

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

JEAN COLEMAN

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Stella Perone in 2014**

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TITLE: Oral History of Jean Coleman
INTERVIEWER: Stella Perone
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Jean Coleman (née Spangler) was born in Fremont, Nebraska, and moved as a young girl with her family to Mill Valley in 1937. In this oral history, Jean recalls growing up in Mill Valley, attending school and church, and belonging to the Campfire Girls. Amidst the backdrop of World War II, Jean's mother died and her father moved back to the Midwest, leaving her with a relative and friends. After graduation from Tamalpais High School, she attended College of the Pacific, and then moved to San Francisco where she met and married her husband, Bruce Coleman. Together they traveled to Europe where their first son, Steven, was born. In 1955 they bought their house in Mill Valley — where Jean was still living at the time this oral history was conducted — and had their second son, Joseph. Jean recollects how Bruce loved to travel and had various jobs that afforded them the opportunity to live abroad for periods of time. Jean also describes how she discovered her own vocation as a librarian and the work she did in schools across Marin.

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Oral History of Jean Coleman
January 14th, 2014

Editor's note: The Mill Valley Public Library has provided a few minor clarifications as footnotes. Jean Coleman passed away before her oral history was finalized and she did not have a chance to review this transcript.

Stella Perone: Hi, this is Stella Perone sitting here with Jean Coleman on January 14th at her home on — what's the address here, Jean?

Jean Coleman: 12 Oak Lane.

Stella Perone: 12 Oak Lane. Okay. Jean, why don't you start off by telling me where you were born?

Jean Coleman: Oh, I was born in the Midwest: Fremont, Nebraska.

Stella Perone: What year?

Jean Coleman: Um, I can never tell.

Stella Perone: Oh, that's okay. I don't want to be personal. Do you want to tell me a little bit about your parents and siblings and if you can give me a brief description of what led you to Mill Valley?

Jean Coleman: Well, we came to Mill Valley in 1937.

Stella Perone: Were you with your parents, obviously?

Jean Coleman: Yes. We came because my brother was a friend of George Wickham.

Stella Perone: Is that Stephanie Wickham's father?

Jean Coleman: Father, who was mayor of Mill Valley. Anyway, my brother was a friend of his.

Stella Perone: Your brother or your father?

Jean Coleman: My brother, my brother. Anyway, the Wickhams had moved to California to this place and that's what brought us here.

Stella Perone: Were they from — sorry to interrupt — were they from your home town in Nebraska?

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Okay, so they were from Nebraska.

Jean Coleman: Yes, they were from Fremont, yes. So anyway, that's what brought us to Mill Valley.

Stella Perone: Okay. How old was your brother when you moved here?

Jean Coleman: He would have been high school age; I was at the sixth grade at Summit School.

Stella Perone: Wait, Summit School here in Mill Valley?

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Okay, so you moved when you were in sixth grade.

Jean Coleman: Yes. I came here, and I came to the low sixth grade at Summit School.

Stella Perone: The school right here at the base of Summit, a block up from Old Mill?

Jean Coleman: Yes, right. And my brother had to go to high school.

Stella Perone: Okay, so your family moved; your brother was just a high school student and your family moved because your brother, who was in high school, his friend moved?

Jean Coleman: Well, I guess at that time — it was just after the Depression. So I think that times were hard, you know. So maybe they thought that there would be better times here.

Stella Perone: Okay, better opportunities. If your brother knew George Wickham, can I also assume that your parents were friends with the Wickham seniors?

Jean Coleman: No, they weren't close friends; no, they weren't. That's all I remember about that.

Stella Perone: Okay. So you and your brother and parents moved out here.

Jean Coleman: In 1937, when the Golden Gate Bridge came.

Stella Perone: Okay, what year was the Golden Gate Bridge? I'm sorry, I didn't know that.

Jean Coleman: It was 1937, I think.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Jean Coleman: But we still could take the train to the ferry, you know, and then go on to San Francisco. I remember my parents driving the car on the ferry and going to San Francisco that way on the ferry, the car.

Stella Perone: Okay. So you came out here and your father —

Jean Coleman: Well, he's a builder.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Jean Coleman: And he, well —

Stella Perone: What was your last name?

Jean Coleman: Spangler.

Stella Perone: Oh, okay.

Jean Coleman: So, anyway, he was going to build a house for us here in Mill Valley. And we were living in sort of a temporary place.

Stella Perone: Where did you live when you moved out here?

Jean Coleman: Blithedale Avenue.

Stella Perone: Is the house still there?

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Do you remember the number?

Jean Coleman: No, I don't, but it was right next to the Methodist Church.

Stella Perone: Which one?

Jean Coleman: On Blithedale. Well, not that.

Stella Perone: Camino Alto?

Jean Coleman: No, the Methodist Church was on Blithedale. I'm sorry, it was the Methodist Church when we lived there.

Stella Perone: What is it now?

Jean Coleman: I don't know what it is now. It's on Sycamore.

Stella Perone: Okay, so you lived right near the church at Sycamore and Blithedale.

Jean Coleman: Yes, right next door.

Stella Perone: Right next door, okay.

Jean Coleman: So I remember singing in the choir and being in the young people's group and going away to their camp.

Stella Perone: Where was their camp?

Jean Coleman: Now that I don't remember. I don't remember.

Stella Perone: How did you get there?

Jean Coleman: Well, we were driven there, of course. It was a ways from here, it certainly was. Isn't that strange?

Stella Perone: Was it up in the mountains?

Jean Coleman: I just don't remember much about it but I do remember going there because that was about the first time I was ever away from my family, you know.

Stella Perone: So your parents moved here with you and your brother and you had this rental house on East Blithedale next to the Methodist Church.

Jean Coleman: Yes, it was an apartment below a house.

Stella Perone: Oh, you lived in the apartment below the house, okay. And you entered Summit School. You said "low sixth grade." What does that mean?

Jean Coleman: Yes. Low sixth. Well, we had low sixth and high sixth then, and low fifth and high fifth.

Stella Perone: What's the difference?

Jean Coleman: I think it had to do with sometimes they would skip students, you know, that could do more work or something, they would skip them. It was easier to do it with those two, low and high, I believe that's what it was.

Stella Perone: Or age, with the first six months of the year were high and the second six months were low.

Jean Coleman: I don't know. You know, that's possible, I suppose that is possible.

Stella Perone: How many people in your class, roughly, do you remember?

Jean Coleman: No, actually, I don't remember roughly. I remember a couple of classmates.

Stella Perone: Yes, who do you remember?

Jean Coleman: Well, I remember Pudgy Seitz, she was in my class.

Stella Perone: Pudgy?

Jean Coleman: Yes. Her name was Frances but we called her Pudgy. She wasn't pudgy at all when we knew her. She has never been pudgy.

Stella Perone: How do you spell her last name?

Jean Coleman: S-E-I-T-Z. She would be a granddaughter of the Weissich.

Stella Perone: Okay. And she remained in Mill Valley all her life?

Jean Coleman: Until she got married — I think until she got married, I think so.

Stella Perone: Okay.

Jean Coleman: Then I also remember having a Japanese friend. When the war came, or before the war came, and we used to go on hikes together, I think we even hiked to Muir Woods. I can't imagine that we did that, but we did.

Stella Perone: Do you remember her name?

Jean Coleman: Akiko.

Stella Perone: Akiko.

Jean Coleman: And she came back to Mill Valley, she lived here. In fact, she worked in the library.

Stella Perone: Last name, do you remember her last name?

Jean Coleman: Shibata. I don't think she ever married. She had two sisters. So anyway, Akiko was sent back to Japan. She lived with her two sisters with an uncle, Mr. Yoko. He used to do gardening for a lot of families in Mill Valley.

Stella Perone: The name again?

Jean Coleman: Yoko. There was a lot of sort of Japanese influence, I think, back then, for this city. You know, there were Japanese gardens and those couple of archways that were here in Mill Valley that still exist. So he used to do Japanese gardening. Anyway, she was sent back to Japan before the war because apparently they knew something was going on before the war.

Stella Perone: Did she not have parents?

Jean Coleman: Apparently her parents were in Japan. I don't know why these girls were all sent to live with their aunt and uncle in Mill Valley. But anyway, the two sisters, they were older and they refused to go back to Japan. But anyway, Akiko did. I have memory of writing to her through the Red Cross, but I don't know if that's true.

Stella Perone: So if you moved out in 1937 and the war started in 1941 or '42 —

Jean Coleman: Yes, things were rumbling already in Europe and so forth. And then Pearl Harbor was what year, I don't remember.

Stella Perone: But she was gone by the time Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Jean Coleman: Yes, she was gone. But anyway, thinking of my life, I thought, how wonderful that I had that exposure. I don't think that I would know Japanese people in Fremont, Nebraska, you know.

Stella Perone: Okay, who else do you remember from your grammar school? Any boys you remember?

Jean Coleman: Yes, Donald Schroeder, I remember him. His sister was president of the Outdoor Art Club and his mother was president of the Outdoor Art Club as well.

Stella Perone: At Summit School, I've kind of seen it from the road — did you have much of a play area there, outdoor play area?

Jean Coleman: You know, I don't remember the outdoor area very much.

Stella Perone: Yes, I can't imagine it either. How many classrooms in it, was that kindergarten through eighth grade?

Jean Coleman: Through sixth grade, probably.

Stella Perone: K through six, okay.

Jean Coleman: And then for high sixth, I went to Old Mill School; we went to Old Mill for high sixth.

Stella Perone: So Old Mill just started at sixth grade then — they did sixth, seventh, and eighth, or something?

Jean Coleman: It wasn't seventh and eighth, because then seventh and eighth, I went to Park School, which seems strange, now that I think about it. But I know that I went to Park School because I remember the principal there, Mrs. Edna Maguire, it was named after her.

Stella Perone: What do you remember about her?

Jean Coleman: I just remember being called into her office once for — I don't know what I did, but I crossed the street — it had something to do with traffic, I think. It couldn't have been very serious, but I do remember that.

Stella Perone: Was she an older woman at that point?

Jean Coleman: No, she wasn't that old, I didn't think. So anyway, seventh and eighth grades were there at Park School. We had — no, that was different, because at Old Mill School and Summit School, we had just one teacher for the class. But seventh and eighth grade, we had a different teacher for every subject, if I remember correctly, I think.

Stella Perone: So what did you do in Mill Valley in those early years when you were in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade when you weren't in school? What do you remember about Mill Valley?

Jean Coleman: Well, I remember going on those hikes with Akiko.

Stella Perone: Well, where would you hike?

Jean Coleman: I think we went to Muir Woods once. Or just around town, it could be, we hiked up on outlying roads around town. And there was a five o'clock whistle in those days. So when the five o'clock whistle blew, we had to come home. That seems funny at the time, imagining it.

Stella Perone: Where was home, how long did you stay at East Blithedale?

Jean Coleman: Oh, it was during the war. The war had already started. It was Pearl Harbor and I remember being very frightened and my mother said, "We have to be brave." I remember my mother saying that. My mother became a civilian defense worker and she worked someplace in Sausalito and watched for enemy planes, you know.

Stella Perone: Really!

Jean Coleman: Yes. And my brother was in the Merchant Marine then. He had just come home from a tour. She was up with the other person that did it with her and it was a terrible storm and I think the windows blew in. She died very suddenly there.

Stella Perone: Your mom did?

Jean Coleman: Yeah.

Stella Perone: So it was accidental?

Jean Coleman: Well, I don't know whether it was the stress.

Stella Perone: So she was at work?

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: And a big storm, the windows blew in, and she died like a heart attack sort of thing?

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: How horrible. How old were you?

Jean Coleman: Yes, very unexpectedly. I was 16. So that — see, my father was going to build us this house and then that made a change.

Stella Perone: How horrible. What was your dad doing these years from when you moved out here until you were 16?

Jean Coleman: Well, he had work.

Stella Perone: Building?

Jean Coleman: Yeah, he had work here. I think he did well, you know, I think he did well. He had work, I know. So anyway, that was quite a shock to lose my mother that way. So anyway, now where do we go from here?

Stella Perone: Okay, so your mom had her tragic death, and then you moved from East Blithedale at some point after that?

Jean Coleman: Well then, my brother — in those days — well, I remember one friend whose father had committed suicide because of the Depression, you know, so another family took her in.

Stella Perone: Was this back in Nebraska?

Jean Coleman: It was in Mill Valley. So my brother just begged the Seitz family — he knew the Seitz family — he just begged them to take me in while my father got sort of adjusted.

Stella Perone: Your father got what?

Jean Coleman: Sort of adjusted to you know, being a widower. He went back to Nebraska.

Stella Perone: Your brother did, or your father?

Jean Coleman: No, my father did.

Stella Perone: Oh, your father went back to Nebraska.

Jean Coleman: So anyway, I stayed with their family for my high school time.

Stella Perone: So this is from age 16 for the last couple years of high school.

Jean Coleman: Yes. Well actually, I think it was just my senior year in high school.

Stella Perone: Yes, that would make sense, given your age. Where did they live?

Jean Coleman: They lived on Bolsa Avenue. So I think Klyce¹ had built their house. So anyway, they had two daughters. Pudgy was one of them, who I said I knew. I remember Pudgy, there was one silly thing I remember about her, I don't know why. We used to play some sort of a game and I remember Pudgy going, "One potato, two potato, three potato, four." You know, and counting us out. I think of that sometimes, I don't know why I think of her that way. Anyway, so we still know her, I mean, I still know her.

Stella Perone: She's still alive?

Jean Coleman: Yes, she lives in Pullman, Washington. Yes, I just heard from her; she sent me a birthday card. So anyway, now let's see. So I had my senior year there and they were a very, very loving family and treated me just like their own daughter. I was very lucky, really, to have that.

Stella Perone: So of course you were at Tam High.

Jean Coleman: Yes. And my dad, he was just shattered, the loss of his wife. And actually he went back and he married her sister. So then he was married to her for some years, which was very wonderful for him too.

Stella Perone: Did they move back out here from Nebraska after he married the sister? Did they come back to Mill Valley?

Jean Coleman: Yeah. No, they didn't come back to Mill Valley; they lived in San Francisco.

¹ Harvey Klyce, a famed local architect and builder.—Ed.

Stella Perone: Okay, so they came back west.

Jean Coleman: Yes, they did; yes, that's right. And they lived in the city there, they always lived in the city. He didn't move back to Mill Valley.

Stella Perone: Are there any houses around Mill Valley that your dad built that you know of?

Jean Coleman: Well, he and his brother did, I know for sure, did the addition to the Baptist Church. There is an addition, over on Miller Avenue.

Stella Perone: Oh, the Little School, the white one?

Jean Coleman: Yes, I think it is the Little School.

Stella Perone: Okay, so his brother moved out here with him.

Jean Coleman: Yes, his brother did, yes. And he built a lot of houses around Mill Valley. As Mr. Jordan, our electrician neighbor, said, "He did everything." He was one of those people that did the plumbing, the electricity, everything, contracting, you know. So anyway, that addition on the church is called Spangler Hall.

Stella Perone: Oh, is it?

Jean Coleman: It was at one point. I don't know if it is still called that.

Stella Perone: Anything else that you know he built?

Jean Coleman: Different houses that they lived in.

Stella Perone: That who lived in?

Jean Coleman: My uncle.

Stella Perone: Oh, your uncle, okay.

Jean Coleman: Let's see, there is one in Homestead and one in Tiburon.

Stella Perone: Where is the one in Homestead, do you remember?

Jean Coleman: Yes. I think it was on Homestead Boulevard; I'm not sure about that. They painted it blue. I always thought that was kind of strange to paint it blue; it didn't look right.

Stella Perone: Did they have kids? Did your uncle have children?

Jean Coleman: Yes, he had four children, four children. Yes, my cousins, yes.

Stella Perone: Okay, so you went to Tam High.

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: And then what?

Jean Coleman: And then I went on to College of the Pacific. I guess they thought that — I don't know — because of my affiliation with the Methodist Church, at that time it was called a Methodist college.

Stella Perone: The one out it Stockton?

Jean Coleman: Yes, it's now UOP [University of the Pacific].

Stella Perone: Yes.

Jean Coleman: So I went there for four years. And I didn't want that to end, college. Most people, you know, wanted to get out of college and do something, but I just wanted to stay there. Anyway, I wanted to tell you something else about Mill Valley because it had a big influence on our lives. We rented a house, my husband and I, from Mama Gravander. I guess you haven't heard of her?

Stella Perone: Say the name again.

Jean Coleman: Mama Gravander. She had this house up on Tamalpais Avenue and there was a cottage attached to it. In fact, there were two cottages, and we rented one of the cottages. She was in Sweden, I think, when we first moved there. She came back and she had a big influence on everybody that she knew. She always had these Swedish celebrations that everybody was invited to. It was like living in Sweden. She was a Swedish weaver and she had a place in the city that was called Sveaborg, but she moved here. I don't know why they decided to move here and buy this property. But the house is still there and much the way that it was.

Stella Perone: Where is it?

Jean Coleman: 325 Tamalpais Avenue. In front or to the side of it, you just see this little cottage.

Stella Perone: That's on the upslope, right? Is that upslope or downslope, you are going up on the right or the left?

Jean Coleman: It sort of — it would be downslope, but not much downslope. Anyway, you will see this little cottage next to it. It used to be very Swedish. The walls inside were

painted blue and the curtains were blue and yellow, the hand-woven curtains. There was a fireplace in the living room and a fireplace in the big room down below that we used as a nursery for our children. So it was very, very nice.

Stella Perone: You graduated from UOP, or College of the Pacific, and then what did you do and how did you meet your husband?

Jean Coleman: Oh yes. Well, I worked as a secretary for a couple of different companies. One of them was Commerce Clearinghouse, I guess. One day, I met my husband on the street.

Stella Perone: Is this San Francisco?

Jean Coleman: I already knew him from UOP, yes, but I didn't go out with him or anything. I just knew who he was, and I guess he knew who I was, I don't know. I don't know why he should have known. But anyhow, that's how we met, on the street.

Stella Perone: In San Francisco?

Jean Coleman: Yes. When we were both — I moved out of my parents' apartment and went into a boarding house because everybody did that then in San Francisco. We all went and lived in these boarding houses. My husband lived in another one.

Stella Perone: Wait, can you describe what a boarding house is? You just had a room and you used a central kitchen?

Jean Coleman: Yes, I think so. Actually, I don't remember how we ate; we must have prepared our own meals somehow, but I really don't remember that.

Stella Perone: Shared bathrooms?

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: But you had your own room?

Jean Coleman: Well, I might have shared it with a couple of people, I might have had a shared room. Gee, isn't that strange? If you don't write things down, you don't remember them.

Stella Perone: Do you remember where in the city you were?

Jean Coleman: Where there were — no, I don't remember now, I don't remember. I thought it was close to my parents' apartment; they lived on Fillmore Avenue. I thought it was close to them. But anyway, so my husband and I, we kept — if I would take the bus, he would be on the bus, and if I took the cable car, he would be on the cable car. We kept

meeting, and so then I think we just went together about six months and then we decided to marry, I think. It seems awfully fast, doesn't it?

Stella Perone: How old were you?

Jean Coleman: Well, I must have been 23, I'm not sure. He was 29, I think. He was as old as my brother. So anyway, that's how we — we kept meeting, it just seemed to be fate.

Stella Perone: And so then after you got married, did you live in Mill Valley, is that when you rented the cottage?

Jean Coleman: Oh yes, that's when we found — well, first, we went to Europe. First, we lived on Twin Peaks; we had an apartment there, and then my husband always loved to travel, so we went right to Europe. He studied on the GI Bill.

Stella Perone: In Europe?

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Great. What did he study?

Jean Coleman: Well, he studied the language in Paris. But then, by then, I was pregnant. I think of this and think how I knew I was pregnant and went over to Europe, you know. So anyway, then I decided that I wanted to have the baby in Switzerland, so then we went to Switzerland.

Stella Perone: Any special reason?

Jean Coleman: I don't know. It was just sort of an instinctive thing.

Stella Perone: I don't know if the child got Swiss citizenship.

Jean Coleman: No, that didn't have anything to do with it. In France, he would have been half French, he could have had French [citizenship], but in Switzerland, it's what your parents are, at least it was at that time, so it didn't have to do with that. It had something to do with — and it was a good idea because I had health issues with the pregnancy. I came to a very, very, probably one of the best doctors in Switzerland. I remember him putting me to bed right away until I had the baby and everything was fine.

Stella Perone: What did you have?

Jean Coleman: A boy.

Stella Perone: And his name was?

Jean Coleman: Steven Michael.

Stella Perone: Steven Michael. Is it appropriate to ask you what year that was?

Jean Coleman: Um, what year was it? Well, we were married, I know we were married in 1950, so it must have been in 1951 that the baby was born.

Stella Perone: Okay. So you had Steven Michael in Switzerland.

Jean Coleman: In Geneva.

Stella Perone: Geneva, great.

Jean Coleman: And then we came back to America after being in Switzerland. I think we were there for about six months and then we came back to America. I'm trying to think where my husband got a job; I can't remember. There was a time he worked for the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, so that must have been where we went next.

Stella Perone: Was he a writer?

Jean Coleman: Yes, yes, he was a journalist. So he worked for the *Press Democrat* then. I think that we were there for about a year.

Stella Perone: Did you live in the Santa Rosa area?

Jean Coleman: Yes, we lived there for a year, I think. Then we came back. Oh, we had friends there that we knew and somehow they got him in to the *Chronicle*, so he got a job with the *San Francisco Chronicle*. That's when we were looking for a house in Mill Valley, a place to stay, you know, so that's when we found the house that Mama Gravander rented. We stayed there a year in that house, in the Swedish house. But it was all colored Swedish, painted with Swedish designs and everything.

Stella Perone: Does it still look Swedish?

Jean Coleman: I don't think so. The interior is a lot like she had it, that wasn't changed like the way a lot of people change things; that wasn't changed. But the kitchen was changed; that was changed while her daughter lived there. I remember her kitchen; it had a little built-in table and there were benches around it, you know, where the table was. This was where she used to serve the big Swedish smorgasbord that she did. She always had the children wear these lighted candle crowns and everybody was nervous about that but nothing ever happened. So anyway, and then from there, we found this house to buy.

Stella Perone: What year was that?

Jean Coleman: 1955.

Stella Perone: 1955 you bought this house, great. And how many kids did you end up having?

Jean Coleman: Just two, two boys.

Stella Perone: Okay, Steven and — ?

Jean Coleman: Joseph Paul.

Stella Perone: How many years later?

Jean Coleman: Just two years later. I'm trying to think. We lived in the city, too. And that's when Joey was born, the baby. So we lived in the city there for a while, on Bay Street, in a housing project; it was a brand new housing project. From there, we must have moved to Mill Valley. I don't have all these things documented; I should have them documented.

Stella Perone: That's fine. Okay, so the kids basically spent pretty much their entire life in this home.

Jean Coleman: Yes, they did. They grew up here.

Stella Perone: And they went to Old Mill School?

Jean Coleman: Yes, they both went to Old Mill School too, yes, and Tamalpais. I remember playing in Old Mill Park a lot, going there almost every day. In that time, they had what they called the WPA², our government had that, so there were people there that would, you know, lead the children there in projects and so forth. I remember one project even: there was a wood carver there named George Hawbrook and he taught wood carving to some of us. But then I just remember being in the park a lot, Old Mill Park. I can't remember exactly. I remember there was a wading pool there.

Stella Perone: Really. In the creek, obviously; they had it dammed?

Jean Coleman: No, it was just a little cement wading pool, about where the playground is now, just a wading pool. So yes, I just remember Old Mill Park a lot, yes.

Stella Perone: Did you do the Dipsea steps much?

Jean Coleman: No, I don't think so. No, I didn't. I was just telling my son, I said, "You know, I've never been to Cascade Dam." I've never been there in all my life, imagine that. I just never got there. I should go there, I guess.

² Works Progress Administration, a government program employing millions of unemployed people to carry out public works projects in the late 1930s.—Ed.

Stella Perone: Did your friends go there and swim when you were young?

Jean Coleman: No, I don't remember that very much. I don't. But it was a popular place, apparently, because I just read about it in the paper. I don't know whether my brother went there or not. I don't remember that. But you know, one thing that really bothers me about Mill Valley is that there is no downtown. The downtown has changed so much. I mean, we used to be able — we had this department store on the corner called Albert's. We used to be able to buy our Tamalpais High School uniforms there.

Stella Perone: You had uniforms at Tamalpais? What were they?

Jean Coleman: Yes. We wore dark pleated skirts and a white middie and there was a dark middie, too. I mean, a dark collar, I remember. We had a dark tie and when you got to be a senior, you didn't wear the dark collar anymore, and you wore a red tie and that made you a senior. But we had those pleated skirts, dark navy blue pleated skirts. So where were we?

Stella Perone: We were talking about how there is no downtown. You used to go there and buy your uniforms.

Jean Coleman: Yes, Albert's. And then there was a shoe store, Mosher's, and there were dime stores, you know, and variety stores. Well, we had more than, it seems to me, more than one grocery store downtown, two.

Stella Perone: What did you have? You had Mill Valley Market, right?

Jean Coleman: Yes, and then there was a Safeway close by.

Stella Perone: Where was that?

Jean Coleman: On Blithedale, at the corner of Blithedale and I think Sunnyside.

Stella Perone: Where the bank is now, Westamerica Bank?

Jean Coleman: Where the bank is, yes. Anyway, I miss that part of Mill Valley a lot. I found that it was so hard to — I mean, in those days it seemed to be so easy to get out of Mill Valley and so easy to do things with the car. You could go directly to the city easily, but you can't do that now. It's a lot different.

Stella Perone: Okay, so when you were at Tam High, you belonged to different youth groups?

Jean Coleman: No, I didn't belong to any youth groups there, I don't think. I didn't belong to anything there.

Stella Perone: Okay, you started to tell me, jumping back after you were married — the kids were four and six.

Jean Coleman: Yes. As I said, my husband loved to travel, and he got a job with the USIS, United States Information Service, so we were sent to Madras, India, where we lived for two and a half years. That was certainly awesome.

Stella Perone: What did he do there for them?

Jean Coleman: He was what you called the exhibits officer. That was strange because the time we were in Paris when we were first married, Julia Child was there with her husband and she was going to that school. I know I would have gone to that school had I not been pregnant.

Stella Perone: You mean the cooking school?

Jean Coleman: Yeah, because that's where I got interested in cooking, in France. It's too bad my mother — my brother always said to my mother, "You should teach her to cook." And she said, "Well, anybody can cook and not everybody can draw." I used to draw when I was a little girl a lot. So anyway, I didn't learn to cook from my mother, which was too bad. But anyway, they were there in Paris and then he became an exhibits officer in the USIS. But he was — I don't know where he was, her husband. But anyway, I remember a couple of the exhibits. One of them was a Buckminster Fuller dome that they brought to Madras. I think there was an American Indian exhibit, maybe of pottery and so forth that was brought. It was kind of a propaganda agency. There was an American library in Madras.

Stella Perone: Do you think he was a spy or anything?

Jean Coleman: You know, that's exactly what my neighbors said.

Stella Perone: In recent years, or in past years?

Jean Coleman: No! You know, they questioned Julia Child's husband, but he did work for the Office of Security, didn't he, OSS [Office of Strategic Services], and he was questioned. But no, my husband was not.

Stella Perone: Okay, so you went to India. How long were you there?

Jean Coleman: We were there two and a half years.

Stella Perone: Okay, so you went to India for two and a half years and then went to Paris?

Jean Coleman: No, we went to Paris when we were first married.

Stella Perone: Oh, okay, got it.

Jean Coleman: But anyway, my husband just thought, I guess, I think he wanted to raise his children in America instead. Our next post would have been Dhaka, in Pakistan.

Stella Perone: Oh, wow. Where was your husband from?

Jean Coleman: Well actually, he was born in Nebraska, too.

Stella Perone: Oh, you're kidding.

Jean Coleman: No, he was born in Nebraska, too.

Stella Perone: It's a small world.

Jean Coleman: His background is sort of Swedish.

Stella Perone: Is that how you got the rental from the Swedish woman?

Jean Coleman: Well, I think that was one of the big things about being there, it was so Swedish for him.

Stella Perone: Oh, I bet. Okay, so then you came back from India and you were in Mill Valley.

Jean Coleman: Yes, and then we settled in at the Old Mill School, I guess, and then my husband was working for the *Chronicle*.

Stella Perone: What kind of writer was he, did he specialize in a certain area?

Jean Coleman: Well, he wrote a lot of features, feature stories. I think they had a Sunday section that he worked on once, I can't remember what it was called.

Stella Perone: Actually, let's stick with this neighborhood. Tell me a little bit about the neighbors that you remember over here. Tell me again, how many years have you been in this house, did you say? You bought it in —

Jean Coleman: Yes, 1955.

Stella Perone: Oh, so you have been in the 59 years, whatever —

Jean Coleman: Yes, something like that.

Stella Perone: And the Killions lived across the driveway.

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Until 20 years ago for probably the same amount of years, right? So your kids grew up with the Killions?

Jean Coleman: Yes, that's right.

Stella Perone: Who else lived near you that had an impact on you?

Jean Coleman: That's when I started to volunteer, I was going to say that, in the Old Mill School library, I started to work as a volunteer there. That's where I met — there were other people that I met who were volunteers. So Nan Stoller, the one that made the cookies.

Stella Perone: She had kids your kids' ages.

Jean Coleman: They were a bit younger than ours, I believe. Maybe Tia is Steve's age; I don't think so, though. I don't know, I don't remember. So a lot of us that worked as volunteers went back to library school and got either a master's or I got a credential to work in children's libraries.

Stella Perone: Where did you go back to library school?

Jean Coleman: USF [University of San Francisco].

Stella Perone: Okay, so after you got your credential in libraries, where did you work?

Jean Coleman: So then, I came back to the Mill Valley School District and I was hired by the Mill Valley School District and I had two schools, I think, that I served. One was Tam Valley and one was Homestead at one point, and then I was at Marin Terrace at one point too, I think.

Stella Perone: So how many years roughly did you work for the district?

Jean Coleman: Well, about three, about three years.

Stella Perone: Were your kids grown at this point, or were they still young?

Jean Coleman: Oh, they were still pretty young. I remember Joe was in — I think he was in middle school. But anyway, then my husband got another opportunity to travel and that's what we did.

Stella Perone: With the family.

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Where did you go?

Jean Coleman: I don't remember, where did we go next? This should have been written down!

Stella Perone: It'll come to you. So you traveled for a year or two, do you think? Were the boys still in grammar school?

Jean Coleman: Well, that's strange. I don't know whether it was the time that we went to the Navajo reservation. It could have been that. He might have gotten a job at the Navajo reservation. But by then I know Joey was in high school and Steve was going to San Francisco State then, so I don't know if it was the Navajo reservation. I went to try to get a job in the library there, but they gave me third grade to teach. I am the last person that they should have had to teach 30 little Navajos. But I had very good help. I had two young Navajo women who were helping me in that school. So I taught for a year; we were there a year. My husband was working for a Navajo community college. That must have been — I'm trying to think — that was probably why I left the school district.

Stella Perone: And then you came back to Mill Valley.

Jean Coleman: Yes. Well yes, we always came back to Mill Valley, you know. We had rented our house, we would rent it. Even our neighbor, Mr. Whiteshead, was in the real estate business then, and he took care of the rental for us — one family that we had. So it was always good to be able to come back to Mill Valley.

Stella Perone: Okay, so then the boys went to Tam High, I assume?

Jean Coleman: Yes, both of them.

Stella Perone: Did you ever go back to work?

Jean Coleman: Yes, then I did. I kept working. Then I was sort of, I worked as a substitute. I worked at Tam and other high schools, I remember. Yes, I remember substituting in high school libraries. Then I met a friend. We would, I guess she would — yes, she worked, she was the librarian at Marin Catholic.

Stella Perone: Oh, what was her name?

Jean Coleman: Dolores Simons.

Stella Perone: I went to Marin Catholic, I think I knew her. The name sounds really familiar.

Jean Coleman: Yes, Dolores Simons. There was an opening there for a librarian, so I was sort of an assistant librarian.

Stella Perone: What year were you there?

Jean Coleman: You know, I never documented that.

Stella Perone: Do you remember how old your kids were, so that I can put it together if we were there at the same time? I never know years either, but if you can think about if your kids were out of college. I think we might have been there at the same time.

Jean Coleman: Really, I wonder! No, I just — and I worked there for a few years, I really loved it. Actually, it was part time; I was just worked part time there. That's probably another reason I liked it so much.

Stella Perone: Okay, so I'm really intrigued by that beautiful structure out in your backyard. What is it?

Jean Coleman: Steven's folly, something he built.

Stella Perone: You called it a set design, does he do set design?

Jean Coleman: Yes, he's a set designer.

Stella Perone: For movies?

Jean Coleman: Not for movies, but for stage.

Stella Perone: Oh, okay, for plays.

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Did he live in that structure?

Jean Coleman: Well, he did used to sleep there, but I didn't like it. I thought it was getting too moldy for him, you know.

Stella Perone: So does it have plumbing and electrical, or just a playhouse?

Jean Coleman: Oh no, it doesn't have anything like that.

Stella Perone: He built that as a little kid?

Jean Coleman: Yes, he used to build as a little kid, but he didn't build it then. I don't know, he sort of let it go, he let it deteriorate. He didn't have time to take care of it, so things got out of control. He has been working on it too, but he never gets it finished. You know, if you are a set designer, you don't have to worry about roofs leaking. He built something like that. My husband bought some property in the foothills when he was in the Navy. My husband was — I didn't tell you that my husband was at Pearl Harbor, too.

Stella Perone: Oh, no.

Jean Coleman: Yes, my husband was at Pearl Harbor, but then of course I didn't know him.

Stella Perone: That was before you met him.

Jean Coleman: Oh, yes. He was quite young to be there. So no, I had no idea.

Stella Perone: What did he do after Pearl Harbor, military-wise?

Jean Coleman: Then he came back to University of the Pacific, a V5 program.

Stella Perone: What's a V5 program?

Jean Coleman: Sort of an officers program. But he didn't like that; he didn't want to do that.

Stella Perone: So he didn't have to do a tour of duty in the South Pacific or anything like that with the war, or was he in combat?

Jean Coleman: His ship went down, the [USS] *California*, he was on the *California*, and his ship went down.

Stella Perone: Where did it go down?

Jean Coleman: In Hawaii, wherever that was.

Stella Perone: During the attack.

Jean Coleman: Yes.

Stella Perone: Okay, so he was bombed and his ship went down and he got out.

Jean Coleman: Yes, they were rescued, some of them were rescued, some of them. They didn't lose all of them. So he was rescued, but he was at Pearl Harbor

Stella Perone: When did your husband pass away?

Jean Coleman: 1995. But then he went back to UOP [University of the Pacific], you know, after being in the Navy. I guess — I can't remember when the war ended; I can't remember when the war ended. I guess we were in college when it ended, probably. Yeah. And then it was all different. He wanted to do that traveling. And so, okay.

Stella Perone: Where does Steve do set design?

Jean Coleman: Well, he started, I guess, in San Francisco.

Stella Perone: Like right after high school?

Jean Coleman: He also went to College of Marin and he went to San Francisco State. So I think he started doing them — he was with a group called Stage Group, I think, and he worked for them for years. I think he might have studied it at College of Marin, set design; he might have studied it there. And then, I guess he studied it at State and then was affiliated with this Stage Group and worked for them for many years. He even acted in some of the plays; he knew a lot about theater. Then he worked with Joan Deamer at the middle school and worked on those plays that she did, and that's how he met Lucy Mercer, I guess, who bought this theater³.

Stella Perone: I bet I know your son.

Jean Coleman: Oh, you probably do, he's the man about town⁴.

Stella Perone: Yes, long ponytail.

Jean Coleman: Yes, it's a little short now; he cut it.

Stella Perone: Oh, I bet I know him.

Jean Coleman: He usually wears that cap.

Stella Perone: Yes, I know who your son is!

Jean Coleman: I have pictures over there.

Stella Perone: I'll go look. I have no idea. Absolutely, totally great!

Jean Coleman: Yes, have you been in the theater?

Stella Perone: Oh, I'm there all the time.

Jean Coleman: Oh really? Good! That's good. Well, he did all that painting and everything.

Stella Perone: Yes, I knew that. Totally great! What does your other son do, where does he live?

³ Throckmorton Theatre at 142 Throckmorton Ave.—Ed.

⁴ Artist Steven “Steve” Coleman is Mill Valley’s resident set designer, famed for the sets he has designed for Throckmorton Theatre, Marin Theatre Company, and other Marin productions.—Ed.

Jean Coleman: Well, he is staying up at our property, I told you, my husband bought this property in the foothills.

Stella Perone: Where in the foothills?

Jean Coleman: At a place called North San Juan.

Stella Perone: Where is that?

Jean Coleman: It's about 14 miles past Nevada City on Highway 49. Our place is right on Highway 49. There was a chestnut orchard there.

Stella Perone: Oh, neat.

Jean Coleman: Yes. So we've had that all these years.

Stella Perone: Do you commercially —

Jean Coleman: Well, my husband used to take care of it, you know. I won't say he loved it more than me, we were neck in neck. He loved that place.

Stella Perone: Did you spend summers up there with the kids?

Jean Coleman: Oh yes, we would spend his vacation up there. He would go up many weekends of the year, yeah, and work up there. Oh, when my husband died in 1995, a neighbor up there, or a person that we knew who had 200 acres and sold things organically, he told over the harvesting of it, which was very wonderful for me. It was somebody to look after the orchard; I couldn't deal with it. So anyway, he has been doing it all these years, harvesting the nuts and selling them, and I think he does pretty well. He even had them certified organic, which was good, very good, I think.

Stella Perone: So just chestnuts, or other products?

Jean Coleman: Just chestnuts, it's a chestnut orchard. I think there were 100 trees to begin with, but I don't think there are that many now. Some of them have died.

Stella Perone: Okay, so your son lives up there now.

Jean Coleman: He is staying up there; he loves it up there. He loves the country. Mill Valley, he loved Mill Valley too, but he thinks Mill Valley is spoiled, you know, it's not his Mill Valley anymore, so he likes it up there, yes. As I say, Steven and his father — this was a point of dissension between us. They built, Steven and his father built, what they call a *bastide* out of all the rocks they got on the property.

Stella Perone: Wait, they built a what?

Jean Coleman: It's called a *bastide* in French.

Stella Perone: What is it?

Jean Coleman: It's a structure that is sort of French looking, you know.

Stella Perone: Like a shelter with a roof on it, so that you can live in it or sleep?

Jean Coleman: Well, that's the thing. I said, Steven wasn't good with roofs, so it has been leaking.

Stella Perone: But you have a real house on it?

Jean Coleman: It wasn't a real house, Steven had designed it, you know. That's why I said, "Why did you build something leaky?" It has a lot of charm but it's just, it's not practical at all.

Stella Perone: And your son lives in it?

Jean Coleman: Well, there was a little house on the property, I remember, when I first married Bruce. In fact, we spent part of our honeymoon up there. It was a little cabin and it was nice, very nice. But it burned down. Now, that I remember, the fire of 1957. There was a fire up there so we lost that little cabin. Relatives built us another little one-room cabin that we used for years; it was very primitive. But Joe has electricity and he has a telephone there.

Stella Perone: In this one-room cabin that the relatives built?

Jean Coleman: Yes, that's where he stays. So it was kind of nice, I remember when it was first built, but it's kind of run down now, I think, with the water and everything. And Steven, he doesn't go up there very often.

[Stella walks to the pictures.]

Stella Perone: So Jean, you have two pictures here. Tell me about this picture.

Jean Coleman: That picture is in Old Mill Park. I told you, we used to play in Old Mill Park, too, and the Works Progress Administration had workers there who would teach us things, you know, and supervise us. So I think that was when I was there. There was this concrete wading pool. I slipped in it and got all wet, so somebody took my picture.

Stella Perone: Were there any play structures there then?

Jean Coleman: I think there could have been. But I don't remember any. It's funny, because I would remember swinging or something. I don't remember, I couldn't tell you.

Stella Perone: And what's this photo?

Jean Coleman: That's Treasure Island, the fair of 1939, I think it was, the World's Fair of 1939 on Treasure Island.

Stella Perone: Neat. And who are you with?

Jean Coleman: Wanda Hartson. She lived up on Corte Madera Avenue, very close to town, in a bungalow there. She and I used to play in the creeks together.

Stella Perone: What other creeks did you play in besides Old Mill Creek?

Jean Coleman: That one, yeah, and then there was a creek on Park Avenue. There was a bridge that went over a creek at Park Avenue.

Stella Perone: That's probably the Sycamore Creek, the one that goes through Sycamore.

Jean Coleman: Is that Sycamore? We didn't know the name of it then.

Stella Perone: Yes, I still don't.

Jean Coleman: But anyway, there were some kids that had a raft there. They used to paddle it around, the raft, until Dr. Hartman, who lived very nearby them, decided he didn't want the children playing there. He didn't think it was safe, so he closed it off to them.

Stella Perone: It was like a little pond?

Jean Coleman: It was a creek, yes. It was pretty deep. So anyway, he didn't think it was safe for them to play there in that way. And then another thing we used to do in the creek was to pick blackberries. We used to pick blackberries a lot. My mother used to give me 25 cents a bucket for blackberries. That was fun. And then there was, in my day, we didn't have Girl Scouts in Mill Valley, we had Campfire Girls, so I was a Campfire Girl, and that's where I knew Gene Stocking. I was a "trail-seeker" and she was a "fire-maker," I think. So our group of trail-seekers were hosting a little party for the fire-makers and I think, as I recall, it was in Old Mill School. So we made dinner for them and we had candle light, and I remember Gene saying that she couldn't see the food because it was so dark.

Stella Perone: Are the two groups for different age groups?

Jean Coleman: Well, there were four steps: trail-seeker, wood-gatherer, and then I don't know, one was fire-maker. I don't know what the fourth one was. Fire-maker might have been the top one, I'm not sure; I don't remember.

Stella Perone: Who was your leader?

Jean Coleman: I don't remember. We occasionally met at Scout Hall, I remember.

Stella Perone: Did you wear a uniform?

Jean Coleman: Yes, I did have a Campfire Girls uniform. It was blue.

[Interview ends abruptly]