Community Church had two youth groups: one was called Redwood League, and that was for the younger kids, probably about junior high age; and Muir League, which was the older kids, the high school kids. We were all active in those youth groups, and I think they probably kept us out of a lot of trouble. Although my brother Richey did manage to get in some trouble.

I got my first job when I was at Tamalpais High School at the drive-in, Mill Valley's first drive-in, which was on Miller Avenue, within very little distance from the high school.

Stella Perone: C's.

Abby Wasserman: C's, yes. And Ceasar, I can't remember his last name, but I will find it out, Ceasar whom Chuck Oldenberg has written about in one of his Homestead histories. Ceasar hired me when I was, I must have been 14 or 15

Stella Perone: Was it new then?

Abby Wasserman: It was new; and it was kind of – it was good to have a job, but it was a little bit painful because I had to wear a hairnet. Kids from the high school would come over while I was working. You're nodding your head; you know what I'm talking about. [Laughs.] And so, but I worked there for, I don't know, six months maybe. It wasn't even an entire year. I worked at the counter and Ceasar was behind doing the cooking.

Stella Perone: Burgers, fries, shakes? Is that correct?

Abby Wasserman: Yeah – burgers, fries, shakes. And I remember the French fries were frozen, so they would go – they were packaged French fries, he would put them in the cooker, in the deep fryer. And the onions were dehydrated. Now this was probably '54, '55, around there. And so I guess that kind of makes sense, but anyway, I didn't have to cut up onions. [Laughs.]

I was looking in my Tamalpais yearbook, and I was active in a lot of clubs. I was very active in high school. I was in the pep club, I was in Junior Statesmen. I ran for song leader twice, lost both times. [Laughs.] I remember going to Bakersfield with other Junior

Statesmen, where there was a mock convention, where people would be elected. I know that I have some notes on this, I'm not sure that they're right here, but it was – I was very, very active in high school.

And I wasn't terribly keen on my studies. I did enough to get by. I remember my poorest subjects were French and chemistry, for sure. I had no idea about chemistry. And anything having to do with mathematics. And my favorite subjects were writing – English; typing, which I really loved, and I loved Ted Mitchell's oral interpretation class. Ted later became the principal at Tamalpais High School. I loved giving talks, I love giving speeches.

One of the things in fact that I enjoyed very much about the Community Church was I liked to give sermons. We would have little worship services. I liked to think about something that I wanted to say, and you know, try to extrapolate my learned experience or what I was reading, or what other people told me. And I liked being in front of people. That's not surprising that I loved those things, because I became an actress, amateur actress, but I did a lot of acting in high school. And I became a writer and an editor.

Some of the teachers I remember at Tamalpais High School – there were so many good ones – Mary Baker, taught Phys Ed; Katherine Flanagan, was kind of – we always thought she was a bit racy. She was someone who could talk to the girls right at our level. We called her Flanny. And she had a real twinkle in her eye. I had her for sewing and cooking – Home Ec. Victor Rowe was a very serious person, a very nice man. I had him for English. Dean Potts. Mr. Potts I believe I had for chemistry.

Stella Perone: Was he related to Steve Potts?

Abby Wasserman: That I do not know. But Mr. Boussy, Henri Boussy, who became so active with the Historical Society and did so much writing for the Review, he was the art teacher. And I remember Jacquie and I were in his class. Miss Abbot for English, for senior English, was a wonderful teacher. She was tiny; kind of like a gold finch, some small bird, very prim, very nice, very fun. Miss Iona Peck was one of my typing teachers. And also Frank Cassou was my typing teacher. I think touch typing was about the best course I ever took.

I was wrong about Dean Potts. If I had him, I had him for math. I had Raymond Palmer for chemistry. Sidney Duddy for algebra and geometry; I was a hopeless student.

Adrienne Cobb for physiology. Miss Cobb was also my counselor; Chuck Crawford for driver's ed. We all loved Mr. Crawford. He was the best teacher, and we were so lucky to have our driver's education with him. I still remember the time that he had to grab the wheel out of my hand [laughs] as I went around a corner too fast. Ted Mitchell for oral interpretation.

Ed Bode was the drama teacher when I first got into Tam. I didn't do anything in my freshman year except I was the script girl for the senior play, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. It's a wildly funny play, and I had the best time, because I was around my brother's – my older brother's friends, some of his best friends were in that play, and they were hilarious.

Peter Klain then came on staff and I was in a couple of pieces that he directed. The first one was called *Room for One More*. I played the mother of a whole bunch of kids and foster kids. There was always room for one more. One of the other actors was Carl Webber, whom we called Cappy. He was in my class. He played a character called Jimmy John who was a very fractious foster kid. And Carl is now a renowned playwright in Denmark. He went to live there and writes in Danish.

Another drama that I did with Mr. Klain was George Kaufman's *The Tavern*. And one notable thing about the cast was that Michael Leibert played the Stranger, which is the lead role. I played Violet, the crazy woman who suddenly appears. [Laughs.] I loved that part. And Michael went on later to co-found what became Berkeley Rep; along with another friend of mine from childhood, Mikel Schwarzkopf. And Mikie lived in the Almonte area. Mike Leibert died young. I think he was only around 40. He was quite a Lothario in high school. And a very, very bright guy – lived in Tiburon. Wonderful actor.

George Pohlman was our history teacher, and he was droll and he wore bowties. And my French teacher was Erwin Peterson; very, very good looking man. Blond, kind of a dreamboat, but very aloof. And I asked in that class to be called "Robin" instead of "Abby" because "Robin" is much more romantic in French than "Abby." [Laughs.] Jean Roberts was our school nurse.

There were so many activities [at Tam]. I didn't get into music there, but I was taking music lessons those years. I took piano lessons from Marion Winkler who lived in Larkspur and was a wonderful teacher, a concert pianist. I was thinking about some of the

other friendships; you know, in those days, we would become friends around an activity. I think it's still probably true, even at this age. My friendships come from people with whom I'm doing something as well as from the past. We would meet a lot of different kinds of people, depending on the clubs we were in.

And when the Pai came out, our year book, we would go through the Pai and have everybody sign it, and it was so exciting, especially if you had a boy that you had liked, and he wrote something like, "Been great knowing ya. Love ya." [Laughs.] I had a few of those. Somebody who had never given me the time of day. Here is a picture of some of us running for song leader. Laurie Giesecke, Susie Ghee, me, Bonnie Bruderer, Pat Schneider –I'd known Pat at Alto School, she lived in the Alto area, and Judy Duerson.

Stella Perone: Let's scan this and label the names at the end?

Abby Wasserman: Definitely.

Stella Perone: Yeah, okay, thank you.

Abby Wasserman: Let's see. Other things about high school. Well I didn't mention one teacher, Jack Gibson, who was – I had him for an English class and my brother John had him for journalism. He's the last one.

When I was a senior at Tam, I was given a scholarship to go overseas with the Experiment in International Living, to live with a family for a summer. And my friends Phil Richardson, whom I've mentioned before, Suzanne Rovelli, and Jane Hickman, went overseas. Jane went to France under the American Field Service, and I think Phil may have gone to Sweden with the Field Service as well. But I went with the Experiment. I was just 17. I wanted to travel overseas. All during my childhood, my father had gone overseas almost every other summer, leading study tours to Europe, to Russia one year, to Mexico. I grew up with a sense that one should travel, so I was delighted to go with the Experiment.

Stella Perone: Where did you go?

Abby Wasserman: Well, funny – I had wanted to go to Scotland for some reason; I don't know why, but I was sent to England. I was in the county of Norfolk, which is in East Anglia near a town called Norwich. I stayed with two families there. My group went on a walking trip of the Cotswolds. We walked, and then we would stay in hostels and then –

Stella Perone: With a bunch of other kids your age?

Abby Wasserman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Wow, wonderful.

Abby Wasserman: It was wonderful. And our English counterparts went too, so it was all very exciting and wonderful. My second family had five children and a goat, I remember. And one of the things I learned how to do was to milk a goat. In so many ways, they were the perfect family for me; just wonderful people. And so it was a very good experience.

I came home and went right into college, the College of the Pacific in Stockton, which had been my mother's school, she had gone there, and she was very strong on that being the right place for me. I was very close to my mother, and I don't think I rebelled, almost not at all when I was a teenager. That I did later, but not then. [Laughs.] So I went to College of the Pacific; I stayed in the women's dorm and it was a very good –

Stella Perone: Wait, was that co-ed then?

Abby Wasserman: The dorm was not co-ed.

Stella Perone: But the school was co-ed.

Abby Wasserman: The school was co-ed. I think the school had always been co-ed. My mother had been there in the – let's see, that would have been the '20s. So it was co-ed then.

Notable at College of the Pacific was my interest in religion. There was a chapel that was mandatory, so we went to chapel every week. An interest in philosophy: I had a couple of really good philosophy teachers. And speech and drama. I was in a play there, Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. It's a very intense one-act play. And I took piano lessons from Edward Shadbolt. I remember the only recital I ever played in I was so frightened, I was so nervous, that I almost walked off stage, but I managed to muddle through. And that was a nervousness about performing that I carried with me for many, many years. I could play – if you were here in my house, and you were talking to someone, I could play without nervousness. But if you were sitting and listening to me, I would, you know, start to make mistakes, and then I would be down on myself. Mrs. Winkler had been a wonderful piano teacher; Edward Shadbolt was much more exacting. And I wasn't a very good student, even though I loved the piano.

I suppose I told you about going to sleep in this house to the sounds – two main sounds – the sound of the piano and the sound of the typewriter. And those continue to be sounds I really love, although we don't hear the typewriter any more.

I didn't major in anything at College of the Pacific; I just took liberal arts courses and enjoyed them a lot. I went to COP for two years and the second year I joined a sorority. And the sorority I joined was a local called Tau Kappa Kappa, and midway in the year, they became a national. That meant all kinds of different rules. And I remember that the sororities at College of the Pacific except for one, which was off-campus, all of the big sororities, even when they were locals, were discriminatory.

Stella Perone: Against who?

Abby Wasserman: Against blacks.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Abby Wasserman: Yeah. And not against Jews, I believe. I don't think so.

So here we were in 1959, 1960, and I decided that I wanted to quit school after my sophomore year and act for a year in a theater company that was owned by a Belvedere resident, Martha Bigelow Eliot. And it had been going on for a long, long time. It was a travelling children's theater company called the San Francisco Players Guild. Marty Elliot was a friend of my mother's and my father's. She and her husband Ted. And so that was kind of the way that I steered into that. My parents didn't object to my taking a year off, which I was grateful for.

I played one of the ugly stepsisters in *Cinderella*, and made some friends who remain friends for life. Wonderful actors like Sally Sherman Taylor, from Mill Valley. Her mother and father both have oral histories in the History Room. Sally still lives in Mill Valley. She was a wonderful actress and she played the other stepsister. And then Alice K. Perry from Sausalito played the mean stepmother. Nothing could be further from the truth of Alice.

We went out on the road every day. Five days a week, I drove the company car. At 18, I think they were very brave to let me do that. I only remember one near accident. But I would pick up other members of the company, and then the rest of the company would come in a big truck, bringing lights and the set, you know, the portable set, and we would go to mostly elementary schools, sometimes to institutions. We went to Laguna

Honda, I remember, and we played for maybe one retirement home; and at a place for developmentally disabled adults. But mostly for kids. We would set up, we would have a show, usually in the morning, eat lunch that we had packed, have a show in the afternoon, pack up and take off. And that's what I did for nine months.

Stella Perone: With the same play? Or did you – a bunch of different plays?

Abby Wasserman: Just the same play. We got pretty good at it. One time I actually went on stage in my rather scruffy slippers instead of the shoes that I was supposed to be wearing, because I just hadn't been thinking about my entrance. I was sitting in the dressing room and kind of jumped up, "Oh, my turn!" It had gotten a bit too rote, so I figured I had to refresh.

Stella Perone: So then you went back to school?

Abby Wasserman: I went back to school. However, I didn't go back to COP. I decided – my parents had been very strong about my becoming a teacher; and I thought that was a really good idea.

Along in here I had directed the Junior Theater of Marin, doing a play at Reed School with children. I really enjoyed that. I'd written a play, based on *The Ugly Duckling*; it even had songs in it. And the mothers made the costumes, and we put it on at Reed, and it was really quite a hit. It was great fun. It was called *A Duckling's Tale*.

Stella Perone: And you wrote the whole – you were college age when you did that?

Abby Wasserman: Yes, yes. I think so.

Stella Perone: And you wrote the songs also?

Abby Wasserman: Yes. And chose the incidental music. I'd have to refresh my memory. I have a copy of the script somewhere. The songs probably were the simplest kind of songs you can imagine, you know. Simpler than "Hans Christian Anderson." You know the movie had those very lovely songs that were based on his stories, and I had seen that Danny Kaye film when I was a kid, one of those times that my brothers and I went to the matinee and he was my favorite, Danny Kaye. So maybe that had some influence.

Anyway, I decided to go back to school, to San Francisco State College, because they had a marvelous elementary education program, and actually I lucked out. My father was a professor at the college. My mother was an educator, and she had gone back to

school and gotten her master's degree in education. After I graduated from State, she taught there, too. She supervised student teachers and taught a couple of classes. I think maybe the master's degree was after I left college too. But she had always been very involved with some of the more prominent educators for elementary school when she was an elementary school teacher and she would have human relations workshops over here at the house. People would come over and they were always so interesting and so kind to us kids, and so I was lucky. San Francisco State had a brand new program that was funded by the National Mental Health Association, a non-graded elementary education project called the Teacher Education Project. I entered that program and I was there for two years. And then had the choice of what to do afterwards. I had lived in San Francisco off and on, but never really enjoyed San Francisco that much.

Stella Perone: You were living here in Mill Valley when you went to SF State?

Abby Wasserman: No. I had lived in San Francisco when I was with the San Francisco Players Guild; but then during college I lived at home. I had lived in San Francisco with a friend from high school, Judy McClure. We rented an apartment on Laguna near Broadway. Prior to that, Judy and I had lived together at a boarding house at Laguna and Broadway, and this apartment was just down the street.

Stella Perone: It's a pretty nice address.

Abby Wasserman: Really nice address. While we were in the apartment, there was an earthquake early in the morning and I remember waking up and thinking there was a giant outside shaking the apartment building. And then I realized it was an earthquake. It wasn't too bad. I didn't get out of bed, I just stayed in bed and waited for it to be over.

When I lived in the Laguna house, I fell in love with a Chilean writer, a young man. He was just my age, 19 years old. He was going to go to Mexico with some of his friends from California. This was at the time that I was working in the theater group, the San Francisco Players Guild. He urged me to go to Mexico with them, but I couldn't do it; I had a responsibility to be in the play. You know, that was my work. I couldn't just leave, and I remember wondering if I were a different person or didn't have my family nearby, you know, who knew my employer [laughs] – if I would have gone to Mexico, just taken off and you know, been a free spirit. But anyway, I didn't, and I'm sure it's just as well that I didn't. [Laughs.]

I finished out that year, matriculated at State. Then when graduation was coming along fast, I applied for a teaching job in Alaska. But at the same time, I applied for the Peace Corps. I'd been very moved by John F. Kennedy's address, and I loved the whole idea of living overseas. There were many opportunities for teachers on those days; I mean, there were opportunities in Berkeley, and Mill Valley, and there were opportunities all over that there are no longer. But *then* it was wide open, and I could have gone anywhere.

But I decided to go into the Peace Corps instead, and I think I may have said that I'd like to go to South America. That's where they sent me. I was assigned in the fall of 1963, right after I graduated. I didn't graduate until after the summer; I had a course to make up, something like that. So right after I graduated I went to Albuquerque, New Mexico for training with an educational television project in Bogotá, Colombia. We were in training for two months in Albuquerque.

In January of 1964, we left for Bogotá. Right before leaving I had my heart in my throat, I thought maybe I wasn't going to be able to go, because the Peace Corps had found out that my parents had been very radical in the '40s, and early '50s, especially my mother. They were doing a security clearance, so they were collecting information. My clearance was on hold, so I couldn't leave until I was cleared. I had not been an activist particularly at all; the only thing I'd done besides Junior Statesman and Young Democrats was to take part in a protest against the House Un-American Activities Committee. That would have been around 1960 in San Francisco. And that was around the time that the police used fire hoses against the protesters, some of them – in my memory, some of them were actually swept down the stairs by fire hoses. Not that day, though. Anyway, that was about the only thing I'd done. I wasn't a radical. I wasn't very political, actually. And I did get the clearance. One of the staff from Peace Corps Washington and I had hit it off. Ted Meyers, he'd come out and been with our group for a little while, and Ted helped get it through. He vouched for me.

So we all arrived in Bogotá in January 1964, and commenced being newbies in a place. We had had very, very good Spanish training, but it was the first time I'd ever spoken Spanish, and there we were in Colombia, which was a much, much less violent country than it is now, I think things have improved. But Columbia has gone through

some tremendous upheavals and a lot of violence. But in those days, it was pretty safe. I never felt threatened, except with theft. There were pickpockets on the street. And we had to be very careful. If you were stopped at a – if you were driving a jeep, Peace Corps had a jeep. I didn't drive it, but in Bogotá, if you had your arm casually on the window, and you were stopped at a stoplight, somebody might come up behind you, grab your watch off your wrist and take off. My pocket was only picked once.

The Peace Corps was one option in those very activist years for American youth. There were those who went to Selma; there were those who had been Freedom Riders on buses. There were those of us who went overseas, or were in domestic Peace Corps. Overseas was my choice, and I've never regretted it. I worked for six months in educational television in Bogotá, in elementary schools with elementary teachers who were just learning how to utilize the television sets that had been provided by the Alliance For Progress.

The program had three facets. The technicians who kept the televisions going, the programmers who worked with the Colombian counterparts to create programming in Spanish of course, and then the utilization people, and that was my group. There were about 50 of us who went down.

Stella Perone: Wait, what does utilization mean?

Abby Wasserman: Utilization of the programs. The teachers and their children watched a program; let's say it was on language arts, and I then would help them figure out what we could do to expand learning. Because what they didn't want – the people who conceived of the program – what they didn't want was that the teacher would have the kids sit in front of the TV set, watch the program and then go on to something else. They wanted to help them figure out how to incorporate and integrate the programming into their school curriculum. So that's what we were there for.

And I met some wonderful teachers. I remember the first time the teachers asked me to stay for lunch, they served a potato soup with cilantro, and it was the first time I had ever tasted cilantro. And it was so good I remember loving it right from the very beginning.

It took about six months for my Spanish to become fluent after the two months of intensive Spanish training in Albuquerque. But you know, being out in the field and

talking with people was just the best. And being in Bogotá was especially good, because in Colombia, the clearest, cleanest Spanish – the most elegant Spanish – is spoken in the central part of the country, and the Bogotanos are very proud of their Spanish. So it was a great place for me to be.

However, I went to visit some Peace Corps friends who lived in the countryside, way up in the mountains near Popayán, the city of Popayán, which is south of Bogotá, and I decided that I wanted to change programs and wanted to be in a rural setting, and doing community development like they were doing. It was very willful of me because I'd been trained in one program; however my director, Christopher Sheldon, Peace Corps director in Colombia at that time, said if I wanted to do that, I could do that but that I would have to get the okay of the director of CARE Peace Corps. Peace Corps at that time contracted CARE to administer many of its programs. Peace Corps had very little expertise, so they turned to other agencies to help them out. And CARE had many, many years in the field, especially with self-help projects and development projects.

Well, the new director of the CARE Peace Corps program, who had just arrived in the country, was named William Rayman. And Bill was from Cleveland, Ohio, and he'd been working for CARE for many years. But he was totally new to Peace Corps, so one of the first things that he was confronted with at a conference was my request to get into community development. And he told me later that I was just a pain in the neck at that point. [Laughs.] But he said it was okay too.

So now with Chris Sheldon saying yes, and Bill saying yes, I left the educational television program, left Bogotá, and went north to the back of beyond, to La Guajira, which was not even a proper state at that time. It was an *intendencia*, the next step down. It had very little government, very little amenities. It was very primitive. No electricity except one or two families who had a little generator in their shop. No running water, except in a couple of homes where the people had more money and had put in running water. And no toilets. I don't know if anybody had a toilet. There were outhouses.

And it was in the most beautiful area on the coast of Colombia. My little town was called Dibulla, and a number of years ago I went back to see it, and it had greatly changed. And yet some of the same people that I knew were still there, which was wonderful. I was in Dibulla for a year and a half working in community development.

Before going, however, I trained with two wonderful women who were doing a health and community project on the coast of Colombia, and one of them is now one of our Superior Court judges. That was Faye Hooker from Arkansas, and her name now is Faye D’Opal. She and her site partner Joan Mansfield, from Chicago, put me up, they taught me a lot, and became friends for life.

So I was in Dibulla working with trying to get a girls club going, trying to get latrines built, trying to get the school up and running. There were a number of projects; I don’t think I was particularly effective in any one of them. A lot of the time I was working by myself, which is not the best way to do it. I had a couple of site partners who were men, and one of them, Howard Converse, lives in Oakland now, and I’ve seen him a couple of times. But Howard left early on to become a volunteer leader and I was alone in the site until Willie Dow arrived. Willie’s from the East Coast. He was my site partner for a few months.

But I settled into the life of Dibulla; I learned how to dance the cumbia; my Spanish became very fluent. It was quite a wonderful time. And I got to know Bill Rayman better. He did a site visit; we fell in love, and when I finished my Peace Corps service in 1965, in the winter of ’65, I came home, stayed with my parents for about a month, and then Bill came up, we had an engagement party here in Mill Valley, and then we both went back to Colombia and I got a job teaching school in Bogotá then. Bill was transferred from his position as CARE Peace Corps director, he was transferred to be CARE director in Turkey. And so we left in 1966.

We had gotten married in February of ’66 in Bogotá, in a little church there. None of my family was there. My mother had visited me one time during the Peace Corps time; she had come to the coast and we’d had a lovely time together. But she either couldn’t afford to come down or just – I don’t know. It was a long way to travel. But my husband’s mother did come; she lived in Florida, much closer, so she came down for the wedding. And Joan Mansfield, one of the people I’d trained with, was my maid of honor. I had a very traditional wedding, except that I chose the music, taped it, and I forgot to get anybody to run the tape recorder. So the music was turned on, and [laughs] there was a bit of music for each part of the service, and by the time it was my entrance, all the music was gone. [Laughs.] I wasn’t very good at delegating responsibility back then.

Bill and I left in June of 1966 for Turkey, and we took a delayed honeymoon. We sailed on the S.S. France to – I can't remember the port. It wasn't Marseilles; I'll remember it later. But we went by ship. We got to France and Bill had bought a car, and so we picked up the car and we drove to Turkey. And it was a fascinating trip. I was seeing all those places for the first time.

We got to Turkey and we settled into a house in Ankara, and there our first child was born.

Stella Perone: What year?

Abby Wasserman: November of '66. So that baby was real soon. His name is Graham Ashley Rayman. While he was very little, I had my own little preschool for children, mostly of people who were living there as part of the AID or another U.S. program, but there were also occasional Turkish children in the group. I had my preschool there for pretty much all the time we were in Turkey, and we were there for two years.

I studied Turkish five days a week at the Foreign Service Institute; loved learning the language. And loved being a mother. And we did a couple of nice trips around Turkey. We went to Cappadocia, we went to Istanbul, and it was just a very exotic, wonderful place. We went to Antalya, Aphrodisias, Pamukkale, places like that.

In 1968, summer, Bill was transferred, and that was kind of the story of his life, is he would be in a place, he would do a bang-up job, and then he would be transferred. They never let him stay in one place very long. He was transferred to Honduras, and he was glad to get back to Latin America, and so was I. Bill had lived in Bolivia before he lived in Colombia. And so we went, I think we stopped in California on our way down; visited.

My mother did come to Turkey; she travelled to Turkey after the baby was born. And by this time my parents were getting a divorce, yeah. '67 I think it was. So my mother came by herself. She always came to any country I was in one time. She even came to Nigeria later.

So we moved to Honduras and we lived there for three years, and this is where our second son Joshua William Rayman was born. And –

Stella Perone: Date?

Abby Wasserman: Date, yes. Josh was born March 10th, 1969. Graham was born November 20th, 1966.

Honduras was wonderful. We made some awfully good friends there, and one of them was a Franciscan priest, who was at that time working in Honduras for the church. He was the priest in charge of the Catholic members of the American Embassy. And he and an Episcopal priest from England and a sister, maybe a Dominican sister who was – or a Maryknoll sister was there, an American; we, with some of the other American families, started a discussion group. It started out as a religious group to talk about theology. I was interested in theology. Bill wasn't, but I was, so I was part of that group with the priest, Gratian Buttarazzi and Father Pat Hurley and Sister Marilyn and so on, and then some Americans who were not affiliated with the church. That became the nucleus of my social life.

I also taught school. I taught first grade in a local school but that didn't work out too well because I had the little – I had the two-year-old, and the new baby. So I didn't teach for very long. But we lived in a beautiful place up on a hill above Tegucigalpa, Graham had been born in Turkey in a Turkish hospital, with a Turkish gynecologist/obstetrician, Kaya Aydar. And in Honduras, we had a Honduran obstetrician, Octavio Zavala, and Josh was born in a Honduran hospital. Those were very good experiences.

My father visited us in Honduras, and one of the things that meant the most to him was that we had Israeli friends. There was a Jewish holiday which we had never observed in our home – my father had not cared about such things during those years. Our Israeli friends invited us to a party for Rosh Hashanah and my father heard the music and he ate the food and he was just – he was in heaven. It was really meaningful to him. That was one of the great pleasures of my life, was to give – you know, to give pleasure to your parent. My mother was very easy to give pleasure to; all I had to do was make the room when she would stay with us beautiful – put flowers in it and make it look lovely for her. It just pleased her to no end. I would take her to visit friends of mine, educators in Turkey, or friends in Honduras who had something in common with her. But my father had not visited us overseas, so when I was able to give him the joy of that party, that really meant something.

Three years we were there in Honduras, so we really settled in. The children were doing pretty well and Bill was doing well. Then the earthquake in Peru happened in 1970 and CARE sent him down for a month to Peru. There had been terrible mudslides and awful results of the earthquake, this tremendous earthquake. A whole village buried in a mudslide, and terrible damage. So Bill went down to direct the CARE relief efforts there, and he was gone for a month.

In Honduras we had a live-in housekeeper who also helped with the children. I did a lot of baking and cooking there, I baked bread and croissants and all kinds of things. Had a lot of leisure time. And my mother-in-law Janet Rayman came down and visited us at least once.

In 1971, Bill was transferred to Nigeria. And Nigeria was a really tough experience. It was different than the other places. Although in those days, it had a very stable – in many ways a very stable government under the leadership of Yakubu Gowon, who was a military man, a general. There wasn't the terrible violence and strife that there is now. In fact, Honduras is – in Latin America – just about the most violent country of all; whereas at the time we were there it was very, very peaceful. Nigeria is in a terrible, terrible situation; and Turkey is going through a lot of changes right now. Colombia has been through the mill. So it's sad to think about the places that in our lives were so good, being so terrible for so many people.

We lived in Lagos for a year, and Bill directed the CARE program there. I remember it was always my habit to go and introduce myself to my neighbors, and I went around with my children, we walked around the neighborhood in Lagos, and knocked on doors. And there was almost no one who was really welcoming there. One family, maybe one or two, among the rich people who lived in the area where we –

Stella Perone: Were they white or black?

Abby Wasserman: They were black. They were Nigerians. But the people who were friendly were the very poor people who lived right across the street. It was so ironic to live in this posh neighborhood with huge houses, and right across the street, and not a very wide street, there was a big slum with very modest to very poor housing for people. One or two faucets for hundreds of people to share; public faucets. And no sanitation facilities. And this was right across the street. But my closest Nigerian friend – I had two

good Nigerian friends, but one of them was from Falamo, which is the name of this slum area. She lived immediately across the street, and had come over to introduce herself to me. And one time, I remember, she brought a cooked chicken to us, which was so kind and so – I mean, chicken was not cheap for someone like Agnes. So my other close Nigerian friend was from a very different strata of society. She was an actress, and I had met her through a play that we had gone to in Lagos. Her name was Molly.

I loved being there; I really enjoyed it, it was so – it was tough, but it was tough because nobody was, you know, bowing and scraping to us. We were barely tolerated foreigners. But the friends that we made were really deep friendships. And many of them were African Americans who were stationed in Nigeria and lived near us; lived across the street on the other side. A couple of them, Joanne and Art Patrick, who worked for AID, became very close friends. There was a teacher named Clotilde Reed who became very close with us.

What I enjoyed in Nigeria was an integrated community, a larger community, of people from all over the world, including Nigerians, but including many Americans, whose paths might or might not have crossed mine in the States. So that was a joy. And we did a lot of entertaining; we went to other people's homes for dinner; I learned how to dance, to really move, you know – to move my whole body instead of keeping my body straight and still, because the Nigerian dancing was so wonderful and free, and so that was a great experience.

My mother came and visited us there. As I said there were hard times, but on the whole, we liked Lagos. When Bill decided to come back to the States, to take a leave of absence from CARE, he and I said to each other, “ There are so many people who have a really, really hard time adjusting to Lagos, and here we are, and we've adjusted, and we've learned how to live here, and now we're going.” And we were both sorry about that. I had taught a drama workshop class so I was keeping my hand into drama, and decided that when we went back to the States, I would get a master's degree in theater.

So we went – Bill had a friend who was an investment advisor in Stamford, Connecticut, and in 1972, we travelled back to the States and set up our household in Riverside, Connecticut. We lived for a time also in a winter rental on the beach, in a place called Saugatuck.

I remember being so lonesome for different colors of people there. I mean, literally, I felt deprived. I made friends with the man whose family owned the refuse collection business; he was a lovely African American guy, and you know I just gravitated towards that warm – I mean it sounds strange, and I don't mean it to sound patronizing, but Connecticut was really, really, white; and rather cold. And cold when we got there in the winter.

My best friends there were a Jewish woman from New York who was kind of out of her element, and an Englishman from England who was a music buff and was out of his element, so we gravitated towards one another.

We lived in Saugatuck and then in Riverside for a couple of years while I went to New York University to get a degree. I had tried out for Yale School of Drama, and auditioned there; and they asked me if I would be willing to be a special student – which meant I wouldn't have gotten any credential. I could have gone through the School of Drama, but I wouldn't have gotten any credit towards teaching. I wanted to teach drama. And I decided –

Stella Perone: You were going to have to pay for that?

Abby Wasserman: Oh, yes.

Stella Perone: Why would you do that?

Abby Wasserman: Yeah, exactly. Well, that was what Bill and I felt, too. So instead, I applied for New York University in their School of Educational Theater, which was more on track. I studied there for a year-and-a-half or so, and then we moved to Washington, D.C. when Bill got another job.

In the meantime in 1973, the stock market had gone way, way down, and Bill's firm, the investment advising firm that he had with his friend, Jim Nash, went pretty much south. A lot of money was lost, and they felt terribly responsible for that. I don't know if Jim ever picked up the business after that, but Bill decided that he wanted to go back to – not to overseas, but he wanted to get another job.

So we moved to Washington, D.C. in 1974, and I had about six months still to do on my master's degree. So I enrolled at Catholic University for my final work. I hadn't gone to my graduation from college at San Francisco State because it would have been the June after I was already in Colombia; and I didn't go to my graduation from New

York University either, because I was then living in Washington and I guess I felt the ceremony didn't matter.

So we moved to a house in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and Bill had a new job with five or six cooperatives that worked overseas that had come together into an organization. Bill was their executive secretary. They included the Rural Electrification Cooperative, and other cooperatives that had to do with housing and development in third world countries. And I finished my course work, you know, and was a mother. I was in a play, I played the lead role in a play called *Approaching Simone*, by Megan Terry, with the Washington Area Feminist Theater. And that was an interesting experience because Simone Weil was a philosopher, and that little string of philosophy kind of goes through my life. My father was a philosopher; my son is a philosopher. And I had always liked philosophy studies. But maybe that's enough for now.

Stella Perone: Okay.

[Part 2 recording ends here; Part 3 begins]

Stella Perone: This is Stella Perone with Abby Wasserman on March 16th, at 1:30 in the afternoon at Abby's house.

Abby Wasserman: Well I wanted to go back into the high school years just to say specifically what my senior year was like; and then I want to go back a little bit in time to some wonderful experiences that I had as a teenager in the field of drama.

I think I said that I was in the senior play. That was a big deal. As a sophomore I was in the all school play, and then when I was in my senior year, I was in a play called *The Tavern*, and that was with Mike Liebert, I believe I've talked about that.

But the other activities: I was the student body secretary; I believe I said I ran twice for song leader and lost. I was in kind of a pom-pom group that did marching at football games during halftime; and we were called, I think, the Tamettes. I was on the election and survey committee on the student congress; I think I may have been honor T one semester but never again.

Interestingly, although I became a writer, I didn't do anything in journalism. I didn't work on the paper; that came later, that interest. I was on the rally committee and the Junior Statesmen and also in the French Club. So I was very active at school. I was also in the music club, which surprises me because I didn't play an instrument during

those years, except private piano lessons. But I was a real joiner, I would say, when I was in high school.

So, I also wanted to bring up that – on the subject of going on the Experiment on International Living when I was a senior, I acted in a play on the ship. The ship was called the Arosa Kulm – it was a German ship. On board the Arose Kulm, although I was very interested in the young Germans who were part of the crew, because I just was so interested in boys always, I also took the time to be in a play. There was a young director who was going to Europe also – we were a big group for the Experiment on that ship. Denis Towey directed a reading of the play *The Glass Menagerie*. And I played Amanda, the mother. It seems that I was always a character actor; never an ingénue. And that was a great experience, to learn that play just in a matter of days, and present a reading – you know, we had our scripts, but we were able to be very free of them.

Another dramatic experience or experience with drama I had, I had mentioned that I wrote a script based on *The Ugly Duckling* for the children in the Junior Theater of Marin. I was directing children in a play and decided to write the play myself, and I believe that I've already talked about that. But I did find the script. At the time, I had forgotten what the end of *The Ugly Duckling* was. And so my variation of it is kind of charming, and really quite original. It turns out that in my story, the swans are the snotty ones, and the duckling is really a duckling, not a swan. But he has been born among the swans and the swans tell him how ugly he is. And as I recall, in the story by Hans Christian Andersen, it's just the opposite. It's a swan egg that has gotten in amongst the duckling eggs. And he's different than the rest of them and then he turns out to be a beautiful swan. So I had reversed it in my head. But it was really a lot of fun, and the children loved it.

I believe I've already referred to the leaders of our Muir League group at the Community Church, Millie and Ben Young. And there was one memorable play that I did there with Steve Fowler, the son of Carol and Donald Fowler, a really kind of silly and wonderful play called *Arby the Bugboy*. That was another of the experiences that I had in theater when I was young.

Between my junior and senior years, I was in a workshop at San Francisco State, a drama workshop for teenagers from all around the Bay Area. It's interesting because

last night at O’Hanlon Center for the Arts, we had an Irish salon, March 15th, 2015, last night. And there were step dancers from a step dancing group here in Marin County, young people; there were musicians, there were people reciting Irish poetry. And I recited a poem that I learned at that workshop at San Francisco State when I was 16 years old; a beautiful poem called *An Old Woman of the Roads*. And I remember so much of that poem from when I was 16. It just shows how much smarter kids are than adults – you know, we remember things for years. So that was a nice link from last night.

I went into college after the summer in England when we did a lot of walking around, and we also went to London and saw plays. It was just a fabulous experience. Then I started at College of the Pacific, which I’ve talked about some. And all during this time, I kept up my friendships with my friends from Tamalpais High School, including Phil Richardson. I joined the sorority Tri Delt – or rather, I joined a local that became a national, and became Tri Delt. And I was in a play at College of the Pacific, *No Exit*. I played the lesbian Inez in *No Exit*. And my friends from now UC Berkeley, Phil Richardson and a few others, were going to come to see the play. So I got this very funny telegram the night of the play. “Congratulations on play. Are drunk. Wrecked car. Can’t travel. Unhurt. Be cool. Have faith.”[Laughs.] One of my friends. College of the Pacific was a good experience, but I decided I wanted to take time off.

I believe I’ve also talked about stopping school for a year to join the San Francisco Players Guild, which was directed by Martha Bigelow Elliot, whose daughter Joan Washington had directed the first play I was in as a child, *Prince Fairy Foot*. I think I’ve talked about that. And so I played one of the step-sisters in *Cinderella*; it was a nine-month commitment, and one of the other actors in the play, the other step-sister, was Sally Sherman Taylor, who grew up in Mill Valley. And she should do an oral history, she’s amazing. So Sally and then Alice Perry from Sausalito was the step-mother; John Brebner was in it; he became very well known, he and his then-wife Ann Brebner started Outdoor Shakespeare here in Marin County, and John played a part in *Cinderella*. And then a couple of San Francisco actors. I drove the company car. I was 18. I think nobody else wanted to drive the car; that’s why they give the job to me. I think they took their lives in their hands. Anyway so that was a period of nine months where I had just a great, great time. We would go out to institutions and schools.

After that I decided to go back to San Francisco State and get an elementary school teaching credential. My parents had raised a pragmatic child in certain ways. I think I would have been frightened to try to go into professional theater. I wanted some security, so I decided to be a teacher. I also did love children, and I enjoyed education. So I was at State for two years, graduated from there, and I believe I've talked about this, I had a decision to go into the Peace Corps or to go to Alaska to teach. And I chose the Peace Corps and went to Colombia.

I think I've mentioned that my father did a great deal of traveling. He took study tours from San Francisco State overseas, and I think that he had instilled the bug for travel in me. So I was really, really happy to go into the Peace Corps and I was assigned to Colombia. We first had two months at least in training in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I'd never taken Spanish, but I learned Spanish and took to it very quickly.

And we left in January of 1964. I believe I've talked a little bit about the Peace Corps experience, and how that was, and how I decided after six months, that I wanted to switch into community development, and that was when I met my future husband.

So fast forward, I believe that I've also said something about marrying in Bogotá, Colombia, and how our next assignment was to Turkey, and how I had my first child there.

After Turkey, we went to Honduras, which was a very different place back then; pretty peaceful place. Not a great deal of crime, certainly not the murder capital of the world the way it is now. We lived in the house that the former president of the country owned, up in a hillside area above Tegucigalpa. His name was Ramon Villeda Morales, and it was beautiful rural area to live in. And Honduras was the place that I became very much interested in spirituality and met with a couple of priests and a nun and some other people interested in theology; and that kind of developed in parallel to what was happening in the United States in the early '70s, because we were there for three years. I remember we talked about theology for a year- and-a-half or so, and then we segued into happenings of our own, where we would do artwork together or other fun things. Unbuttoned, very enjoyable. Very loving group of friends.

The wonderful thing – one of the many wonderful things about living overseas is the chance to get to know people from different countries, because of course there are

always foreigners of many different kinds who are doing development work or are in the consulate or in the embassy or in the AID program overseas, and so my friends were from all over the place. They were Americans, but some of them had chosen to stay in Central America. We still have one of those friends, Father Gratian who lives in El Salvador, and we have visited him, you know, my husband and I, a couple of times.

Our second child, Joshua William Rayman, was born on March 10th, 1969, and so I had two children when we went to our next assignment, which was Nigeria.

I may have spoken about that, too, a little bit. What I remember most about Nigeria was how I realized what it must feel like to be in the ethnic or racial minority. In Nigeria, especially in Lagos, it was –I think it's good practice for anybody who kind of takes for granted while in the majority of their own country, that they will always have a free pass. Because in Nigeria, I felt like an outsider. And I hadn't had that feeling in the other countries I was in; a little bit in Turkey.

In Turkey, I was in an automobile accident once; it was just a little fender bender, but I had just been to the dressmaker's and I had on a dress that was above the knees because I was going to a reception with my husband that night, and so I was coming back already dressed. And this fender bender happened and we were – a woman and I, a Turk and I – were talking to each other outside the cars, and I remember being very self-conscious about my short dress, because it was not in – you know that was not the style. The reception we were going to would have been filled with foreigners who also would have been in short dresses. So there were times like that when I felt like an outsider.

But Nigeria was where I felt mostly like an outsider, much more in that sense of being barely tolerated instead of you know, being able to move freely and with people giving me a reception of welcome. So that was very good for me. And I also made some good Nigerian friends, a couple of them, and directed a play while I was there, *The Brave Little Tailor*, which was again a marvelous experience because I cast as the tailor a Nigerian named Steady Arthur Worrey, a wonderful man – rather on the short side. And the two giants in the play, by Aurand Harris. I cast two very tall white guys, who were both working with an overseas development agency. One was with AID I believe. And they towered over Steady. And I remember how the mostly Nigerian audience just loved that – they loved that the brave little tailor vanquished the two big huge white giants.

That was great. We had an American who was working for AID compose original music for that. There was an American who did the costumes, incredible costumes, and an Argentinean woman who was there with her husband who worked for Shell Oil, she helped do the music, the live music during the play. It was really quite a great experience. And I also taught a workshop for teenagers, a drama workshop.

We came back to the United States in 1972, and settled in Stamford, Connecticut with our children. And a notable thing about that is that I went to New York University to get a degree in educational theater.

Before the degree was finished, my husband got a chance to take a job in Washington, DC, and so we moved to DC and I finished off my secondary credential and master's degree at Catholic University. The time in DC was characterized by starting to be a writer; I began to write for a newspaper on theater. And then went into writing about visual art. Both of them just winging it – well, theater, I had the background. Visual art, no. Just the appreciation. But it was possible in those days to write and get your stuff published.

So I started writing in 1976, and I remember the first article I did was for a small newspaper on a show of Argentinean art. And this is perhaps, maybe in these years I began to see how what we do in our lives, all the paths that we take, begin to circle around. Because I knew Latin America, and the first article I did was on Latin American art.

I had started writing about art just for myself back when I was a teenager. If I went to an exhibit, I would take notes and think about what my reaction was to the artwork. So this was really a pleasure.

I also acted in a play by Megan Terry called *Approaching Simone* that was given by the Washington Area Feminist Theater, and this was a lead role and it was a long run. And I think it was an eight week run. And I really, really loved that experience too; very challenging. I had to sing in it, I had to do some choreography; I had to fall, I learned how to fall. And I learned how to say lines that were taken from Simone Weil's – the philosopher's – work; directly from her writing. And they were very academic lines, and try to give some life to them. So that was a challenge, too.

And then my husband and I began divorce proceedings, and we were divorced in 1979. So it took three years. And by that time I was writing for larger newspapers as a freelancer, and writing on mostly visual art, but also doing some feature writing; usually on people. I was always interested in people's – not so much lifestyles, as the kinds of households people have and the way they get along in their relationships.

Speaking of which, right after *Approaching Simone*, the play by Megan Terry, I went back to the Washington Area Feminist Theater to try out for another play. I was going to keep going, even though these were not paid assignments. And the play was all about the dissolution of a marriage, and I read the lines, waiting for my turn to audition, and I decided I couldn't do it, because it was too close to home. That was my last play for a number of years, *Approaching Simone*.

In 1979, my brother John died in an automobile accident while I was living in Maryland. And John had been the Chronicle entertainment critic for a long time, since 1964 he'd been writing for the Chronicle, and then he had taken over Ralph J. Gleason's column after Gleason died. And that was when he did his most marvelous writing, which was about entertainment in the broadest sense. And he died in a car accident that he caused. He was drunk and he was driving up Highway 280 right around Hickey Boulevard. There was a very, very heavy rainstorm that night, and dark. And he got turned around. I think he may have gone off – I read the police report, seems he may have gone off at Hickey Boulevard and then apparently there was a ramp there that if you didn't have your wits about you, you might make a mistake and go back onto the highway going the wrong direction. I've never tried to figure it out; I've never had the heart. But he was going south in the northbound lanes, and hit a car and killed two other people and himself.

And I was in such shock over that – I was in Washington when my mother called me in the middle of the night – that at first I didn't book a ticket home. It was like, I don't know what I was thinking, but a friend of mine from San Francisco, with whom I spoke who had had loss in her family, told me that I must go home. And so I booked a flight and left my sons with their father and came home.

There were a couple of memorials, gatherings for my brother. He was very popular, and he had a lot of friends who were celebrities, so we went to a couple of these

gatherings, and they were very warming, you know because of all the love people had for him. But it was a whole different world for me. I had lived completely apart from my brother for so many years, that I didn't know much about the circles he ran with. And so a lot of high powered people, and people in the entertainment world –

Stella Perone: Did he leave family?

Abby Wasserman: No. He wasn't married and he had no children. And years later, I was moved to collect his articles from *The Chronicle* and to write a narrative about his life. And that book was published in 1991. So he died in '79 and it took me until – you know it took me quite a few years to get around to the point where I saw my way clear to do a book on my brother.

My mother and father were very – very, very wounded by his death. And my father was in charge of my brother's estate. And I do think that that may have had something to do with his death, which was almost three years later; because it took a lot out of him. I think that the grief that they felt for his loss was compounded by a sense of the tragedy of the other two people; and my father had known my brother had a drinking problem, and he tried to stop him from driving when he'd been drinking. But my brother was very headstrong and he had been a heavy drinker for a long time, but managed to keep it together. But he had had a number of accidents in the past, starting from when he was I think 16, and just off and on, you know there would be these periods where he would wreck his car.

I didn't understand hardly anything about alcoholism; and I'd never really thought about it in relation to my brother. But what I had thought was that because of the way he lived, which was at such a high speed, that he would – I thought he would die young. But I had no specific idea of how he might die. He was a very – he was brilliant, and very, very talented and very funny. And I think he must have been very sad also; felt a lot of pain. He was extremely sensitive. He was very loving to a lot of people but some other people objected to his take on things. He was so professional in his writing. He was very, very disciplined. And he also loved to entertain people, and he entertained lavishly. Although not necessarily lavishly with food; but he would always provide a lot to drink.

Stella Perone: Where'd he live, Abby?

Abby Wasserman: He lived on Bush Street when he – in a building that's been torn down since. He had lived also on California Street before that. He'd had several San Francisco addresses. They still publish articles by my brother in *The Chronicle*, under their – I don't know what they call it – vintage or nostalgia or something like that – you know, the way things used to be articles in the Sunday section in the Pinkie there are articles by Terrence O'Flaherty, by Art Hoppe, by John and by other stellar writers from *The Chronicle*. And John was lucky because he was writing for *The Chronicle* in just about their best years for writers. They had a bunch of brilliant writers.

My brother was very colorful; there were stories and stories, so I ended up – before that book was published, I ended up interviewing 110 people who were friends of his, or acquaintances or work colleagues. And those transcripts are so interesting. I just could use a handful of stories for the narrative sections of the book, but I think the portrait of my brother is a fair portrait and a loving portrait. And his articles speak for themselves. The book is called, *Praise, Vilification, and Sexual Innuendo, or How to be a Critic*. And it was published by Chronicle Books.

The phrase, "praise, vilification and sexual innuendo" is from my brother. He wrote a series of articles on how to be a critic that were very tongue-in-cheek. And he said you had to be an expert in sexual innuendo because of course the censorship laws at that time were far more strict than they are now. You had to be good at sexual innuendo; you had to be good at praise, and you had to be very good at vilification. And John was. He was especially good at vilification.

So now the family was my father, my mother, and my younger brother Richey. He had been a road manager for some of the signature bands of the '60s including Sea Train and the Butterfield Blues Band. And he would be an interesting interview also about those years and that kind of music. He lives up on the north coast in Point Arena.

So, the next thing that happened was in 1981 my now ex-husband died by his own hand in Maryland. And so that was a very difficult period. My children were then 12 and 14, and I was the only one able to handle his estate. And so – and he died intestate, so it was a struggle for a couple of years. That was finally settled. And my father died in 1982 after two heart attacks. So those were years of sadness and difficulty.

By this time I think I was working part time for the Smithsonian Institution as a writer on their "Festival of American Folk Life," which is a wonderful yearly event. I especially liked it because I could write about people who had very different experiences from a Hmong family from Cambodia, who had come to the United States and the women were still sewing in the traditional Hmong way. And their needlework was shown at the "Festival of American Folk Life;" to people from the old medicine shows, Snuffy Jenkins and Doc Watson and other people who used to play for the old medicine shows.

And then there was the National Theater of the Deaf that demonstrated their folklore and their theater, which is a very elaborate, very theatrical sign language.

Anyway, there would be these marvelous combinations of people who were bringing their talents and their heritage to the Festival. Native American groups always. So that became a community for me because I would come back every year and work with the same people. That is to say, the same staff people from the Smithsonian.

I also was writing freelance for the *Washington Star* during those years, and doing features and sometimes reviews. And I got a job with an organization for psychiatric half-way houses called the Richmond Fellowship, also during those years in Washington. I was there for ten years, and so all of this experience I'm kind of trying to encapsulate.

For a couple of years I was the researcher for Tom Wicker, the journalist, where he wrote a book on Richard Nixon, called "One of Us: Richard M. Nixon and the American Dream." I used to work down at the Library of Congress almost every day researching Nixon material for Tom. So that would have been about 1980, 1981, maybe even a little bit of 1982 that I worked for Wicker. He was a wonderful boss, and the best conversationalist I think I've ever been with. He was just riveting in his conversation. And so open and encouraging, and just a wonderful man.

In 1984, I decided it was time to come back to Mill Valley. My son Graham had graduated from high school and was going to the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio. So with my younger son Josh, who had just completed his freshman year in high school, we packed up, we all got in the car, Graham, Josh and me, we took off for Ohio. We delivered Graham to his college, got him settled, and then we came across the country. This was the third cross-country trip I took with my kids. I had driven with them from Washington DC to California twice already, and then I'd also taken them on a car

camping trip up in Canada at one point. Those trips were absolutely wonderful. And I don't think I would have tried a cross country camping trip alone, but somehow with my two boys, it was okay to do it. And they remember it, they remember those trips very well.

Josh and I arrived in California in the late summer of 1984, very late summer. Just before school started, and Josh was here on time to begin at Tamalpais High School. The first place that we found to live was with my mother, here at the 101 Reed Street house. But we also lived for a couple of years next door at 105 Reed Street, the original house. Now you look at it, you see nothing of the way it was. It was completely rebuilt years later. But at that point it was owned by Anna Maria Knapp, and she rented it to us, and we liked living there.

We also lived in this period – I think right after 101 Reed Street before 105, we lived at 170 Miller Avenue, apartment 2 I think it was. That was a two-level rental place right on Miller Avenue. And that was where we lived. We must have been there a couple of years, then we moved to the house at 105.

Anyway, we were at 105 when Josh graduated from Tam in 1987. He was a very assiduous student; he was highly motivated to do well and get into a really good college. I think – and I don't know where that came from – I think because I was pretty much the same with both my boys that I encouraged them, but I didn't stand over them. And Graham had been less enthusiastic about school, more into sports. Josh also was an athlete, and he was on the cross- country and track teams. He had not wanted to come to California, he'd wanted to stay in Maryland and wanted to stay at his school, but I remember at the first athletic banquet for the parents and the kids on the cross country team or the track team, my son got Most Valuable Player on the junior team. And I just felt then that it was the right place for him to be. He took band from Mr. Greenwood, he was good in math and he worked hard. And he was given a National Merit Scholarship to Oberlin, but he was also on the waitlist for Williams, and he decided to go to Williams.

So now, I was alone, empty nest. My older son Graham graduated from Wooster and came out to California, but not to live with me. He came out to California – his first real job was in Lake County, on the *Lake County Record Bee*. So he lived up in there. He did a lot of reporting on the methamphetamine labs that were springing up all around

Lake County, and he did a very good job at news reporting. And so he was launched on his career. He later went back to school in New York at Columbia and got his master's degree in journalism and from there worked on *Newsday* in New York, *Newsday Long Island*, and then settled at *The Village Voice* for a number of years where he did some really fine investigative work. And a few years ago he won the highest investigative reporting award that is given by the New York Press Club, and so he did awfully well at that. Since then, like all the other senior reporters on *The Village Voice*, he was laid off, and so I think right now he's thinking of going to law school.

Stella Perone: Really.

Abby Wasserman: Yeah, making the change. Because the whole newspaper business is so appalling right now; so difficult for old style reporters.

Josh in the meantime went into the Peace Corps, after Williams. He was four years at Williams College, and he went into the Peace Corps in Malawi, and was there for two years, then came back and started his graduate school experience that extended on until he got his Ph.D. in philosophy. And he teaches now at the University of South Florida, and lives in Tampa.

And so what was I doing at this time that my boys were out doing things and you know, making their own lives? Did I mention that I joined the Art Commission – did I talk about that?

Stella Perone: I don't think you've talked about anything that you did after you got back to Mill Valley.

Abby Wasserman: Okay. Well, let me go back to my first experience, my first two weeks back in Mill Valley. And I have to say first that I had had many dreams about Mill Valley over the years. And most often, they seemed to take place in that area between Montford Avenue, along Miller Avenue from Montford to the high school, which of course would have been the part of town that I walked the most. And I remember how kind of empty it was, you know, and quiet. I think I may have talked about the sounds that I used to hear here. I'm not sure that I mentioned that one of the sounds that I heard was the train. Did I mention the freight train?

Stella Perone: I'm not sure if I remember that or not.

Abby Wasserman: Did I mention the foghorn? The two note foghorn that I could hear from my window? And the frogs at the pond? And the fighting that I would sometimes hear from across the street?

Stella Perone: I don't remember that.

Abby Wasserman: Yeah, we'd hear voices, you know people saying, shouting at each other.

Stella Perone: Certain neighbors.

Abby Wasserman: Certain neighbors. There's something so evocative about sounds. Sometimes I sleep in my old room, and when I do, I can hear people coming back from the 2 A.M. Club. There was a couple that lived up the street here, and they would come by and they would be yelling at each other and saying the most appalling things, you know at 2 in the morning, and the sounds would just waft in and you know, when it's quiet here, it's very, very quiet. But most of the sounds that I heard at night as a child were sounds that I treasure. You know, the natural sounds of a place like this.

One night I woke up when I was a kid, and the sound I heard was voices down in the street. And I looked out my window, and my father was across the street talking to some people in a car. At that point, there was no house across the street right there where there is now. That's 106 Reed Street across the street. There was no home built there. And a car was parked, and my father was saying to the driver of the car that he had better let the young woman come out of the car, or he was going to call the police. And so a very shaken young woman came out of the car on the other side and came up the walkway with my father into the house, and my mother made cocoa for her, while my father got in touch with her family. And what had happened was the guy that she was out with had parked here and was trying to force her to do some – I don't know what, some sort of sexual thing I imagine, and my father had heard that from up here and had gone down.

And I remember what a hero he seemed to be, you know; to my eyes he was such a hero. These doors were closed to the kitchen, and that's where they were. The telephone was in the other room there. So my brothers and I, we all slept on this side of the house, and we kind of crept out and listened at the door. I think my mother discovered us there and said she'd give us some cocoa too.

I really had a sense growing up here in Homestead of a neighborhood, you know, of people taking care of one another.

When I came back here to live in 1984, there were still some of the people that I remembered from way back, who lived here. The Fosses were still across the street; my friend Carol Foss who now lives on Montford, Frank and Winnie Yim from up here on Ethel Lane were here, and they had come, I guess, when I was an early teenager. Jack and Claudia Aranson lived right across the street at 1 and 3 Ethel. Claudia and I had been at Tam together. She was an opera singer. Jack Aranson was an actor. And next door, that house at 105 Reed, was still the same so it kind of felt comforting, you know it felt like it was still the place where I grew up.

The other day I went up to see our friends Eldon and Helen Beck who live on Laverne or live right off Laverne on a very high driveway. And the house that's being built right in front of them, that you see from Laverne, is totally out of character for the neighborhood. Completely out of character. It's a huge rectangular monstrosity. And it has no relationship to the houses across the street, you know. None at all. And you know I miss that neighborhood feel. I miss it. I think a lot of us do.

Okay. I tried to get into the Art Commission. The whole Art Commission had resigned as a result – this was around 1984 – as a result of – they held a competition for a fountain that was going to be in the plaza. And with the help of the Marin Arts Council, they chose a design. And the design was like a large ice cube, transparent, with water that would come out and cascade over it. And it was a very pretty, modern design.

As soon as some of the citizens of Mill Valley – probably the older ones, you know, like me, but I wasn't part of this – as soon as they realized what was being proposed, there began a movement of great, great criticism of the Art Commission. And for better or worse, the Art Commission was forced to – I think by the City Council, although I'm not very – I'm not up on my facts on this, I've kind of forgotten it over the years – the Art Commission was forced to renege on their prize to the winning designer, and all of the Art Commission resigned in protest.

So there the City Council was, without an Art Commission, and they immediately began to ask for volunteers to serve on the Art Commission. Now it wasn't easy then, and it probably isn't easy now, to become a member of one of the commissions. They put you

through an interview process, and so on. This was 1984, and I had not yet gotten a job, but I had worked for the Smithsonian for a number of years, seven I think, off and on; and I'd been writing about art, and I thought I was very qualified for this. But I was not picked. And then the next year came along, and they were again asking for applicants, and so I applied and they turned me down again.

Stella Perone: Did you feel like the people they chose really had better resumes than you? Objectively?

Abby Wasserman: You know, I don't know that I read their resumes, but I felt that they were probably choosing the people who struck them as having the best qualifications. Yeah. I didn't think that there was something fishy about it; I simply thought that I either didn't present myself very well, or that there were other people they felt were more qualified.

Stella Perone: Or the Council people owed favors to.

Abby Wasserman: Oh, well that could be, too. I didn't even think about that. Anyway, I'm sure they got good people. I know they must have gotten good people. But they were still having trouble keeping – I think you were supposed to have about seven people on the commission. So they turned me down the second time, and then one of the people they selected decided not to do it.

Oh, here's the other thing. Part of that time I was living in Homestead Valley, and they only had one slot for a person in what they call "The sphere of influence." And then the second time I believe I had moved to 170 Miller, so I was in the Mill Valley city limits. Anyway, when the person resigned, they asked me if I would like to – if I still would like to serve, and this time they took me.

And I served on the commission then from '85 or '86 – can't remember exactly when it started – until 1990. I became chairman my last year. In 1987 I introduced the idea of the Creative Achievement Awards, and then followed that up. That was turned down by my commission, by the commission. And the next person that I recommended for a Creative Achievement Award was Ann O'Hanlon, and they – the commission liked that. And they decided to go with this idea of having one award a year. In 1990 I left the commission. Trubee Schock picked up that project and she carried it through.

I moved at that point – let’s see – I started working for the Oakland Museum in 1986. They hired me to be on their public information staff, and to be assistant editor of their magazine. So in 1986 I began working there, and I was commuting from Mill Valley. And in 1988 I did my next theater experience. I played the part of Mistress More in *A Man for All Seasons* in Berkeley. And it was directed by my old friend from Tamalpais High School, Mikel Schwartzkopf. Mikie was the co-founder of California Shakes with Michael Liebert. Mikie was directing *A Man for All Seasons*, and my husband-to-be, Potter Wickware, was auditioning for a part that night. And I hadn’t intended to try out. I was just helping Mikey by handing out scripts and so on. This was over at the Live Oak Theater in Berkeley.

But I decided I would like to be in the play, and so I joined the cast, and we were in rehearsals for a few months, and then we had quite a long run. And so it took us from I think April we began the first reading, to August. And by the end of that, I was pretty much involved in a relationship with Potter. And from then on, it was just me and Potter. We were together for about four years and then we got married.

Before I got the job with the Oakland Museum, I was freelancing as a writer for the Chronicle. It was before Kenneth Baker became the art critic. And Kate Regan, who had interestingly enough been my brother John’s assistant for a long time, Kate Regan was writing on art before they got a permanent art critic. They should have hired Kate, but they didn’t. I was doing art writing and some other people were, too. And in fact, that was how I came to the Oakland Museum for the first time, was writing a long piece for the Sunday Chronicle in the review section on the museum’s reinstatement of its history gallery.

So it was at that point, 1985, when I met the guy who would become my boss, Phil Mumma. And interviewed the history curator, Thomas Frye, and wrote a piece that they liked so much that they put a blurb from it on their book – they did a book for the reinstatement. I also wrote on things as diverse as Aymara weavings from ancient Peru, and Barnett Newman, and Bill Viola, the video artist, and I loved that period of writing for the Chronicle. I especially loved doing reviews of museum shows. That was such a joy.

So when I was hired by the Oakland Museum, it couldn't have been a better assignment for me, because I had to write a lot – I was writing about art, I was writing about California history, and even sometimes about natural sciences, because the Oakland Museum had all three there. And I was learning how to edit. I was immersed in studies of California, so it couldn't have been better.

So I was commuting from Mill Valley for those first years, from 1986 to 1990, at which point Potter and I decided that I should move over to Oakland where he lived, and so I lived there with him for almost seven years.

During that time, my mother Caroline was here in this house. My father had gone to Canada after their divorce in 1967 or so, my father had retired from San Francisco State and gone to teach at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. He was living near Ladner, B.C. And yes, that was in the years when I was still living overseas; he was up there, and my mother was here in Mill Valley. And then after my mother visited us in Nigeria, the following summer she went to live in Sweden with her Swedish farmer that I talked to you about – Uno Jansson. So, just trying to put this together in my head.

Once I started working for the Oakland Museum, and living with Potter, I still went to Sweden a couple of times to see my mother, and in 1990 I went to Sweden to bring her back. She was not in good health, and she wanted me to come and help her come back to California because the flights were always a strain on her. So I came back with her, and continued to work at the Oakland Museum.

I became the editor in chief of the magazine when my mentor and boss took another job within the museum, and loved doing that. All that experience learning how to edit was probably-- it was just the best way to do it. You know, you learn by doing, and editing is very complex. And you learn how to, you know very gradually, how to work with writers and how to bring out the best in the writers and how to put your own ego kind of behind you. And it takes a long time. Sometimes you feel very insistent that a writer has to do something the way you want the writer to do it, and it really doesn't work that way. So you have to kind of go from where the writer is, and empathize with that and ask questions that are respectful, and then little by little, you know, you learn how to do that.

Years later when I was given the opportunity to apply for a job with the magazine *Boom*, which is a journal of California, as an editor, I got the job and it was really on the strength of all my experience in the past.

I worked for the Oakland Museum from 1986 to 2000 on their full time staff, as a city employee. When I retired, I was given a good retirement, and health benefits. I continued to work for the museum part-time for a few more years as their magazine editor. And then that ended, that terminated.

I got the *Boom* job through an old friend at the museum. She recommended me for – she told me about the job, and I continued to learn editing, because of *Boom*. It was just about a year ago that I stopped working for them after two years as their developmental editor. During that time I really learned how to work with writers. Way more than I ever had before. And so I feel in a way that this is all accumulative, you know. You learn how to be a better person, you learn how to be a more respectful editor, you learn how to impart your knowledge to other people without being arrogant; you learn how to learn from other people, have them teach you. So, I do love the editing part of my work.

In 1985, I did my first book. So that was before I came to the Oakland Museum. It was as a result of a series of articles that I did for the American Indian Contemporary Arts Gallery in San Francisco. They commissioned me to do a series of basically brochures about their artists. I did eleven of those, and they were made into a book in 1985. A book that's out of print now, but I was able to obtain a copy of it recently over the Internet.

And my second book was my book on my brother, and that was 1991. Talked about that already. And then my third book was done for the Oakland Museum, it was a history of Oakland by a lot of different writers. I commissioned thirteen writers to write on various aspects of Oakland history. Oakland history is fascinating; so many groups have come to Oakland and made lives there and the culture has been amazing, and the architecture and the sports and the music, and it's just a fascinating place.

So I did that for the Oakland Museum, and then my fourth book was a children's book called *Tosca's Paris Adventure*, which I illustrated and wrote. And then my fifth book – and these books have come out like every – you know, sometimes once every six

years, so this is a long period – the last book was on Mary Lindheim, whom I’ve mentioned before because she was my mother’s good friend who lost her husband right before the war in Europe ended. In 2010 the book on Mary came out, so five years ago.

Stella Perone: Why was she important enough for a book?

Abby Wasserman: Well she was one of the very few women ceramic artists working at a certain period in the Bay Area. She was a studio potter, but she was also a very close colleague of Edith Heath. Edith Heath was a production potter and Mary was a studio potter, and the difference between those two is that the production potter is duplicating again and again and again, whereas the studio potter is making one of a kind. Mary had been a sculptor before she was a ceramic artist; and she was like Edith, and like Marguerite Wildenhain who was another potter in the greater Bay Area, and who was very influential. Mary had taught ceramics, she was president of the organization – the Association of San Francisco Potters which was the big organization in the Bay Area for ceramic artists. That was in the early ’50s. She became a potter in 1946, and then she was just very, very active, so it was not only her own beautiful work which was shown in many, many shows, both in the States and internationally, but also that she was very active and very much a cheerleader for others. And also she was very involved not only in ceramics, but in the craft movement, in the studio craft movement, which means glass artists, metal artists, wood artists, people working in all these different media.

And other than that, she had an astoundingly interesting life. After Donald died, she was a very independent woman who lived life on her own terms, and quite an inspiring figure with very high principles. And I was paid for it, right? I mean I was commissioned to do this book.

Stella Perone: So who commissioned you?

Abby Wasserman: Her estate.

Stella Perone: Oh, neat.

Abby Wasserman: Yeah. So that was the last one. Now along about – gosh, I don’t even know the year – well I started about 12 or 13 years ago – I started to teach creative writing. And not really teach it so much as I found out that I could guide other writers, give them comments that were helpful. This would be an outgrowth of editing, you know I’m sure, and I could listen, you know – I could give people feedback that was positive

feedback, and help them think things through, because as writers we have to think things – we have to be open to discovering through the act of writing, and not impose on our writing. You know it's very different from what we learn in high school about outlining, you know the creative act of writing can be – yes you can have the discipline of the outline, you know where you want your story to go, but also you have to be open to discovering what is there, you know, what rocks are in your path. And what creeks you have to cross.

So I began to work with very small groups. And I was helped in that endeavor immeasurably by my dear friend Jean McMann. And Jean, until her death about a week ago, lived at 179 Lovell with her husband Douglas Muir, who's a photographer. And Jean was a wonderful writer, and just the best teacher. I had experienced her teaching, and in fact, learned a great deal about teaching, guiding people, from Jean. And it was Jean who suggested that I start, my own little group.

Gosh, she was a good teacher. She brought out of us the best that we could give. She didn't have any discussion. I would read something; other people wouldn't necessarily say, "Oh, that's so good," or "Oh, you know, really this part stinks," or you know, no, nothing like that. It was to be able to receive whatever was going on in ourselves, and then to share it, but not to have to go through the feedback, which I think was a wonderful – it's a wonderful method. I don't do it exactly, but it's very positive. Everybody would go out of her group feeling wonderful. Feeling that they had created something that was really worthwhile. And that's what I try to do with my groups now.

I had a writing group in Sausalito at one of the members' houses for a while, about a year, and then started to give groups at O'Hanlon Center for the Arts which was called at that point, Sight and Insight. At O'Hanlons' home – Anne and Dick O'Hanlon's home, and their organization that they had created in 1969. So that would have been in the early 2000s. And I've now had groups there since 2002 perhaps. And every year my students and I give a public reading at the O'Hanlon Center. At this point, I had seen Ann O'Hanlon around town. Her husband had already died; had died very recently I think when I came back, in 1985.

Stella Perone: Did you know her through your family before?

Abby Wasserman: I did know her through the family.

Stella Perone: Yeah, through your parents, right?

Abby Wasserman: Yes, right. Well, she and Dick were very, very close with Sam and Sylvia Newsom, and my parents were friends of the Newsoms and of the O'Hanlons. And of course, Ray Strong lived right above the O'Hanlons and he was very close to my family. And Ray and Lou, my father, were very close to Gordon Foster, and to Agnes and Don Oman, and to Oma and Bill Pemberton and we knew Mama Gravender and there was just this whole wonderful group of musicians and artists, Sali Lieberman and his family were friends with my parents. The circles were very – you know they were kind of like the circles when you throw a rock in the water. I know that just recently working on this latest issue of the [*Historical Society*] *Review*, and being at the O'Hanlon Center, I have met the sons of Dan and DeReath Collins, the Collins senior were friends of my parents, especially my mother. I just met last night Alex Call, who's a marvelous musician, and Lindy was a very dear friend of my mother's.

Stella Perone: So who's Lindy?

Abby Wasserman: Belinda Call.

Stella Perone: Oh, his wife?

Abby Wasserman: No, Alex's mother.

Stella Perone: Okay, got it.

Abby Wasserman: Belinda and Hughes Call, and they're the ones who gave their home to the Homestead Valley Community Association.

Stella Perone: Oh, that's the Call home?

Abby Wasserman: That's the old Call home. And I just last night ran into Alex Call and heard him perform at the O'Hanlon Center, and Henry and Gloria Wach's daughter, Debra, was at that same event last night. You know, she grew up in Mill Valley. It's wonderful to be in your hometown, and to be 73 years old and to be still meeting people who were so closely connected to your parents, you know? That weren't even perhaps my friends, I didn't even know them. My brother Richey knew Chip Collins. They were almost in the same class, and Chip Collins was the best friend of Alan Eshelman, who lived right here in the neighborhood. To see these people years later, and to feel that connection which is deeper than any other root, you know, is just like a miracle. And happiness. Kind of reminds me of when I first came back to Mill Valley. I remember

seeing George Cagwin somewhere, and George was an old friend, and seeing Carol Foss, my friend from across the street, or you know, a few other people I knew, and feeling that I was truly walking in a state of grace to be back home.