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ROGER PACKER

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Derek Van Loan in 2011**

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TITLE: Oral History of Roger Packer
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 6 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: May 22, 2011

In this brief interview, Roger Packer recounts living in Mill Valley in the 1960s. Roger spent time with the legendary philosopher and poet Alan Watts, who was living aboard the docked ferry *Vallejo*. Roger describes his love for the eccentric and his experiences with other colorful locals such as Roger Summers, Art Grant, and Margo St. James.

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Oral History of Roger Packer
May 22, 2011

Derek Van Loan: This is Sunday, May 22nd, 2011. It is a little after 10am. We are in the History Room. I am Derek Van Loan and this is my friend Roger Packer who lived in Mill Valley in what, 1960.

Roger Packer: 1960, yes.

Derek Van Loan: 1960 on East Blithedale and he has a few interesting things to say with some background about Alan Watts.

Roger Packer: Anyway, so, I met Alan at that time and he said, "I am going to have a seminar tomorrow, would you like to come by?" I said I would be very interested, so I went there and there were mostly ladies there, mostly teachers, I found out. He was wearing a black judo outfit, actually, that he had dyed and he sat lotus position at the head of this group and after the seminar they had a question time and this lady said, "How do you express death to a child?" Alan looked away and said that death is nothing but a mirror image of before life and should be looked on as that, but we cannot explain that to a child. We have to stimulate them and say, "What do you think?" I always remember that because that was always very typical of Alan. I think he stimulated all of our minds in lots of ways, which I admired him for.

Derek Van Loan: Now that took place on the ferry boat *Vallejo*?

Roger Packer: Yes, that was on the *Vallejo*.

Derek Van Loan: But later on he came up to Roger Summers' place.

Roger Packer: Yes, he came up to Roger Summers' place.

Derek Van Loan: In Mill Valley.

Roger Packer: Yeah, in Mill Valley. He had quite a few friends over. I remember this, he was dressed in the same outfit one day and said, "What do you think of this, Roger?" He said, "It is very much like a Japanese gong, listen." And it was nothing but a welding tank which had been cut off on the bottom. He hit it twice and it resonated all through the valley, it was beautiful, and all the way back again. That was typical of the man too, he was really interested in anything, how can I say, artistic and arterial. One day I went to one of his parties and I was talking to people in general and then I heard this beautiful music and it was a harp played by his son-in-law. I believe the name was Joel. He was very nice, I must say.

Anyway, as for Alan, he was somewhat of an enigma and curiosity within himself. He once went sailing with me on my boat with his father and at that point he was with Mary Jane who was quite a conservative lady. He had Joel at the party, if I remember rightly, and we were sort of all merging, talking about different things and he

was quite difficult to follow. I have done an average amount of reading, but Alan could come out rather like a magician with a rabbit. He could pull out on any subject an author and he could quote him for at least five or 10 minutes on exactly what he said. I think he was very lucky, he had a total recall mind for that. He had once been selected, a major church in England, he was one of the 12 who had been selected and he told me that at the end of it all, he still couldn't quite mesh with the English church and felt like he still wanted to be a searcher of religion. So he finally ended up after going to Japan, he ended up in San Francisco and then in Mill Valley. He liked Mill Valley because of the tranquility of the place, he liked it because of the aesthetic trees, he loved the trees.

We would often go practicing archery together and he would have a recur bow, a Japanese bow, and I had long bow, and he would ask me, he said, "When you were very young, Roger, did you rush through the high grass and have fun in general?" We had targets put out and you would walk along this lane and on either side there would be these targets, and there would be someone hitting them. I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, when I was younger, I used to do that." Funny enough, he was really interesting because a lot of his youth, he couldn't quite remember, so some of his youth, when he wrote the book *In My Own Way*, I flatter myself, but I think he actually used some of mine as an example for himself, which I didn't mind at all, I was really flattered. But I must say he was one of the main people who opened my eyes to the rest of the world.

Derek Van Loan: That's great, Roger. Can you tell me about Roger Summers' house?

Roger Packer: Roger Summers' house? Oh, Roger had got an offer from the past commission and they said, "Would you like to sell your property?" So he said yes. He thought of an incredible figure, he quoted a figure and then doubled it. That was very typical of Roger, a very sharp man. So he doubled it and before he died, he would leave it to the state, but before he died, he had the money right away and went to Hawaii and I hear he has a huge estate over there. I haven't seen him in years.

Derek Van Loan: He built a house here in Mill Valley that he used to have Alan over.

Roger Packer: Yes, he built quite a few houses. Hither and yon, I worked for him a couple of days or a couple of weeks, I have forgotten how long. But he would do amusing things; he would totally construct the house and then he would decide the view was wrong so he would make a small hole and he had this peep thing and he would look through and say to the owner, "Now, how do you like this view?" The owner would come up and say yes, that looks pretty good. "Okay, that's the side of the hole, cut it out." *Jeet, jeet, jeet*, and that would be the window. So the place looked for anybody who was a bystander, a little bit strange if you looked at it from the outside, but from the inside it was glorious. So one of the owners said, well, I am not catering to other people, I am catering to myself. And I thought, well, that makes sense, you know. Roger Summers was a real character. He would have a piano and he would, it rotted away and he had this piano out on a flat and you would all pick up, everybody would pick up a small pebble stone and he would say, "What do you think about this?" And you would be able to make a statement and then you would throw the pebble on the piano to see if it bounced twice or three times on the strings and it would make a certain amount of time and if it sounded

good, he said, “Yes, that clicks.” He was a real old tease. He had an excellent cabinet maker there, I wish I could remember his name, I don’t. But he made quite a few pie-shaped buildings, Alan had one of them. So anyway, he, Alan, told me that all these people that I would be meeting when I went to Bristol and London and he had a lot of addresses for me. He liked to crack the old booze now and again but I don’t blame him, he was quite under a lot of pressure, as he had two families to support at that time. He was, besides being a conservative bloke, he was a lot of fun. I knew him a little bit later and from my place I could see his place and it was a huge window. One night I see the lights almost like a stage and there he is dressed in Japanese attire and I look through, I know it is rude to stare but I stared because he had a Japanese samurai sword. At that time, I knew this red-haired lady as he did and she loved to dance, so all of a sudden, here she comes in long flowing gowns, dancing around the place rather like a dance to spring.

Derek Van Loan: That was on the ferry boat *Vallejo*?

Roger Packer: Yes. And there is Alan with a sword swooshing it around in time to the music, she is dancing to the music, oh, if I had just had a video, it would have been wonderful. I didn’t, but there we are.

Derek Van Loan: Roger, you told me about these Hawaiian women, they were quite elderly and lived here in Mill Valley.

Roger Packer: Yes. I must have a little bit of old timers¹ because I can’t remember her name.

Derek Van Loan: What part of Mill Valley did they live in?

Roger Packer: She was, let me see, yes, she and her sister would come from Hawaii originally. Then somehow they wound up on the east side of the United States. So at that point the Panama wasn’t cut through and she told me, something like Elaine or Eva, Eva, that was her name, she told me how she had sailed around the bottom and come up through.

Derek Van Loan: Around Cape Horn.

Roger Packer: Then her sister had to come around, her sister came around the bottom of the cape, what’s it called —

Derek Van Loan: Cape Horn.

Roger Packer: That’s it. Past Rio Paraiso, of course, came all the way to San Francisco and the captain didn’t want to come in here because it was very strong tides and it was the time of tide shifting so he was a little bit hesitant. The winds were very variable, so he waited, and Eva’s sister, who was a little bit on the edge anyway, was going a little bit crazy because she didn’t like waiting so long. And finally, after about five or six days,

¹ Perhaps a casual reference to Alzheimer’s disease. — Ed.

they sail in to San Francisco and Eva met her at the dock and then they went back to Mill Valley. She said at that time, there were very, very few people who lived in Mill Valley. They were mostly holiday homes for the summer. In other words, they didn't worry too much about foundations or anything like that. They were mostly carved in to the clay and the whole building was made very rapidly. So, along came the earthquake in San Francisco and all of a sudden, Mill Valley looked more desirable. So they — a lot of people including Eva, moved over to Mill Valley and that was really the start of Mill Valley per say, because all of a sudden, all the quiet and conservative people all of a sudden moved in and there was more of a society, more of a community. All the quiet places which were once just used for holiday were all used right away and that was the start of Mill Valley proper.

Derek Van Loan: That is very interesting. Of course ships in those days with no engine, a sailing ship would have no engine and if you didn't want to hire a tug, you were at the mercy of the winds and tides and you had to be pretty careful. Later on, you worked for Eva.

Roger Packer: Yes, I worked for her and she was a very nice person. Her husband had been an architect and designer and builder and he built this house for her. He had a Model A which she would crank up and putter around with and Eva said he was a wonderful man but he had one problem. Any time he came across a problem in his building, he would putter off and say, "Now I have to go off and make a special tool for this problem so that if I come across it again, I will be able to solve it." So he would putter off for several hours when in actual fact he could have built a wall in no time at all and it would take him twice or three times as long because he wanted to make a special tool. Does that sound familiar?

Anyway, so, he was like that but evidently a nice person. They both had, actually, her and her husband, had planted all these fruit trees, some of them very unusual and some not so unusual, and most of them doing well, funny enough. So she would pick this fruit and what she couldn't can, she would make into wine. I was her chief wine taster! She was always inviting me to lunch and then she would say, "Now, I want you to taste this." I had to be very careful not to be crocked in the afternoon at the end of the lunch so I didn't cut my hand off. I was a carpenter at the time and I painted all her rooms, but I must say, Eva was always very good to me, a wonderful person. Her sister, as I was leaving to sail down to Mexico, her sister ended up down in Mill Valley with her bed clothes on with her slippers on.

Derek Van Loan: The two sisters still live together.

Roger Packer: Yes, they live together. She would disappear and Eva would go into a flat spin saying, "Where's the car?" And I would say, "Right outside!" I think her name was Myra, her sister. We couldn't get Myra back. I would say, "Where is she?" "Downtown, in her bedroom clothes!" I said, "What is wrong with that, this is the 19th century, Eva, don't worry." "Well no, we have to get her, it is obscene." "What do you mean, obscene?" "Well, she could be obscene." "Is she usually obscene?" "No." "Well, don't worry, let's just go get her and don't worry."

We would get her, we would find her talking to somebody or talking to a dog or just wandering around looking in midair and we would quite often get her back home. She was something else, I'll tell you. Both of them were. I used to be highly amused by them because that is what gave a lot of the flavor in those days, the eccentrics that lived here, I must say. I always admire them because somehow today, we are not living with many eccentrics. We seem to cast in the shadows of mundaneness. I don't know how it has happened, but it certainly has.

Derek Van Loan: One more question, Roger. The lane that you and Alan would walk on with your bows and the archery targets, do you remember where that was, was that near Roger Summers' house.

Roger Packer: Yes, it was right near Roger Summers' house, very near the top.

Derek Van Loan: On Montford, was it?

Roger Packer: I can't remember exactly. But he had quite a few acres, it was very wild. He had the common sense to not build right on top of each other, which I thought was very tasteful. You drove in the middle and you could walk to your house, you know, where you lived, your abode, by a central theme. Everything branched out from the central car park, as it were. It was all very aesthetically done. There weren't any trees cut down unless they really needed to be. He had good taste. He was a very jolly person. Margo St. James, he was really friendly with at the time and she was really outrageous, flashing policeman in San Francisco.

Derek Van Loan: Yeah, she was the president of the Hookers Union, as I recall.

Roger Packer: Yes, president of the hookers. She was outrageous. She would wear this nun's habit and prance around here and there. Luckily she didn't prance around too much in Mill Valley, but she certainly did in San Francisco. Actually in a way, she did do a few good things, I think, for women's rights. So she was like a double-headed coin, as it were, yes, she was a bit of fun, she was. So I must remember that I have very good happy memories of that era, which was the '60s mostly when all this happened, yeah.

Derek Van Loan: Mill Valley has been through a few changes since then.

Roger Packer: Oh, yes. It is like all these places. Luckily, most of the places — because of the redwoods — most people are pretty woodsy here. So, most of it is good taste. A lot of these places which develop, somehow they don't have a good feel. Well, they have a good feel, but it is mostly almost mechanical, they paint everything a different color, which is okay, but I like muted colors personally, they show a bit more taste, I think.

Derek Van Loan: Can you think of any other thing about Mill Valley that might be interesting to people?

Roger Packer: Oh, well, there weren't so many coffee houses. Just like in Sausalito, they had people, they would go to the corner drugstore for their coffee. The station house looked more like a station house downtown. That is where I met Art Grant who used to live here, what a character he was. Art, I somehow think he made up the name, he was a guy from New York who was rotund and fast-talking and he always had a quip or joke to make. A lot of fun he was.

Derek Van Loan: Art was an artist.

Roger Packer: Yes, he was a what I call an avant-garde junkman. He would take pieces of junk. If you were dinging something up, he would say, oh, let me see that, yes. And he had something for everything. He would start with a rusty this and then put a chrome piece of that and then before you knew it, you would have usually a face or something resembling a human frame. He was a lot of fun, he was. He had several places and he eventually I think died in Mill Valley. But I used to say, "Now Art, do you really make this name up and were you christened Art Grant?" I used to tease him no end. I would say, "I'm sure you made it up." Nobody could end up with a name like that and not wish for a grant for their art. So we had a lot of fun.

Derek Van Loan: Roger, this has been fantastic, thanks. I'm going to see if I can figure out how to turn this machine off. Unless you have anything else to add.

Roger Packer: No, I can't think of anything at the moment.

Derek Van Loan: Well, this is great. This is Roger Packer and it is Sunday morning, the 22nd of May and we are here in the History Room in Mill Valley and I am going to press the stop button.