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**VERNA PARINO**

**An Oral History Interview  
Conducted by Nancy Emerson in 2015**

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Born in 1917 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Verna Parino lived in Mill Valley for more than 60 years until her death in 2015. In this oral history, Verna recounts how she moved to San Francisco in 1942, and soon after made her first visit to Mill Valley with her church youth group to spend a weekend at the Alpine Hiking Club Lodge. She tells the “romantic tale” of how Mill Valley’s first Youth and Community Center was brought into being in 1962 – a project with which she and her husband Dick Parino were involved – offering it as an example of her adopted town’s remarkable civic spirit. After Dick’s untimely death five years later, Verna describes immersing herself in the world of opera, and discusses her decades-long educational and organizational work as a volunteer for the San Francisco Opera Guild. Verna’s passion for opera – and especially the operas of Richard Wagner, whose epic opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* she saw performed 77 times – took her around the world, earning her the nickname “The Opera Lady,” and bringing renown to Mill Valley. In addition to her tremendous love of opera, Verna poignantly expresses the sense of home and belonging she found in Mill Valley, highlighting the town’s diversity and natural beauty, and recollects the joy she received from her involvement in the Community Church, her many years working as a Girl Scout leader, and her friendship with the naturalist Elizabeth Terwilliger.

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## Oral History of Verna Parino

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**Oral History of Verna Parino**  
**February 23<sup>rd</sup>, March 20<sup>th</sup> and May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015**

**Part I – February 23, 2015**

**00:00 Nancy Emerson:** Hello, this is Nancy Emerson. I'm sitting with Verna Parino at her home in Mill Valley on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 and we are beginning her oral history. She will be telling about her life and especially her days in Mill Valley over the past 60-plus years.

**00:17 Verna Parino:** Hello. My name is Verna Parino and I'm an old lady. I'm 98 years old. I've lived in Mill Valley for 60 years, and I've a story I'd like to tell you about the olden days and how we happened to have such a grand community center to greet you as you enter our city. It's a romantic tale, not about sex, but about adventure and all the wonderful things that happened in order to bring about this community center. So, let's get started with this story.

**01:10:** Communities get together and helped form youth advisory committees, and that's what happened in Mill Valley. The youngsters wanted to have dances but they were a little too rambunctious, and they had to have chaperones so they formed a youth committee. And they had meetings, as committees do, and they formed dances with chaperones that were well-chaperoned. And they arranged for jobs for young people to earn some money. Joining that committee was my husband, Dick Parino. He had lived in San Francisco and been a youth advisory committee working with young people, and I had been a Girl Scout leader for 20 years and so other members of the community got together and worked to make it possible for young people to have dances.

**02:27:** Now it so happened, that out on the Highway 101 there was a restaurant called Marvel Mar back in the 1940s, and the lady who owned it decided to sell it to a Charles Mosier. And Charles Mosier ran the restaurant, but he changed the name to the Colonel's Ranch Wagon. I don't know if any of you remember that Colonel's Ranch Wagon, but he had it for about 10 years, and then he decided he would like to build a motel. So, he was going to tear it down, but rather than tear it down, the youth committee convinced him sell it to the city of Mill Valley. Sell it for a whole dollar. And with several community spirited people encouraging the City Council, the Park and Rec Commission, the Planning Commission, that's what happened. The Colonel's Ranch Wagon was sold for a dollar. But how to get it into Mill Valley from the highway, now that was another story.

**04:00:** So, what they did, they cut the building into three sections and then built a road from the highway near Goodman's Lumber. Narrow, winding, rough. They hauled each of those three sections over that rough road, over Enchanted Knolls, and passed where the police and fire station now are. Then they put it on a barge and hauled it across the bay and placed it onto a cement platform that was put there for that purpose. Then with many, many, many, many, volunteers, they put it all together again, onto that slab.

**05:05:** I'm probably the oldest person around still that has slides. We took many slides of that process and I'd like to share them with you, beginning with the Colonel's Ranch Wagon, and hauling over the hill and onto the barge, and onto the cement. Then all the hard work, weekend laborers, everybody came. Hal Schwartz was there all the time. He had taxi service, and as the building took place, he had his phone installed in that building, and to this day that very same phone is still the phone of the Park and Recreation Commission of Mill Valley, so that goes back a long ways.

**06:15:** Bill Woods was there, he ran a tractor, and you could see him down there hauling dirt around and getting the land ready for the whole process. Joe Brewster worked so hard, and he was on Park and Rec, and Bill Seacore worked so hard. So many others worked so hard, and of course, they had to have some money in order to buy supplies, and I designed a poster of a temperature showing how many dollars of the \$25,000 we were trying to raise. That was a lot in those days. That was back in 1962, and we had that poster standing up at the corner of Throckmorton and Miller, and people kept looking to see how much money we had finally gained.

**07:38:** Well it finally got all put together, and to celebrate, there was a Fourth of July Parade. And since my husband had been the main spokesperson for urging city bodies to foster a part – it was called a Youth and Community Center to begin with, it changed names several times, so Dick was asked to be the Grand Marshal of that parade, and all the youth groups started out at Old Mill School and then paraded down Miller Avenue. The Goodman, or the Mill Valley Lumber Yard, loaned us their flatbed truck, and since I was a Girl Scout leader, and my assistant Sunday school teacher was a leader of the Campfire Girls, we had the two groups on that truck together, youth groups working together. It was a big deal.

**09:01:** So then, the next year there was another parade, and this time they brought in a lot of circus-type events and bean bag throwing games, and the whole project that had been called Project 17 – 17 acres of marsh land for recreation purposes – became a grand circus area. The Youth Center was used heavily, perhaps too heavily, and it sort of worn out and it was time to replace it. So then another committee was formed and a new community and rec center was organized, and it was grand. It had a swimming pool that was really fantastic, and large meeting halls. In fact, I even taught classes in opera down there.

**10:32:** Opera happened to be my love, and community meetings of all kinds, dinners and what have you are held in that park, or that rec and community center now, and it all started just because there were some rambunctious students that didn't have enough chaperones, and the community got together and brought a Colonel's Ranch Wagon for \$1. That's the beginning of our wonderful Mill Valley Community Center as I recall it.

**11:14 Nancy Emerson:** Fantastic. Oh, but let me ask you two questions.

**11:20 Verna Parino:** Okay.

**11:21 Nancy Emerson:** Two questions. One is, do you recall how much money you hoped to raise when you made that thermometer chart poster?

**11:34 Verna Parino:** The first one was \$25,000.

**11:37 Nancy Emerson:** \$25,000. Wow. And you did that?

**11:38 Verna Parino:** And we did it.

**11:40 Nancy Emerson:** And you say that's the first one?

**11:42 Verna Parino:** That was the first one, yes.

**11:44 Nancy Emerson:** Was there another one?

**11:46 Verna Parino:** I don't know about the second one.

**11:48 Nancy Emerson:** Okay.

**11:48 Verna Parino:** That was a much more mammoth project, and I think with government help.

**11:54 Nancy Emerson:** Oh yeah, for the new community center in around 2000, whenever that was, yeah. Great.

**12:00 Verna Parino:** And it all grew out of the \$1. [chuckle]

**12:04:** Another question I have is, the person who had the taxi service –

**12:09 Verna Parino:** Bob Robertson.

**12:10 Nancy Emerson:** Bob Robertson. Okay, good. I just wanted you to clarify that.

**12:14 Verna Parino:** Mill Valley Taxi.

**12:15 Nancy Emerson:** Okay, great.

**12:17 Verna Parino:** And that was 383-1370. [laughter]

**12:25:** There's one more thing I would like to add. In the olden days, when first coming to Mill Valley, there was on Highway 101, a stop and go light, so all the traffic on 101 had to stop and go, in order to enter East Blithedale or Tiburon. Then on East Blithedale when you got to Lomita, the land was low. The water came up over East Blithedale, so there was a trestle that went up over East Blithedale and all cars had to go up over that trestle. That was there when I first came to Mill Valley in the 1940s from San Francisco as a member of a youth group, and we came into Alpine Hiking Club Lodge up on the

ridge to have a weekend. Things were quite different in those days but time has changed. Although Mill Valley still retains its quaint character, it's more of a boutique character now, with houses getting larger, being added to, but it all started back there with that \$1 gift to the city. So I think it's a lovely adventure story to remember. Thank you.

[Break in audio]

**14:32 Nancy Emerson:** This is Nancy Emerson, this is the continuation of my oral history interview with Verna Parino on February 23rd, 2015.

**14:42 Verna Parino:** I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I went to the University of Minnesota, graduated and then worked at the Mayo Clinic in the business office for a couple of years. Then in 1942, after the war had broken out, I came out to visit my brother in Berkeley who was working on his PhD – or in '41 – and I liked San Francisco so much that the next year, in 1942, I moved out to San Francisco. And as a member of First Methodist Church Youth Group, many of us came to Mill Valley, to the Alpine Hiking Club Lodge up on the ridge, and stayed overnight and hiked all the trails of Mount Tamalpais, going up to the top and down into Muir Woods, and we sang songs as we hiked along. The group was called the Candlelight Group, and from that group there were many service personnel, Navy and Army and Coast Guard and others. Many marriages were formed, and some friendships still last, and have corresponded about the days of hiking Mill Valley streets and Mount Tamalpais. And always coming down when we got the bus, we would stop at Esposti's Ice Cream Parlor. I don't know if that's there still, but everybody had to have ice cream cones, and that was part of the deal.

**17:02:** I never knew, in those days, that many years later, I would wind up buying a house in Mill Valley, and living here for 60 years. That was just unheard of. But I love little old "Mally" and I still do. No matter where I go, I love coming home to Mill Valley. My daughter was born here and went to Park School and to Maguire<sup>1</sup> and Tamalpais High School. She learned to play a violin and played in the orchestra. Music became a way of life for her, and to this day there are still those people that went to Mill Valley schools, that get together and recently had a picnic in Old Mill Park, and I remembered so many of those names.

**18:11:** I had a big car and I used to pick up students in the music department through those narrow, narrow winding roads going up Tamalpais High School roads, and friends of mine did too. They rather held their breath as I made those corners. In the early days, there was a Norman Black who had a flower shop, and for Easter time he arranged to have a little barnyard in front of the Depot, and all fenced in. There were chickens and ducks and an angry goose that was always snapping at people, and bunnies. And they also arranged to have flower boxes in front of many of the stores. Some of my Brownies, dressed up as bunnies with watering cans, used to wander around watering all of those flowers, and I have a lot of newspaper photos of the girls doing that.

**19:48:** Another project at the Chamber of Commerce was I took the Girl Scouts to the

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<sup>1</sup> Edna Maguire School, which was a middle school at the time



waterfalls out Cascade Road and showed them various wildflowers there and they mapped the wildflowers up and down that waterfall and the Chamber printed them and gave them out to visitors so that they could go visit the waterfall and look up the various kinds of wildflowers that were there. There were a lot of civic projects to earn money. In Boyle Park – living across from Boyle Park – there were sometimes festivals over there and they would have games for people to play for money, and they could buy things. In fact the stained glass square that's hanging in my bedroom window was bought at a festival over there, and there's another one in another bedroom window.

**21:24:** So Mill Valley has always been a civic-minded town and people have gotten together for many different projects to make our community a delightful community in which to live. It's different from any other community that I can think of in Marin County. And I think that the Library<sup>2</sup> has a lot to do with it. It was an original Carnegie Library, and to build such a gorgeous building and have so many wonderful programs for all ages from the youngsters on up, and rentals of all kinds, and meetings of all kinds, bringing people in for lectures. Now that I don't drive, I don't get to go out that much, but I can't wonder but how great it is to live in a community like Mill Valley. I am so fortunate. I count my blessings. People keep up their yards. They appreciate their town. They appreciate the people in the town, and I just feel so fortunate. So lucky to live here. Fantastic. Fantastic. Thank you.

**23:33 Nancy Emerson:** Would you feel like talking about your role as the opera lady, or shall we save that for later?

**23:39 Verna Parino:** Oh, I am so lucky because I have a passion. And I grew up listening to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts and enjoying opera. After my husband died in 1967, weekends were very lonely, and I went back to opera and symphony, and became a volunteer for both organizations – a docent – going into the schools for both opera and symphony and explaining the background of composers and the music, but particularly, opera. And I enjoy having other people learn about opera, so that they can have as much enjoyment as I do. So for 29 years, as a member of the Marin Chapter of the San Francisco Opera Guild, and as the chairman of the San Francisco Opera Guild Preview Program for all the Bay Area, I researched and arranged for opera authorities to come into Mill Valley and the Bay Area, and give lectures with illustrated music, DVDs, and so forth, and became engrossed with Richard Wagner's operas.

**26:09:** They tell the story of humanity and it's pretty much based on mythology from all over the world, which is pretty much the same. When you study Joseph Campbell, mythology is pretty much the same. And as a result, I've had the very good fortune of being able to travel all over the world to see Wagner's cycle of four operas, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* – *The Ring of the Nibelungen*. It's based on mythology, because that way you don't base it on people, but you base on generalities. Because I'm so old, and I've seen so many *Ring* cycles, people like to talk to me about *why*. Why in the world do I keep going? And so in Shanghai, they sent me an email interview and the next day they published it with my picture in Shanghai. And in Seattle they had me on the radio and

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<sup>2</sup> The Mill Valley Public Library

on the – that was a year before. They’ve had me –

**28:02:** Oh, I went to Palermo. I’d never been to Sicily and I went to Palermo because the daughter of my friend was singing the lead soprano in *Brünnhilde*. During the first intermission they came up to me, “Would you answer a question?” “Sure.” And, “May we take your picture?” “Well can’t you wait until after the next intermission?” “No, we’ll take it right now.” They did, and the next day it was in the paper in Sicilian. I had to get that translated. I had three people translating the Chinese and – Oh, I’ve had someone from Germany get in touch with someone from Shanghai, get in touch with me, to talk to me for a documentary. I don’t know if that ever came about. But everybody has a right to their own opinion about what Wagner means. There are more books written about Wagner than anybody else other than Jesus Christ or Napoleon. Everybody gets into the act. Everybody has an opinion. Everybody says this or says that. And they all say, “Wagner meant this” and “Wagner meant that.”

**29:49:** There are more organizations dealing with Wagner than any other composer. No wonder I never get tired of talking about Wagner and comparing Wagner’s characters to what we see around about us, they’re all out there, all the crooks, they’re all in Wagner; all the greed, all the meanness, the goodness, everything is in Wagner, you can find it there. You never get tired of – there are of course, lots of people that cannot stand Wagner because he was anti-Semitic. Okay, he wasn’t a very nice man, but never was there music written the way Wagner wrote music. The ending of *Götterdämmerung*, the fourth opera, is so convoluted, it tells the world’s story from the least little thing, it’s there, it’s right there. A when you get to the end, it’s impossible to keep up with. You got the motifs and the melodies, and they stand for love or hate or something else, and you don’t need the words, you can just listen to the music and you know exactly what’s going on in that opera. No other opera can do that for you. No wonder people go crazy about Wagner.

**32:11:** No wonder I have so many recordings. [chuckle] You get fast and you get slow, and you can get interpretation and that – the first time I was given the [Georg] Solti *Ring* recording of the whole four operas, and that last disc I played over and over and over and over again. It was so convoluted, it told what was happening in the beginning and all the way through and you could just live each one of those characters. I get carried away.

**33:08 Nancy Emerson:** How many performances of the *Ring* cycle have you attended?

**33:13 Verna Parino:** Of the *Ring* cycle, 77. I don’t know, 76. It was supposed to be 76 in May, 77 in May, so it’s been 76. And I’ve seen many individual operas as well as the four operas and many other Wagner operas, like *Lohengrin* is one of the most beautiful operas and you get familiar music: “Here comes the bride, fair, fat and wide.” [chuckle] You know that one? And *Tannhäuser* or *Meistersinger* is considered *Deutschland über alles*, but it isn’t. It is German art over everything, not German nationalism. The *Flying Dutchman* was a very early one and he was – Wagner was always in debt, and he was always escaping his debtors. His *Tannhäuser* was revolutionary and he performed that in Paris, and because the gentlemen wanted to take their dancers out after the second act and

Wagner put the dancing in after the first act, they had a claque that booed and yelled and threw things and ruined the production, because they didn't like that. That ruined *Tannhäuser*. So any time you hear *Tannhäuser*, you remember what they did to that one. And there are 10 major operas and they did all 10 major operas in Berlin in one session, one right after the other, [Daniel] Barenboim. How he managed to do that, I don't know, but twice in a row, he did that.

**36:37 Nancy Emerson:** These 76 *Rings* that you went to, *Ring* cycles –

**36:41 Verna Parino:** 76 *Ring* cycles.

**36:44 Nancy Emerson:** How many countries?

**36:47 Verna Parino:** That's – and for my 73rd, I was in Melbourne, Australia, and they had a *soirée* for me with a birthday cake, and they gave me a CD lecture, a very famous lecturer. In April, that lecturer will be coming here to lecture and – very intelligent. He goes all over the world to lecture, so I've gotta be up and at 'em for that, to hear him again. Oh, I went to – I had such a good time in Seattle that time that I decided I've got to go again someplace, so I discovered they were doing an [George] Enescu Festival in Romania. I can't even pronounce "Enescu," and I went there and they were having interviews, and they picked me out upstairs and, "You're not from here." "No, I'm from San Francisco." "San Francisco? How come you came from so far?" So they interviewed me there and I explained that music is a universal language, that everybody understands music even though there are different languages, even in Romania.

**39:00 Nancy Emerson:** Where else?

**39:03 Verna Parino:** Oh, I was in Cologne and they had banners hanging outside the opera house and a man was taking a picture and I said, "Would you take a picture of me in front of the banners?" "Sure." And he was from Oslo, and I said, "Oh, I've been in Oslo to the *Ring* and you had the most wonderful ski jumps there." "Yes. We did. You were there?" [chuckle] And so we talked about that. And then in Shanghai, the man who got my ticket took me down to the front row center and had a photographer there, and then a man way over on the side stood up. "Who's the celebrity?" "Oh my gosh. It's Verna." So he joined our group, and you meet people everywhere when you attend Wagner.

**40:34:** Oh, and another one. I was in New York for that crazy [Robert] Lepage *Ring* and talking to a lady from New York who was talking to a man from Florida and she said something about how Wagner keeps me alive and he said, "What did you say your name was?" "Verna Parino." "You're the woman in the book!" He had just read about me in a book that had just come out.

**41:14 Nancy Emerson:** What was that book?

**41:17 Verna Parino:** I've got the book<sup>3</sup> in here and they've gotten me in with three other very famous Wagnerians: Father Owen Lee, who is on the Met Intermission, and Speight Jenkins, who is just retired from Seattle Opera, and Brian McGee from London. Me with those three famous people!

**41:49 Nancy Emerson:** Fantastic.

**41:50 Verna Parino:** That was when I had a stroke and they sent the book to me. Life is amazing when you get into Wagner. [laughter]

**42:03 Nancy Emerson:** It's a whole lifestyle. [chuckle] Okay, I think that we should stop, don't you? And rest, okay?

**42:15 Verna Parino:** I did it.

**42:16 Nancy Emerson:** You did great.

## **Part II – March 20, 2015**

**00:00 Nancy Emerson:** This is March 20th, and I am interviewing Verna Parino in her home at 185 Buena Vista Avenue in Mill Valley, about her life in Mill Valley. And this is Nancy Emerson. So Verna, you were talking about Mrs. Terwilliger.

**00:21 Verna Parino:** Mill Valley is such a very special city, town, village, whatever. I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to have lived here. When I first came, it seemed like such a lovely place with so many flowers in the yards and greenery. I had been living in San Francisco, and to wind up having a home and living here for 60 years, I can't think of a more wonderful place to bring up my daughter and to enjoy a home with my husband, and to now be retired. And toward the end of my life, still enjoying my home with its yard of fruit trees and flowers and across from Boyle Park, where I can go for walks. I think one of the most wonderful things about being here has been the feeling of acceptance that I've found in Mill Valley. That's what first brought me here, and got me established, and I'd like to start with that. I come from a Swedish background, growing up in Minneapolis, and my mother had a Lutheran background, and my father a Baptist background. I married a Catholic in a Methodist church, and we decided finally on a community church, where everybody is accepted, no matter who they are or where they are in their religious understanding.

**02:33:** I think that's what really attracted me, and so I became active in the Mill Valley Community Church as a Sunday school teacher and as president of Triple-C, the community church club, and my husband came to church with me. We learned to accept our own differences, and so this is what Mill Valley was all about. It's such a diverse community that it seemed like the right place for us. One of my earliest activities was becoming a Sunday school leader, and at the same time, president of the women's group,

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<sup>3</sup> *Richard Wagner: The Lighter Side* by Terry Quinn

but then a Brownie Girl Scout leader, all in the same year. It was a pretty heavy load, but it led to lifetime enjoyment. As a scout leader, I met with Elizabeth Terwilliger, who was a nationally acclaimed naturalist, who wanted the world, but particularly children, to enjoy the out-of-doors. And she would take people on walks, and to look at the birds, and then we had to go on bicycles in order to see more birds. And then we had to have canoe trips in order to see water birds. And we would pack the canoes on a truck and go all around Marin to launch our canoes. And sometimes there were accidents, up in Novato I remember there was a treacherous spot, and the canoes tipped and we got wet and had to go home and change.

**04:51:** Those are the things that you would always remember mostly, but one of our canoe trips was in Mill Valley, and we were paddling around Richardson Bay, from the Audubon Center in Tiburon, and it wasn't the easiest kind of water to be controlling, but it was wonderful. And I have a photograph of two of our canoes that were taken, with the new Mill Valley Community Center in the background and Mount Tamalpais in the far background, and it is so typical of what Mill Valley is all about. I went with Elizabeth – I had a large car with a large trunk and Elizabeth would go down once a week to San Mateo Regional Park for an outdoor educational program, and she had a lot of stuffed animals that we would put in the backseat of the car and the frozen birds that people would give her in the trunk. By the end of the day, the frozen birds were really defrosted. They were a pitiful sight. But as we drove down the roads, people would see these deer heads and these other animals sticking up out of the back seat and they would turn and stare. Why we didn't have accidents, I don't know. But when we'd go for our walks, she was always turning over a rock, "Let's see who lives under this rock. Oh a slug! Oh how lovely!" And I couldn't stand slugs and I had to look at these creatures, banana – yellow banana slugs.

**07:15:** Everything had a story. There was a rhyme and a rhythm to nature that she brought out in such a happy, joyful way, that she was a delight. She was honored by President Reagan and it was on television. When she taught children about birds, she always said the ducks were always in a hurry and she would flap her arms as though she was a duck going very fast. And then the seagulls were never in a hurry and she would have her arms going very slowly flapping. She did this to President Reagan and got him to flapping his arms like the children were doing. [chuckle]

**08:19:** It was on television and it was a delight. Somewhere in my house I have a copy of that video of that item. She was a naturalist, she just knew how to talk to people and have them enjoy their out-of-doors. She was instrumental in so many programs that brought nature to Marin County and to the rest of the area. So we were very lucky to have her, she just lived around the corner from where I lived. I used to see her at the Y pool where she went regularly to swim, and I was there for arthritis aquatics exercises. Thinking of Mill Valley, I can't think of a more wonderful example of what Mill Valley is all about.

**09:33 Nancy Emerson:** That was a good story. [chuckles]

**09:37 Verna Parino:** Yeah, I thought I would concentrate on that one. It all came together in a way, so then I can talk about – oh, may I add to that?

**09:52 Nancy Emerson:** Sure.

**09:52 Verna Parino:** For another segment, I'm on a roll.

**09:56 Nancy Emerson:** Mm-hmm. Here we go.

**09:57 Verna Parino:** As a Girl Scout leader, I had worked with high school girls in San Francisco. When it came time for my daughter to be involved in girl scouting, there weren't any parents that could take the time to be a leader, so I became a Brownie leader. One of our most exciting events, I think, was reading a first-grade reader about the lifespan of the salmon. The girls took turns reading it, and were prepared, so then the next week we went to Muir Woods and the ranger there had checked to see where the salmon were spawning, and then took us to those places where we could see the fish with their tails building an area to plant their seeds and lay their eggs, and then were treated with the sperm. We saw firsthand the life cycle of the salmon that are so much a part of Marin County. There were other opportunities in Marin, we went to the seashore and gathered seashells and stones and made a collage about three-by-five foot on a wooden board depicting the seashore at Cronkhite beach with a drawing of the rocks and the water and the sky, and then presented it to the Methodist Church where we were having our meetings. It stayed up on the wall for a long time, and it was another opportunity to enjoy Marin County.

**12:23:** And of course, we went hiking. One of our hikes was up the Cascade Trail, and identifying wild flowers, and we made a map of the trail and pointing out where different kinds of flowers or ferns were located, and made copies. The Mill Valley Chamber of Commerce – Granville Beedle was in charge then – he handed out copies to visitors so they could go see that wonderful waterfall that we have right here in Mill Valley, and the wonderful different flora and fauna that you could see along that trail. We also enjoyed – well, I got more involved and became neighborhood chairman, and then we became an area including the Sausalito/Mill Valley neighborhood and the Belvedere/Tiburon neighborhood, and to the Richardson Bay Association. So I was the first chairman of that, and I'm delighted that Girl Scouting is still going. At that time, it wasn't cool to be a Girl Scout except that we were all having such good times that instead of just one Brownie troop, we wound up with a second Brownie troop. And then the third year, when my daughter was in junior Girl Scouts, there was nobody who could lead, so I had three troops. [chuckle]

**14:29:** It was a life of Girl Scouting. For 20 years, I was a Girl Scout leader, including the time in San Francisco, and those girls – it was an organization at my Methodist Church, at that time organized in 1945, and this is the first year that I have missed our reunion. The first Saturday in December, every year, we have gathered from different parts of California and the Bay Area. And daughters, and sons, and grandchildren have come and that Girl Scouting program has meant so much to so diversified a group of

people. The reunion in Hollywood was played up in the newspaper, and to have companionship, friendship throughout life is a very special thing. It's like school reunions, there's something very special about people you've known for a long time, and worked together, and usually for a worthy effort. And so that was another opportunity that Mill Valley gave me for which I am most appreciative.

[Break in audio]

**16:20 Nancy Emerson:** This is Nancy Emerson. This is the continuation of my oral history interview with Verna Parino on March 20, 2015. I asked Verna to talk about how she came to live in Mill Valley.

**16:32 Verna Parino:** We looked around the Bay Area and wound up in Mill Valley. But while I was working and married, we saved all my money so that we could have a nice kitchen. And to this day, I have my lovely kitchen that I worked all those years for. [chuckle]

**16:57:** It was interesting, through my church group I enjoyed a Labor Day family weekend at the San Francisco YMCA Camp called Jones Gulch down in San Mateo Regional Park. And around the campfire, there was Richard as we were singing songs. We met and for two years he courted me, but I kept saying, "No, I couldn't marry a Catholic. Heavens." But somehow or another, we finally agreed to agree, and accept that people aren't always idiots just because they have different ideas about religion or politics. He didn't discover until after we were married that I was a Democrat. [laughter] I mean, that I was a Republican. Of course he was a Democrat. Besides, he represented a labor union and I was so anti-union that I would cross a picket line just for the sake of crossing a picket line. But I supported him on his endeavors. Ane had a difficult first year. But when you learn to accept yourself, you can accept other people. I was most fortunate to have had him as my husband for 17 years, until on a vacation trip to the Grand Canyon he had a sudden stroke and died two days later. But Jones Gulch was a very special place, so I took my Girl Scouts— well, we, Dick went along and he was always Uncle Dick to the girls and they adored him and were sad that they were not allowed to – the Catholic girls were not allowed to attend our wedding because of marrying out of the church. It's an interesting world. You become very ecumenical, and this goes back again to what I like about Mill Valley. It's such an ecumenical area of people who learn to accept others through understanding. And that touches on my favorite opera, which I will speak of later, called *Parsifal*, a Richard Wagner story of learning compassion through living experiences. And it's the epitome, I think, of what I like about Mill Valley.

### **Part III – May 1, 2015**

**0:00:00 Nancy Emerson:** So today is May 1st, 2015, and this is Nancy Emerson. I'm here with Verna Parino, in her home on Buena Vista Avenue in Mill Valley. Today, Verna, we're going to talk about opera and more things that come to your mind, right?

**0:00:18 Verna Parino:** Right. It's wonderful to have a passion, to be interested in something that is so exciting for you that it takes over your life. And I've been fortunate, as growing up, when I was in high school, to have it recommended to me that I listen to the Metropolitan radio broadcasts, and that changed my life. I developed an interest and a knowledge, but then that went by the wayside as I went on to college, and worked at the Mayo Clinic for a couple of years, and then came to San Francisco to visit my brother, who was working on his PhD at Cal, and I fell in love with the city. It's a wonderful city, and so diversified. It opened my eyes to another world. But I went to the opera only a couple times because tickets were offered to people in the service, and I was working for the Red Cross. So I got some freebie tickets.

**0:01:57:** Then time passed, I got married and had a child, a daughter. And then my husband passed away very suddenly from a stroke in 1967. We were on a trip in Arizona, and that first year was very difficult. But I managed – and that seemed to become my mantra from thereon, that I learned to manage. I learned to do things that I never heard of before. I could hammer nails and I could saw and I could do gardening. And I loved having a home in Mill Valley. Mill Valley is a very special place. I love my yard, my fruit trees, my flowers. But I needed something more than that. Weekends were very long, and sad and lonely. And I went back to opera. Dick and I had not been able to go to the opera, but we collected many recordings. And we would listen to an opera every weekend, and choose a different opera to concentrate on. My husband being Italian, and his family being opera lovers, his mother singing in chorus of the San Francisco Opera, we listened to a lot of Italian opera.

**0:04:01:** It became a way of life for me. And now, almost 50 years later, it has become not only a passion for my life enjoyment, but so much of a way of life for me. My whole life became – revolved around opera. And I can't concentrate enough, or say enough, about the wonderful opportunity of having something so exciting in your life that it carries you through all the hard times. And there were hard times. I went back to work and finally decided that my volunteer work was more important than the little money I was supplementing my social security in. And so I continued with my joy of opera. And as times changed, I added to the records that we had, and borrowed recordings from the Library and recorded them on cassettes and got libretti, and became a volunteer for the San Francisco Opera Guild, the Marin Chapter, and took on several volunteer jobs there, including the preview chairman's job for the chapter.

**0:06:01:** I wanted to know more and so I started going to previews that were held at the Ross Valley Center, and from there we had to change to different venues, and we had our previews in Tiburon, at a school; and then in Mill Valley, at the Park School. Acoustics were a problem. My job was to research and find speakers who were knowledgeable on Wagner and all operas, but Wagner became uppermost in my interest and activities, so it came to mind first of all.

**0:07:05:** I learned to meet wonderful, outstanding people who were experts in the field of opera, depending upon what the San Francisco Opera was performing, and we would



choose eight of the operas to preview and the major ones were in the fall, and then there was a summer season, so we previewed those also. I can't tell you how many trips I took to the library, looking up reference books, the biographies. Since we didn't have money to bring people here from Europe, I would not pay any attention to those who came from France or other places, but if they had written books in English, then I became more interested in getting in touch with them.

**0:08:21:** We had six different chapters – well actually five – but we worked with the San Jose Opera Guild, and then shared the opportunity of having these outstanding speakers speak to each of our groups. In the process we had a lot of people come from Sonoma. So in the flyers that I sent out listing who was speaking when and about what I included a little tear-off where any of the people in Sonoma County interested in forming a chapter there – for they wouldn't have to come down to Marin County to hear about opera – and that grew into a chapter.

**0:09:25:** So we had our speakers speak in venues in Sonoma, different places that finally concentrated mainly on one venue that was convenient. Then we had previews in the East Bay for the chapter there, and down the peninsula, and in the city, and in San Jose. And we formed a committee of the presidents, or rather, the preview chairmen from each of those chapters. So I became the preview chairman for not only the Marin County chapter, but overall Chairman for the San Francisco Opera Guild, working with the other coordinators.

**0:10:40:** I can't tell you what an exciting time that was for me. I learned to do so many things I have never done before, including participating in an annual meeting to review what operas we had done the previous year, and then review the planning of what we had previously worked for, for this coming year, and then everybody was anticipating, "What are we going to do next year?" Everybody was always curious about that, and it was always strictly confidential, because the San Francisco Opera wanted to do their own announcements, and it was always, "What are they gonna do next time? Who's going to sing? What do we have to look forward to?"

**0:11:51:** And so, those were exciting meetings. Because I was asked to chair that group of people – it was called a preview committee – I became a preview chairman for the overall Opera Guild as well as the Marin chapter, and I was asked to attend a conference of Opera Guilds International, which was composed of opera volunteer organizations throughout the United States, and I was asked to give a report in Portland where the conference that year was being held. So they were looking for someone to take over the position of coordinating the previews of the Northwest region, which included from Alaska down to San Francisco, and that was a challenge, and an exciting challenge.

**0:13:18:** I was just a little guy from the heck, so to speak. And working with prestigious people, and it scared me, but when you're given a task, you do it. You manage, that became a mantra for me. To this day, I manage. Even though you've never done something before, you learn how to do it. I had no idea what I was getting myself into at that time, and I said, "Oh, you mean I have to send out a newsletter? I've never

done a newsletter.” So I got copies of newsletters and sent out newsletters.

**0:14:08:** We had eight Opera Guilds in our region as members of the Northwest region of Opera Guilds International, but the Bay Area was such a wealth of interest in opera, there were so many organizations, that I would find out about them and attend one of their operas, and get in touch with volunteer people and tell them about Opera Guilds International and get them to join, so we could share our knowledge and our expertise. I did a lot of traveling, and by the time my two years term was up, we had 17 members in our region instead of the original eight. So each newsletter that went out, I would say “Welcome to this group,” or “Welcome to that group,” and I went to Boise, I went to Eugene and Petaluma, other cities that were performing, and sent them information and it was a very exciting time and I keep repeating that, probably because it added so much interest to my life. Although I still loved opera, this was a step up, and meeting other people who had the same passion that I did. So that was a whole other world for me and has been ever since.

**0:16:16 Nancy Emerson:** Can you tell me what years those were when you were serving as a chairman?

**0:16:22 Verna Parino:** That would be 1982. In the '70s I went to the previews in Marin and became active in our Marin chapter, but then becoming chairman of the regional activities –

**0:16:51 Nancy Emerson:** That was '82?

**0:16:51 Verna Parino:** That would be the early '80s.

**0:16:53 Nancy Emerson:** Early '80s, okay.

**0:16:54 Verna Parino:** And going up to Portland, that was the early '80s.

**0:16:57 Nancy Emerson:** Okay, great. Thanks.

**0:17:00 Verna Parino:** The conference is held every two years or so for Opera Guilds International, switches around from city to city. It's a big deal of several days. And the previous chairman for the OGI as it was called – I was a member of the board, and I was going on opera tours and that one early year I met up with – well, they don't have opera guilds in Europe as we do, but they had an organization called “Friends of Opera,” and I was in Paris and I met up with the chairman of the volunteer organization, and told them about what we do in America, mainly with education. It's so important to keep the interest spreading about opera so that there's an opportunity for newcomers to find out about this wonderful art form. That was pretty heavy stuff I must say, being at the Paris Opera and meeting with them.

**0:18:50:** I was part of a tour and went to Vienna, and there I met up with the person who was in charge of the Freunde der Wiener Staatsoper, the Friends of the Vienna State

Opera. He actually worked at a TV station, and it was at the time of the Chernobyl meltdown, and he was so busy with that and his TV work, but he still allowed time to meet with little old me. He said that they don't give money to the opera, it would just go to the general fund of whatever, and it might be used for garbage collection.

**0:20:03:** But the education was performed mainly by families. They didn't have education as part of their Friends organization. So I told him about how we worked in America, and shared our skills and knowledge. Then from there, I went to Munich and met up with Goethe Institut, and nobody there spoke English, and I had to use my high school German to communicate my spiel of what we do in America. That was a rather short visit, I must say. [chuckle]

**0:20:58:** But it led me to meet at the opera then, the Bayerische Staatsoper, the president of the Friends of the Bayerische Staatsoper, and he happened to be the public relations person for the opera there. I told him about opera in America, and it was very exciting.

**0:21:24:** Anyway, when I came back and went to my first meeting of the Board of Opera Guilds International, I had lots of exciting information to tell them, and they thought that was pretty exciting. The only foreign support group was an organization in England, and it led to the furtherance of enjoying opera in different ways.

**0:22:02:** Oh, well I must say that, because of my spreading the word of opera and the value of volunteers, they wanted me to stay on the Board for another term, and they developed a new title: Guild Development Chairman. So, I stayed on the Board, and met wonderful people and grew in my knowledge and my expertise.

**0:22:51:** Suddenly I was expected to be an automatic expert. [chuckle] I was asked to help companies form volunteer groups. The first one was in the Minnesota Opera, and we were having a board meeting in St. Paul. So I prepared information about how other opera companies who had volunteer organizations, and they went by different names, sometimes a "guild," sometimes "friends," sometimes other titles. And I met up with the director of the Minnesota Opera in my hotel room and also Des Moines Opera, the person in charge there.

**0:24:06:** To prepare for it, I got in touch with opera guilds in America, and had specific questions of how they work together with the company, whether they were a separate 501c3 volunteer organization that can get tax deductions for its work, or if they came under the jurisdiction of the parent company. And in San Francisco, we were a separate 501c3, but the Symphony Volunteer Organization, their groups were called "leagues," they came under the jurisdiction of the Symphony, and so answered to the parent body, with how they handled their monies, their treasury.

**0:25:16:** When we started out in Marin, we were subsidized by the parent company with some money to help us get going. And so, there wasn't any specific way of how it had to be. One of the interesting questions was how they handled their by-laws. And so

suddenly, I became an expert on by-laws. Well, I worked pretty hard in learning, so I could answer the questions and it helped when we formed the Wagner Society here, and we came – we had to answer to the Secretary of the State about our organization. It's amazing how one thing you learn at one time can prepare you unexpectedly for being able to work in other directions. And so, it was a wonderful learning experience.

**0:26:28:** A very important part of the volunteer support group, of course, is finding money to help the company put on its work, and also education. So I had all these questions asked of six different opera guilds, and had that typed out and given ahead of time to people I was meeting with in St. Paul. Then they wanted me to do a workshop in Chicago when we were having the conference there. Little old me do a workshop? Really? Me? Really? [laughter] It was pretty heady stuff. So, I got me a new suit for the occasion, so I could feel up for the job. Funny how that really can help you, and I love that suit. I always thought about that workshop. And opera gave me so many opportunities.

**0:27:53:** And people – friends – were amazed that I could spend so much money going to different places and, believe me, it's expensive, the hotel bills and the airfare. But the people you meet were all so exciting because they had the same passion that I had, and your passion keeps more passionate as each year passes, and it becomes a way of life. And I feel so grateful that I had a passion that allowed me to grow. So, one of the questions I asked was, "How do you reward your volunteers?" Because they work awfully hard. And there are times when some volunteers don't follow through with their jobs and they're not responsible. They're human, they make mistakes. And I got to thinking about how do we reward people who volunteer? I had a friend who couldn't believe that I would do all that not being paid. Well, that got me thinking. When I was in fourth grade, a teacher asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up. And I said I wanted to be a teacher. And, oh the teacher was so pleased. "And, well, why do you want to be a teacher?" "So, I can be mean to the kids." [laughter] I was a nice girl, how can I say something like that?

**0:29:56:** Well, anyway I was so embarrassed that after the lunch period, I was afraid to go back to school. [laughter] And I don't know what I did that afternoon, but I got over it. I was interested in music, and so in high school, I furthered my interest with the recordings or the broadcasts, and I wondered why people did the things they did. It became interesting how organizations would reward their people, and each one was different, and some people never thought about that. And so, I became more aware of how important it is that you recognize people for what they're doing, 'cause it's a big effort for whatever organization or whatever field you're interested in. And why do people give so much and not be rewarded? Well, I got rewarded. Not only as preview chairman for our Marin chapter. I became president of our chapter, and then automatically a member of the board, and then automatically meeting up with people, and going to the conferences. I get carried away with what joy I had [chuckle] with all those activities. My goodness, that was 30, almost 40 years ago, but it's like yesterday, it was so meaningful.

**0:32:29:** And to become regional director for Opera Guilds International and go all over, it brought little old Mill Valley to the fore in the opera world in many different ways. And then continuing on with guild development, I received awards and the most prestigious one was through the Opera Guilds International and they had a program for each guild recommending a person to receive an award and I received mine, “Partners of Excellence” it was called. I have the pin that I was given on my dresser here, and I would wear it with pride. In order to get that award, there had to be a letter from the volunteer organization president and the director and the company. So the president of the San Francisco Opera, and the president of the Opera Guild, they had to use all this flowery language about the work that I had done. And somewhere I’m gonna have to dig those letters out and say, “Look at me, look at me.” Well, that’s how you reward volunteers by acknowledging that their hard work is there, and worthwhile, and acknowledged by the higher-ups.

**0:34:56:** It’s like a company gives you a salary increase, and that’s acknowledging that you’re doing a good job. And I was rewarded for helping other companies develop volunteer service, and it’s amazing when you learn how worthwhile the thousands of hours of volunteer service can be, in all the various fields of the opera company’s endeavor. And the San Francisco Opera Guild happened to have an outstanding educational program, and we shared that with other volunteer support groups. So they copied many of our programs, and people learned about little old Mill Valley because I was always introduced in this hierarchy of the opera world. And opera is considered an elitist art form, just because it takes so much money to put on an opera. It combines all the arts, and millions of dollars when you get to something like Wagner and his *Ring of the Nibelungen*, and most companies are not able to afford the kind of singer that is required for Wagner’s work.

**0:36:58:** There’s a term that’s used, *Heldentenor*. Wagner tenors are scarce, and few and far between, so they are in a class all by themselves, and anybody that can sing Wagner well, with all the stamina – the roles go on, the operas go on forever and ever, and instead of a three-hour opera like you might get with Italian opera or operas from the other companies, it will go on for four or five hours. Just one aria can go on for 25 minutes, and to be able to get through that, that’s really something of – Wotan is the chief god in the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, and he has a monologue that goes on for 25 minutes, and to sing that baritone role – or in *Siegfried*, the third of the four operas in that cycle, he’s on stage the whole time, and to be able to manage – some operas call for a tremendous range of how high you can go.

**0:38:39:** For instance in *Siegfried*, or not *Siegfried*, in *Tannhäuser*, another Wagner opera, there are eight high Cs. You hear of Pavarotti and his high Cs, but you don’t hear about it in Wagner – and to be on stage for so long, and then the low notes, and not everybody has that range of music within them. And so you get some singers who are so outstanding because there are certain roles that they can handle, and so they become famous for those roles. So you get super singers in – as you do in every world, those who go to the top, and can do such wonderful roles. Well, anyway, Wagner became a way of life for those that – there are more books written about Wagner than anybody, except

Jesus Christ and Napoleon. How about that?

**0:40:02:** And there are new books coming out all the time. If you become a Wagner fan as I did by going to their lectures, their programs, and then becoming a volunteer again – I became the fourth president of the organization, and a fan of – that sounds like a silly title, but it represents what you do. We'd go to the *Ring of the Nibelungen* wherever it was performed, and very few companies were able to do that, so they had to have their volunteers to perform, and it became a way of life for me. I can't stress enough how fortunate I have been to have this world opened up to me, and to become a part of it, and I kept going to more and more productions of the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, you've got to know you're German.

**0:41:32 Nancy Emerson:** Let me just ask you a question about your role. Were your roles in the Opera Guild and in the Wagner Society overlapping?

**0:41:44 Verna Parino:** Oh yeah, oh yes.

**0:41:47 Nancy Emerson:** Yes? You were doing them at the same time?

**0:41:47 Verna Parino:** I had five different major roles at the same time. I was preview chairman and president of the Marin chapter, and president of the Wagner Society, vice president of the San Francisco Opera Guild, chairman of the Regional Opera Guilds International, and – I was also a volunteer for the Symphony. And I went out as a docent to schools, both for opera and symphony, to present a program. I remember for the symphony one time, a school was doing, or was attending, a performance of Shostakovich's opera, or symphony, that was written about Leningrad, and the horror of the four-year siege of Leningrad, and how many people died in that time. I made it more interesting by including that I had been in Leningrad, and had visited the cemetery that was blocks in extent, where these thousands of people had been buried, and it added a little more interest to the music that they were going to be hearing. I always tried to do that, to make it more personal.

**0:43:44:** The schools would put on their own version – a shortened version of the opera – and we would bring singers, and a pianist, usually four singers and a pianist, and then a docent, who would introduce the program or the opera, in a short version. I introduced that to our Marin Chapter, and I used someone from the Opera Guild to help us put it on, and I used the members as the students would be. We were doing *La Traviata*, and when we got to the school, at that time in the beginning, we didn't have the singers. We used slides and tape recordings, and a slide would show the score of the music. And we were supposed to sing. Well, if they had professional singers, the kids would then listen to the singers and not sing. They wanted the kids to learn to sing.

**0:45:10:** So we used Germont, the father of the hero, he goes to Violetta, the heroine, the soprano, and asks her to, "Please give up your relationship with my son." Because his sister wants to get married into a very fine family, and the father, Germont, all he can say is, "Cry. Piangi. Piangi." And I get so mad at that father, that he's asking so much of

Violetta, and all he can say is, “Sympathize, cry. I’m sorry. So, cry.” To this day, when I go to *La Traviata* – and it’s one of the most performed operas and favorite operas ’cause the music is so lovely – I get mad all over again.

**0:46:21 Nancy Emerson:** This program that you made, that you had for the schools, was this how you got your nickname, “The Opera Lady”?

**0:46:30 Verna Parino:** Well, actually the Opera Guild had someone who presented us with the information that we would give to the schools, and what we would say to the students in the school for like an auditorium program. And I didn’t do it myself, but I could, in introducing things, add something that was personal. And in order to research and find someone who could present an hour and a half of preview, they had to be somebody who was very knowledgeable, who could answer the questions, not somebody who would just look at a recording and the information that comes in the recording. We used musicologists, like a professor who is so knowledgeable of not only music but of opera, and has written books. So, that’s why I would go to the library and look for people who have written books about the specific opera that I was trying to find a speaker for.

**0:48:07:** There are a lot of series of books, like over 20 books, that would give the information about everything and everyone, and look for the bibliographies of who had written books about not only that composer, but about that opera or in that language. If you’re doing a Janáček, composer Janáček’s opera, *Káťa Kabanová*, or *Jenůfa*, or some of those that are less often performed, and less is known about them, you need somebody who specifically knew Janáček. And Beckerman was the man for Czech operas.

**0:49:29:** Then if you wanted to have a French opera you needed someone who was familiar with the French composers or the French operas and McDonald – who will be coming here this fall – I had found came from Saint Louis, and in order to talk to them and tell them what you want them to do, you have to know the language and you have to be familiar, and so you become quite knowledgeable yourself. And I would get the help of the reference ladies at the library to find books that would help me in my knowledge, and finding people who can come here. And so I guess that’s why they called me the “Opera Lady.” [chuckle]

**0:50:26 Nancy Emerson:** When I was first introduced to you last fall, that’s what I was told to say. “Oh Verna, she’s the Opera Lady from Mill Valley.”

**0:50:37 Verna Parino:** That reminds me of when San Francisco Opera was putting on *The Ring of the Nibelungen* here. *Classical Voice* has articles on the web about all kinds of music, and Maria was asked to write an article about Wagner’s *Ring* – and it’s just called *The Ring* for short – and she went to Kip Cranna, who is the music director of the San Francisco Opera – he runs the opera, he’s been there so long and is so influential – and he said, “Oh, get in touch with Verna Parino.” And so she came to my home by appointment, and we talked about Wagner, and I happened to have a bust of Wagner about 12 or 14 inches high, and she took him off the piano and set him beside me and took a picture of me with that bust of Wagner. And we talked Wagner.

**0:52:03:** And just yesterday a friend from Australia that I'd met in Melbourne when I was there for *The Ring* posted on Facebook that picture. There's me and Wagner, and my red jacket that I had gotten in Shanghai. I went there for *The Ring*. And it has come up several times on Facebook. The article was used by San Francisco Opera Guild in its web programs. And then somebody from the *IJ* [*Independent Journal*] in Santa Rosa wanted an interview at the end of these four operas because the first one was done in preparation, and how did I like it? How did it meet up to its expectation? And, actually, that the opera company did it three times so that was 12 long operas. I went to all three.

**0:53:22:** And the interviewer wanted to talk to me at the opera, before the opera started on the fourth opera cycle. So there I am in the opera house and all by the stage door, and people coming in, they're all staring at me, and I'm trying to think ponderously about what can I say that's profound about Wagner, and Wagner's pretty profound. [chuckle] I'll never forget people looking at me, and waving and smiling. And that was a bit ticklish, I must say. You get yourself into situations that you really don't expect, but it's expected of you to be profound.

**0:54:26 Nancy Emerson:** Yes, right. You have something important to say.

**0:54:29 Verna Parino:** So that picture has shown up on Facebook. And that's one of the nice things about Facebook. You're in touch with people that you have met all over the world. And the one in Shanghai, they performed the production from Cologne. And I had been to Cologne for *The Ring*. And they were famous for reducing it to a weekend, so there was the first opera on Friday, and then two on Saturday, and then one on Sunday. That was a little heavy, that was a little bit – and outside the opera house, they had tall banners, one for each of the four operas. I was taking a picture of the opera house, and someone was taking one also, so I asked if he would take a picture of me in front of the opera house. And he happened to be from Oslo, Norway. So I said, "Oh, I saw your *Ring*." "You saw *The Ring* in Oslo?" "Yes." And there, they had more people buying tickets than they anticipated. And when I got to the opera house into my seat, there was an envelope with my name on it. And they gave me a refund. I've never heard of that happening. We're always looking to give money to help put on *The Ring*.

**0:56:19:** And so I'm talking to this man from Oslo. He was delighted that somebody knew about the opera in Oslo. And when I heard about *The Ring* being given in Shanghai, China, that was pretty far out. And through the International Organization of Wagner Societies, I was able to find out how to order a ticket for *The Ring*. And when I ordered my ticket, I asked for a seat as close as possible to the front because I was very short, and didn't see very well, and didn't hear very well. But you can always hear the music. And my goodness, they put me in the first row. The man in Shanghai that arranged it, Pan Hao, wrote back, and I gave my age. I don't always do that. But when I'm asking for something, I sometimes do. And he wrote back, and he said I would probably be the oldest person in the audience, and would I consent to answer a couple of questions on an email basis? And he sent seven questions to me. So I answered right away. Otherwise, you postpone and you never get it done.



**0:57:58 Verna Parino:** And two days later in the main newspaper in Shanghai – and I can spell the word, the name, but I can't pronounce it – there was a picture of me and my answers to the seven questions all in Chinese. So I went on Facebook, "Anybody out there can translate and tell me what I said?" And I got three replies. The best reply, most accurate, was a friend of my niece in Kentucky who lived in Tennessee. And I used that one. And they used – there's that picture. It was a Cologne Opera production that they were performing. And so it tied in very nicely. That makes you feel good, when you're able – a lot of people can give a lot of money for furtherance of opera, but if you can give volunteer service that's worth a lot of money, or if you can be used as a gimmick for a publicity thing, that helps them.

**0:59:26:** So then I flew to Shanghai, and was able to take their very fast, fast train from the airport to downtown. I was using a wheelchair, and they wanted me to take a taxi. No, I've read about that train, and I wanted to – I had to go down with my suitcase an escalator, to get on that train. And it was difficult, but I did it. I can manage – I love that expression – and I managed and somebody helped me get on the train. And then he pointed to a little electric sign in the train above the door inside. I was going 300 miles an hour [chuckle] and that was pretty exciting. I had to take a picture of that. And then I took a taxi to the hotel. It was close to the Grand Theatre, a gorgeous square building, Chinese style with the sloping roofs. And there were a couple of friends there staying at the same hotel arranged through the International Wagner Societies Organization.

**1:01:00:** Before the first opera *Das Rheingold – The Rheingold* – a man came up to me and asked if I was Verna Parino. "Yes." Well, he was the man that had arranged for everything for me and he wanted, somebody wanted, to meet me. And so he escorted me down to my seat in the first row center, and here was a photographer and the editor-in-chief of that big newspaper, wanting to interview me again, and wanted to meet me. Well, in China they revere people of age. And so I was sort of an oddity at my age. I was 93 I think at that time. And the headline I think said, "Woman at 93 longs to see or to attend *The Ring*." [chuckle] Well, it's the way things get translated. And it was so funny because then people were wondering, who this celebrity was that was getting photographed. And there was somebody on the other side of the auditorium who stood up to see who the celebrity was. "My God it's Verna!" So it was someone from San Francisco in our Wagner Society. So he joined us at intermissions and afterwards it's a custom of Wagnerians to go have a beer or something, and yak about production, what was good and what wasn't or what was different.

**1:02:57:** And they had supertitles as we do elsewhere. They had them both in Chinese and in English, on this side, and that was exciting. And they used that picture – oh that's right. I wanted to buy something there, and they were most hospitable at the hotel, and helpful to me, and they wrote out in Chinese the name of a silk shop, and then directions to give to the taxi driver. So he took me there and they arranged for me to get back to the hotel. And I bought a red silk suit jacket and black pants. It was interesting, red shows up nicely in pictures, and the picture they took of me there, there's my red suit holding Wagner's bust. [chuckle]

**1:04:17:** Well, in warm weather, silk is nice to have. So I got a lot of use out of that. But being in China, I typed out at home or printed out, the name of the hotel in Chinese and the address, so I could give it to anybody if I got lost. But I stayed pretty much to the opera. And I was disturbed with China, what they were doing to Tibet. This is a divergence, but I had to throw it in. I read – there was an architect, very famous, who was credited with the work on the concert hall. And his son lived just above where I lived in Mill Valley. And I wanted to, in my way, pay credit to that architect, Sam his name was. So his home where John had grown up had become like a historical marker place. It was a very large, beautiful house. And so, the hotel arranged for me to have a taxi driver who could tour me to see that house, and then he also took me to see a church, a Catholic church that had been restored. It had been trashed during the regime of trashing Western culture, and they brought it back to life in its original form, and it looked like the cathedral in New Orleans; very same style with the two towers; one at each side, and I took pictures of it. And then, when I was being—

**1:07:08:** Oh well, I have to go back. I have to tell you about the interviews. I was introduced to the president of what would be the opera, the ballet, the symphony, and they all met in this building. We had an interpreter, and I was escorted out there and escorted back in. “Oh, big deal!” And then for the second opera of *Die Walküre*, I was asked if I would talk to the TV person, and so I did. My hearing is so poor that I didn’t want to keep saying, “What did you say? What did you say?” So I developed a trick of just talking, and then I didn’t have to try to answer questions.

**1:08:12:** And so, I knew that they were interested in how Shanghai had changed from when I had been there on a tour, 25 years before. So I complimented them about – well, from this Marriott Hotel, which was 50 stories high or more. Everywhere you’d looked there were very interesting, very tall, very modern buildings. It was amazing, and so I told them about that. You could look down, and here were the people walking that looked like ants. And then I told them how pleased I was.

**1:09:00:** Oh, I arranged to attend a piano concert at the concert hall, and I told them how pleased I was that they had been able to move that famous concert hall because they wanted to build a freeway where it was located. So the concert hall is in the center of a huge park, a block each direction. They were not only having the wonderful new architecture, but they were saving the old, and saving the concert hall, the very famous architect, Mr. Pang, had designed, and he had done the university. However, when the communists came in he went to Hong Kong, so they wouldn’t give him credit by name or in any way, and I was pleased that I could give his name and give him credit. And I also mentioned the church, that they had restored the church, and they were now restoring the stained glass windows. And I had read that in some place, local news in English, and so I was able to credit them.

**1:10:36:** And then I mentioned that, as an American, I didn’t know very much about China, but what I had learned, I had learned from a movie I had seen, an old movie from the 1930s, I thought it was, in which Ronald Colman had performed. It was about a plane

that had gone down in Tibet, and – Shangri-La<sup>4</sup>. I remembered the name, thanks. My memory doesn't always serve me, but I was able to remember that. And so I got my dig in. [chuckle]

**1:11:41 Nancy Emerson:** You're subversive.

**1:11:42 Verna Parino:** I'm a Scorpio, and that must be my Scorpio dig that I got in. I don't know. I think I'm usually pretty nice, but – [laughter]

**1:11:51 Nancy Emerson:** In that case. [chuckle]

**1:11:52 Verna Parino:** I was told by my friend, Andy, "Don't mention it again. Just stay clear, you've done it now." [laughter] Well, anyway –

**1:12:05 Nancy Emerson:** Are you ready to take a rest? Are you ready to take a rest?

**1:12:09 Verna Parino:** Well, I'm having a good time.

**1:12:11 Nancy Emerson:** Are you? Okay. You feel alright?

**1:12:12 Verna Parino:** If it's alright, I'd like to tell a little bit about the joy of opera, and how having – we had our opera previews finally in Park School and then when the acoustics were difficult, we moved to the Methodist Church, and we met there for many years, so people from all over Marin came to Mill Valley to learn about opera. I had a display of books and articles and recordings, and people would be interested. And if it was a Wagner Opera I'd need two big tables to put all my stuff. I have such a collection now, not only of opera, but of Wagner. I think I must have a recording of every opera there is, either in a disc or a DVD or a CD. Now that I'm – well, books I kept buying to read when I no longer could get out and around. I'm taking advantage of being able to be in my home. I've had some health problems and – convalescent – both at Smith Ranch and the Redwoods, and I didn't know if I should try to have an apartment at the Redwoods. I was there this year for convalescence –

**1:14:29:** And our church, the Mill Valley Community Church, had sponsored the Redwoods and I had been a guide when the Redwoods opened. And then when my mother moved out here, and lived in the house we'd bought next door, she finally needed more care and she was able to stay at the Redwoods. She had fallen and had to be in the care section for five years, and they were so good to her. And my daughter was studying at Tam High, and she could go over and visit her there. And I always thought that I would wind up living there, but when the time came I wanted to be in my home. And we had bought this, what a realtor called a "bungalow." It had three bedrooms and two baths and I didn't think of it as a bungalow. But it is a usual size lot, and we planted lots of fruit trees; many, many fruit trees and flowers. And during the time that I lived here I so loved my house, and all my recordings, and my apricot and apple, pear, peach, orange, lemon, lime – Trees, and 15 varieties of camellias and flowers everywhere in my lawn, I had to

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<sup>4</sup> Verna is likely referencing the 1937 film *Lost Horizon*

mow uphill. It was exercise and, after my husband died, I continued.

**1:16:50:** And I credit the hard work of keeping up my house and my home and helping me to live so long. And to be so happy here in Mill Valley, and to be so involved in the community, being a Girl Scout leader, a Sunday school leader, all the other many ways that I was involved in the – And when we had a revival of the Fourth of July Parade, I was asked to be in the parade, because as a scout leader I became the chairman of the neighborhood of Mill Valley and Sausalito for girl scouting, and then we became an association, and then we became – I got together with the neighborhood that included Tiburon and Belvedere, and we became the Richardson Bay Girl Scout Association. And to be in the parade, they had a lovely convertible car for me to ride in with a big banner on the side, “Founding Chairman of the Richardson Bay Girl Scout Association.” [laughter] That’s one of the benefits that you get when you’re a volunteer.

**1:18:36 Nancy Emerson:** That’s right. It’s called ‘recognition,’ look. [chuckle]

**1:18:40 Verna Parino:** It comes back to haunt you in lovely, lovely ways and –

**1:18:46 Nancy Emerson:** What year was that? Do you recall what year?

**1:18:49 Verna Parino:** Well, I can’t remember what year that was but it probably, was at least 10 years ago, there was a Fourth of July parade to celebrate, and then they got away from it for a while. And having had my husband – the Grand Marshal of the Fourth of July Parade where we opened the Community Center – it was – And having helped with that, it was wonderful to sit and ride with my red, white and blue outfit. I had a blue hat, straw hat, ’cause I need to protect myself, and a red blouse and white pants and I felt very patriotic, very Mill Valley-an, and one of the advantages of living in such a delightful city – village, town, city – of Mill Valley, you know people. Now I don’t know so many people, but I used to be so involved in the community, and then being in charge of our previews for 29 years I guess it was, I’m up in front and people got to know me, and I didn’t always know who they were, but I felt so much a part of the community, and you don’t get that when you live in the city, or in a larger town like San Rafael or Novato.

**1:20:40:** Here, we’re a smaller community, and the woman who worked at the hat store, I’ve been going to visit her so I could get my exercise walking, and she was a friend of my daughter, and my daughter having grown up here – in the music department. The music department of Tam High was so extraordinary at the time that my daughter was there and involved. And so on Facebook, so many of my daughter’s Facebook friends are my friends because we have a connection through Mill Valley, so when the graduates of Tam – I guess it’s Tam – they get together for reunions, and so many of the people that are involved are my friends on Facebook now that it – Well, even Rita Adams [sic] who wrote the song about Mill Valley, my niece in Florida knew about Mill Valley.

**1:22:06:** And oh, there was a friend of mine – I don’t mean to brag but it comes pouring forth, I have to tell you about this. Life can be so exciting even though you’re

now 98 years of age. Last fall, a book came out about Wagner and the interesting tidbits about his life and things, and one chapter was about famous people including Speight Jenkins who was the general director of Seattle Opera, and I had used him as a speaker here in Mill Valley. And then went to Seattle to see *The Ring* up there, and another one was Simon Williams that I'd used as a speaker here many, many times, and so their pictures were there, and then, a speaker from London, Bryan McGee. He was in that chapter, and then Father Owen Lee, he was from London – no he was from Toronto, excuse me – and very famous. And what do you know, little old Verna Parino's picture was there, taken in Bayreuth, which is a little town in Eastern Germany where Wagner had a theater built, and to this day, they still perform only Wagner's works.

**1:24:00:** And I've had the good fortune of getting tickets to attend *The Ring* there, seven operas. And it's an older theater for acoustics sake, they don't use – It's all wood. It's the most acoustically famous theater in the world. And the orchestra has been put in a pit underneath the stage with a shield that brings the sound up onto the stage so the singers can coordinate with the orchestra sound better than any other place in the world. But the seats are wooden, hard. [chuckle] So you always get a pillow to carry with you. And somebody took a picture of me holding my pillow. That pillow is in my dining room still to this day. And they included a picture of me with all these prestigious people. And I was at Smith Ranch Convalescent Care when it came out, and I was given two copies of that book. And when I was in New York a year ago for *The Ring* visiting with someone from the New York Wagner Society, who was with someone from a Wagner Society in Florida, we were visiting, and I happened to say something about, "Oh, they mentioned how many *Rings* I had attended," and it's, I guess, the most of anybody in the world now, 77 *Ring* productions all over the world.

**1:26:00:** And so I'm famous as the Wagner lady, The *Ring* lady, The *Ring* queen, all these other silly names. And when I said that it was Wagner that kept me going, kept me alive, he said, "Oh, what was your name?" He got all excited. And I repeated my name, "Verna Parino." "You're in the book." And he had just finished reading that book for my picture was in that chapter. And I thought, "Oh my word. The Wagner world is really something else." And just yesterday, having the picture with me and my red suit in that article about my love of Wagner that they did for the San Francisco Opera Guild website, and that was repeated there. And so then, Leona Geeves, who lives in Sydney, who posted it, said I should write a book about my adventurous life. My life has really been adventurous, I must say, to have had the opportunities through this passion, to meet so many wonderful people. To go all over the world. Melbourne, Shanghai. Not all those were *Ring* productions. I went to Palermo, Sicily. Who would ever go to Palermo, Sicily? And I learned all about their culture.

**1:27:40:** When you have a passion like that, you learn about other cultures. One thing leads to another, and you have friends all over, and they come forth on Facebook every once in a while, and my goodness, it adds so much to your joy of life. And I'm sure it has impacted the number of years that I've lived. I can't say enough about – I count my blessings all the time. And well I don't have much longer to be around, I count everyday of – I'm here in my home in Mill Valley, little old Mill Valley. Every time I come home

from a trip, I'm so happy to be home in Mill Valley. I can't think of anybody that ever has that kind of a passion about where they live. So I'm delighted. Well, Leona said I should write a book about my life. And I said, "Oh, well. I've been asked to help with the archives through telling a little bit about my life here in Mill Valley. And so, well, I should write about *The Ring*. Oh well, the section about my involvement with the opera, will have mention of *The Ring* and Wagner."

**1:29:15:** As someone once said, "It's the *crème de la crème* of opera." [laughter] Well, it's almost like a cult, I must say. You can travel and talk about the culture or whatever you're seeing, of historical interests, then if you mention opera, no, no – If you mention opera – If you mention opera you – All of a sudden, you're a friend. If you mention Wagner, oh-oh-oh-oh, you were friends for life. You don't stop talking, chatting about the interests that you share. So you share the places that you've been, and you've been there the same time as somebody else but you just didn't know each other. Sometimes you do. You see people that you have seen before at a *Ring* production, and your friend, you can visit and say, "Hello, I'm Verna." And you go from there. You can do that with Mill Valley. I went – And I have to tell you this. They were doing *The Ring* in Tucson, Arizona, and the man who was general director there had been general director in Seattle, and he puts *The Ring* on every year, and it turned out that I wanted to get in touch with someone who was on the board of the *Festspiele* – the festival in Bayreuth – was part of the architectural foundation that was just outside of Tucson.

**1:31:23:** And I looked up in my roster who was the president of Opera Guilds or other guild there – my roster of Opera Guilds International – and called her, and her name was Jane Cole, and I said, "Jane Cole?" So I called her to get – How to get in touch with this famous board member, and I said, "Is this the Jane Cole that used to live in Mill Valley?" "Yes." "And taught Sunday school at Mill Valley Community Church?" "Yes." Well, we had worked together at – In our Sunday school work when we were studying the festivals that Jesus would have participated in, and we celebrated Sukkot, by building a 'Sukkot' which is in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt and the trials and tribulations of finally finding a home, and the Jewish people build a little house on the roof of their houses, and so we had worked together on that in building a little Sukkot here in Mill Valley.

**1:32:47:** And so I told her why I was calling, and then I went down there for *Die Walküre*, the second opera of *The Ring* that they were doing, and went to the luncheon that they – Or the dinner that they had preceding the opera. Glynn Ross was speaking about the leitmotifs, the themes that Wagner used in his work, that wasn't new and unusual and famous, and he said, "It's like Mill Valley. You meet somebody from Mill Valley and you associate them –" He kept saying Mill Valley, and I couldn't hear what he was saying. I was so disturbed, I wanted to know what he was saying about Mill Valley, and so afterwards, I found out he was using Mill Valley as an association for – Of how you do when you hear a certain melody, you say, "Oh, that's a sword scene, or that's a love scene or the hate scene, or something." So, little old Mill Valley does get around, and I'm pleased that there's such a thing as an archives, so that years later we can know how it all got started.

**1:34:21:** Like the famous Crooked Railroad, people coming from all over the world to ride that little old crooked railroad, and they can come now and attend dinners or affairs in our Community Center, or where I felt I was a part, or they can find the wonderful stream that goes through the park out Cascade Way, and hopefully, perhaps, get a copy of the map, that my Girl Scouts had drawn up to show the wild flowers or plants along that cascade stream, and see the waterfall. I used to take my Brownies there as an outing, and we needed service projects, and it was a junior troupe that organized that mapping, and the maps were given out by Granville Beedle who was in charge of the Chamber of Commerce in that lovely little building by the Depot, and in front of the Depot, the Girl Scouts had had for the Easter time, the little farm yard with all the things.

**1:36:03:** This is my Mill Valley. This is what people should know what Mill Valley grew from. Today, it's still Mill Valley, but it doesn't have the charm that I felt when I first came here and knew so many people. And people have to grow, things have to grow, places have to grow. And I think it's wonderful that the Library is devoting with the Historical Society – and the oral history, people have been here much longer than I have – that we can go back and live history all over again. So thank you, Nancy, for coming and letting me share my joy of living in Mill Valley. I am so excited about being able to be here in my home across from Boyle Park.

**1:37:13:** I needed exercise, and I would walk through Boyle Park, over the little league fields, and we were involved in helping to keep the field green and protected, and the children protected over the bridge. And I wrote a poem that I would recite to myself, past the picnic areas and the children's swings and the tumbler's rings and the sandbox, and the handball courts and around the tennis courts, and come back the way I came. And be wary of dogs and watch out for the balls, home again the way I came, to live across from a park. And I used to take lessons at the golf course, and I was taught to keep my arms straight and then a friend told me to relax your arms. In between trying to follow both instructions, I'd miss the ball completely. [chuckle]

**1:38:36:** But living in the community club area, in the sunshiny area so I get all my fruits, I could can my pears, and I just opened up some apricots that I had canned and frozen apple sauce. That's my Mill Valley. The sunshine and the ambiance. Thank you, Nancy.

**1:39:04 Nancy Emerson:** Verna, it's been such a treasure to be with you for these couple of sessions, and I can hear the passion that you have about Mill Valley and also about the opera and the volunteering that you've done. It's just been such a treat and you are really a treasure from Mill Valley. Thank you.