

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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FRANK AND FRANCES DITTLE

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Joan Murray in 2001**

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In this oral history, longtime Mill Valley residents Frank and Frances Dittle discuss their lives in Mill Valley, including raising five sons together. Frank was drafted in April of 1941 and served four years in the Aleutian Islands. Before and after the draft Frank worked for General Time Corporation in San Francisco, spending 40 years total with the company. In this oral history, Frank and Frances touch upon the great Mill Valley fire of 1929, and Frances describes changes in the Dittles' neighborhood, including new construction and remodels.

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Oral History of Frank and Frances Dittle

March 9, 2001

Editor's note: The transcript below is not a verbatim match of the oral history interview. For the full, unedited interview, please refer to the recording.

Frank Dittle: One two three, la la la la [testing the tape recorder].

Frances Dittle: No, the Summit, then from Summit to Old Mill and then from Old Mill to Park and then from Park directly to Tam. It wasn't the same kind of system as they have now. Very interesting, I think.

Joan Murray: Do you mind if I ask you some specific questions? What we'll do is record it, then type it up and I'll give you a copy of it.

Frances Dittle: Oh that'll be fun.

Joan Murray: But then if there are any questions that you don't care to answer, feel free to say no.

Joan Murray: This is Joan Murray from the Mill Valley Historical Society and I am at the home of Frank and Frances Dittle, at 153 Walnut Avenue, Mill Valley. Today is March 9, 2001. Will you give me your date of birth, if you don't mind? Your full name, your address, your date of birth, if you don't mind.

Frank Dittle: December 2, 1914.

Joan Murray: And, do you have a nickname? Or what do they call you?

Frances Dittle: That depends.

Frank Dittle: Most real close buddies called me "Dit."

Frances Dittle: But in general it's "Frank." But to everybody these days it's "Pop." Our neighbors, and friends of our kids, or our friends, called him that and I call him that. So he's "Pop" to everybody.

Joan Murray: What is your name?

Frances Dittle: I'm Frances. This makes an interesting thing. I'm Frances T. We get our medical records mixed up.

Frank Dittle: They start looking at our medical record, they look at me and say "What's going on here?" [laughs] Now they have a red flag on one of them.

Joan Murray: How long have you lived here?

Frances Dittle: Since the house was built – well not me.

Frank Dittle: Since 1923.

Frances Dittle: His father built the house.

Joan Murray: Oh wow! Did you know the Culmers? They lived on Walnut back in the '30s and worked on the train. One of the sons became a doctor here. They moved away in the early '60s, but I wondered if you knew them?

Frank Dittle: Did they have any good-looking daughters?

Frances Dittle: He always says that!

Joan Murray: Have you lived in Mill Valley since 1914?

Frank Dittle: Pretty close to it.

Frances Dittle: Well, honey, you were born in San Francisco, but moved over here before this house was built.

Frank Dittle: We lived in Homestead [Valley] first.

Frances Dittle: You lived in Homestead three or four years.

Joan Murray: What area of Homestead?

Frank Dittle: I lived on 31 Molino Avenue, now it's Montford Avenue. It turned into Montford.

Joan Murray: Oh.

Frances Dittle: Oh, they keep changing things. I grew up in San Francisco and they keep changing streets. I feel like a foreigner.

Joan Murray: Yes, they do, that's true.

Joan Murray: So then you've been in Marin since 1918.

Frances Dittle: Probably.

Frank Dittle: Oh yeah.

Joan Murray: How did your family find Mill Valley?

Frank Dittle: Well, let's see.

Frances Dittle: Grandpa was in San Rafael.

Frank Dittle: He was from San Rafael.

Frances Dittle: He knew Mill Valley and knew the whole county, obviously. How did he happen to be in San Francisco? Did he work over there?

Frank Dittle: Yes, he commuted.

Frances Dittle: He helped build the Palace of Fine Arts. We have pictures of that, the building that still over there. He helped build that. We have pictures of that.

Joan Murray: Was he a carpenter?

Frank Dittle: Yes, he was a building carpenter. He built this house and the one next door and other houses in Mill Valley.

Joan Murray: Your grandfather or father?

Frank Dittle: My father.

Joan Murray: Wow.

Frances Dittle: For that reason I'm certain that they must have known the Culmers, but the name doesn't ring a bell with him or with me.

Frank Dittle: I remember that every day in San Francisco, I worked in SF, and left when it was dark and got home when it was dark. It was a long day.

Joan Murray: How many children do you have?

Frances Dittle: We have five sons.

Joan Murray: Really?

Frances Dittle: And Frank is the oldest.

Frank Dittle: The teacher used to ask the kids, how many more are coming?

Frank Dittle: Some of them had the same teacher that I had. Mrs. Jackson at Park School. She'd say that she used to have to take his dad's marbles away.

Joan Murray: What did you do? I know you're retired.

Frank Dittle: I worked in San Francisco. Commuted for 40 years. Worked with General Time Corporation. I was manager of West Coast Division of Westclox and Seth Thomas.

Joan Murray: Oh, interesting.

Joan Murray: Have you been involved much in the community here?

Frank Dittle: Not much.

Frances Dittle: Not in that sense. We were with the kids, with their sports, their baseball and their football, that sort of thing, and I was associated with the PTA.

Frank Dittle: Little League.

Frances Dittle: We were never involved politically, I guess you would say.

Joan Murray: Do you have any old photographs, that we might be able to copy, or that you could lend to our historical society?

Frank Dittle: Like what?

Joan Murray: Anything of the old Mill Valley, such as your house.

Frances Dittle: You know, I'll have to hunt it up. We have one of Manny's place with the snow on it on the hill.

Frank Dittle: Up on Eldridge.

Frances Dittle: We ought to give that to the city, we don't necessarily want that. It's very interesting. That was quite a snow they had in 1929, with snow on this house too.

Frank Dittle: We can dig that up from our archives.

Joan Murray: Oh great! Well if there are any more that come to mind, we'd be happy to copy them and return them.

Frank Dittle: Then there's the time of the big fire, the big Mill Valley fire. We all went up to Varney's hardware store, picked up shovels, went out and put out spot fires in Blithedale Canyon.

Joan Murray: You would have been in high school?

Frank Dittle: Yes.

Frances Dittle: I'm a San Francisco girl. I went to school in San Francisco.

Joan Murray: You could probably see that fire from San Francisco.

Frances Dittle: Yes.

Frank Dittle: Yes, she's a Lowell grad.

Joan Murray: Oh, are you?

Frank Dittle: Oh, yes.

Frances Dittle: Why do you make it an issue?

Frank Dittle: Everyone says, "Oh, did you go to Lowell?"

Frances Dittle: I never even thought about it, but not too long ago, someone said something to my niece about being smart and someone said your auntie must have been smart as she graduated from Lowell. What does that have to do with anything? It's fascinating. I realize, looking back that it was the special school because it had nothing but college prep classes. But when I went there, we never thought about it. In the first place you usually went to the school closest to where you live. That's the way San Francisco was. I had a choice of two or three schools, because we lived in the middle. I said I wanted to go to Lowell and that's where I went.

Joan Murray: That's great.

Frances Dittle: One of my brothers went to Poly. That was more or less a trade school.

Joan Murray: Well, I'm sure you're literate, which is more than one can say today, even of high school graduates.

Frances Dittle: I never thought about it. I was always on the honor list, but I'm not remarkable.

Frank Dittle: I always throw that punch line in: "One who graduated from Lowell."

Joan Murray: When did you graduate?

Frances Dittle: We walk a lot up on the fire roads. We met an older fellow up there. And I said I was from San Francisco and he asked if I went to Lowell, as he too went to Lowell.

Frank Dittle: It's funny how you meet people. Like we met "Bay Area Back Roads," Doug Connell, met him up on the trail.

Joan Murray: He's a nice person.

Frances Dittle: Yes, very nice.

Frank Dittle: We, all the boys, including ourselves, did outdoor things. We still go backpacking as a group. We all get together with their wives, and grandkids. Walk, backpacking for a week. Up in the Marble Mountains, the Trinity Alps area.

Joan Murray: Wow.

Frank Dittle: We're kind of a real knit family.

Joan Murray: That's wonderful. Do the kids all live around here?

Frances Dittle: No, the eldest lives in Windsor, Woodacre, which one? Woodacre. Number two son lives in Cotati. Number three son lives at North Shore of Lake Tahoe. Number four son lives in Washington State, up by the Canadian border, up out of Bellingham. Number five lives in Mammoth Lakes.

Joan Murray: Oh, doesn't Dave Locey live up in Washington State? *[Interviewer Note: The Loceys are longtime Mill Valley residents who owned the house next door to the Dittles. Dave is the oldest son.]*

Frances Dittle: We travel from son to son.

Frank Dittle: We always have a place to stay.

Joan Murray: I was wondering about others who grew up in Mill Valley. When I was doing the research on 1946 for our 2000 Mill Valley Historical Society Annual Review, in the *Mill Valley Record*, I came across an article that said that you were coming home from World War II. That's what made me think to talk about you about the '40s and what it was like to live in Mill Valley at that time. The clock at Tam was installed in 1946 in memory of 40 young men from Tam who died in the war.

Frances Dittle: Why don't we remember that? I was too busy raising children.

Joan Murray: I think so. I talked to another old time Mill Valleyean. She didn't remember when it was installed either. She had to get her Tamalpais High School yearbook [the Pai] to look it up.

Frank Dittle: I remember, but I couldn't tell you what year it was.

Frances Dittle: If I had known, if it was in memory of veterans, I'd have remembered. I feel strange talking about this. Once the doorbell rang and it was a college student and he started out saying, "Did you know there used to be a train run up that street?"

Frances Dittle: Oh yes, I know all about it. I've ridden on it.

Frank Dittle: I was drafted April 1, 1941. I can't forget that, April Fools Day. Went to Park School, where the draft board was to sign in. They gave you a ticket to go to the armory in San Francisco. Get over there and they'd give you a box lunch with sandwiches and an apple and put you on a train to Fort Ord.

Joan Murray: Oh, interesting.

Frank Dittle: That was it. Four and a half years.

Frances Dittle: Four years, six months and eleven days.

Joan Murray: Did you see each other during that time?

Frances Dittle: Oh yes, we were engaged to be married. We were planning on a wedding when they drafted him. We were engaged to marry when he was drafted.

Joan Murray: Where did you go?

Frank Dittle: I was stationed in Aleutian Islands for the full time.

Joan Murray: Did you come home at all during that time?

Frances Dittle: Yes, he came home one time when they shipped him back to Aberdeen. They wanted him to go to officers training. He said, "I will not, I don't want to be." He didn't like the spit and polish and salute business. They sent him back and gave him some college courses, for further improvement.

Frank Dittle: It was about two weeks.

Frances Dittle: No, honey, it was for six weeks, because I went with him. Then they shipped him back.

Joan Murray: That must have been hard.

Frances Dittle: Yes that was tough.

Joan Murray: It was what happened in Mill Valley at those times.

Frank Dittle: Of course my job was still open when I come back, so I picked up where I left off. I worked for 40 years for the company. Commuted every day. First by train and ferry boat and then by bus and then, eventually, when the bridge was built, I drove then. It was easy. You didn't have to quit at a certain time. You could leave when you wanted. But, I left in 1941 and got back in 1946.

Frances Dittle: I was with my mother in San Francisco all through this, and we came back after Tom was born, in Jan 1946. We never had any children until after he came back.

Joan Murray: And did you move into this house?

Frances Dittle: All the time he was gone, I would come to visit his folks here, and then his mother died a month before Tom was born, so we were still over with my mother with the baby, and his Dad said won't you come home? He thought we should come home, so we came here.

Frank Dittle: We moved back to the old homestead.

Joan Murray: And, you're still here. That's a long time. There have been a lot of changes.

Frances Dittle: Oh, tremendous changes. There were no houses beyond La Goma, it was all swamp area. They built what they call wartime houses. And up the other way, Goheen, up the other way, Matilda and all those streets. Tremendous changes.

Frances Dittle: The big house. You know Beverly Rogers, don't you?

Joan Murray: No, I don't.

Frances Dittle: Oh, I thought she was really involved in everything. That was just a little house built during the war. How long have they been there? Six or seven years? They've added on to it, and gone up on it, but it was just a little cottage at first.

Joan Murray: Which house is that?

Frances Dittle: The brown shingled house at the end of Walnut¹ that was built during the war. The next two houses were there. This one², across corner was the real estate office.

Joan Murray: Oh really?

Frances Dittle: That was just a real estate office originally for the area.

¹ 52 Locust Ave.

² 152 Walnut Ave.

Frank Dittle: That was the Tamalpais Park Real Estate office. *[Interviewer Note: After leaving the Dittles' home, we went outside and talked about the house at 152 Walnut Avenue that had been the real estate office for Tamalpais Park. In the '50s, Mr. Cruise, who had owned what was then the Locust Bakery on Miller Avenue, built a bomb shelter in his home.]*

Joan Murray: I never knew that.

Frank Dittle: It was just a little two-story with a garage underneath, two stories, I don't know how many rooms it had. It's been added on many times.

Frances Dittle: It's interesting, the house right across from us, that brown shingle one [58 Locust Avenue], was just a little cabin, and grandpa said it was originally a doctor's hunting cabin.

Joan Murray: Oh.

Frances Dittle: He was from San Francisco, and he would come over here. It has been added on and added on. My brother lived there for fifteen years or so. Everyone that moves in changes it. Mrs. Gray, Annabelle Gray, who lived in the next house, told me her house was built same time as this one. She was a bride. She was a telephone operator here.

Frank Dittle: She knew other things as well. In those days when you had to plug in the wires you knew a lot.

Frances Dittle: Grandpa built the next one and he sold it.

Frank Dittle: Rosekrans.³

Frances Dittle: That was the Walgreens. He was a ferryboat captain, and it was built during the San Francisco earthquake. She told me during the earthquake, they lived in San Francisco and then moved to Sausalito until the house was ready. As soon as it was ready, they moved in.

Joan Murray: I'll have to look at the tape and look up addresses.

Joan Murray: Since the time I've been here, I've seen huge changes.

Frances Dittle: Oh, tremendous changes. You just wonder about it.

Frank Dittle: My dad built this one and now it's a two-story.

Frances Dittle: The one across the street got bulldozed down.

³ The Rosekrans house was at 68 Locust Ave.

Frank Dittle: Now the one next door, got poles up so they're going to put up for another story.

Joan Murray: Yes, I went up to the Planning Department and looked at their plans, because I'm concerned about those changes. I'm concerned about how much change. Big houses among little houses.

Frances Dittle: We call it the Alaska house,⁴ because people from Alaska built it. The house burned down, and they let the family rebuild. That was strange because it was, I can't think of their name, but the house burned down. Someone wanted to rebuild and they wouldn't let them. Then, this time, they rebuilt it and it covered the whole lot. It's strange. It's like the one on the corner, Walnut and Fern. A big tree fell and smashed it down. It was a cute little house. An elderly gentleman lived there by himself. He put in to rebuild it and was told, "No way, it's not a buildable lot." So look what's there now. Someone else came along. Even built across the creek, for goodness sake.

Frank Dittle: It all depends on the changing of the guard.

Frances Dittle: The same is true over one right on the corner of Sycamore and Locust.⁵ That was a beautiful little lot with a redwood tree. That was the kids playground. We couldn't figure out why the city didn't take it for a park. All the little kids would go down there. It was a playground. We'd go down there and it was real nice. They tried to build on it and they were told that it wasn't buildable. But the next thing you know, someone else came along that managed to put money under the table or something, and they built two houses, one on this side of the creek and one on the other side of the creek. Now the lady that's there had the redwood trees cut.

Joan Murray: Yes, I noticed.

Frances Dittle: What can you do?

Joan Murray: I'm concerned about the house at 208 Sycamore. It apparently was an elderly person living there, who must have died. The second house from the corner of La Goma.

Frances Dittle: It was vacant for a long time. Remember, you said, "What's going on there?" I don't know whether they're going to move it out or raise it up.

Joan Murray: The Planning Department said that someone came in with plans. I want to know what it is about. The house next to it is huge.

Frances Dittle: Great big houses. I don't know. We were down to the doctor's yesterday and he said, "What's going on there?" And I said all the windows are bordered up and they've taken all the shrubbery and everything out of the yard. I would imagine

⁴ 115 Walnut Ave.

⁵ 40 Locust Ave.

that they would bulldoze it down like they did this one over here. But obviously they're planning to remodel it.

[Interviewer Note: The quality of this recording was not the best. I do remember talking with Mr. Dittle about the hunting that he and his father used to do in Homestead. He used to get quail and deer, but that changed when he returned from World War II. He no longer hunted in Mill Valley after the war.]