

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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PETER RHODES

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Bill Devlin in 2007**

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Born on January 22nd, 1920 in Manchester, England, Peter Rhodes began his career in America at the tender age of 7, selling newspapers on the tramcars that ran down Fillmore Street in San Francisco. Peter grew up to become a dedicated athlete, business owner and lover of languages who prided himself on a lifetime of hard work. Peter's first awareness of Mill Valley came from the town's Great Fire in 1929, whose smoke he recalls seeing from the top of his newspaper route. Despite this – or perhaps because of it – Peter's family relocated to Mill Valley shortly thereafter, where he both attended Mill Valley schools and continued contributing to his family's income by selling newspapers along the train route between Mill Valley and Sausalito. Peter went on to play football for Stanford University, where he was one of the famous "Vow Boys" of the 1930s who swore never to lose a match played against their newfound rival, the University of Southern California. Peter's football and college career were interrupted for a time by the onset of World War II, but his service in the U.S. Army saw work with German prisoners of war in Texas and valuable experience with the German language. Peter eventually graduated, learned the ropes of the export business and became a successful family business owner with many international connections. Peter recalls all of these experiences throughout his oral history, as well as his admiration for the diversity and integrity of Tamalpais High School, the layout of downtown Mill Valley, the town's many areas for sports recreation and the Japanese community that lived there prior to internment during World War II.

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Oral History of Peter Rhodes
December 16th, 2007

Peter Rhodes: I don't know if you want to begin with my first experience in Mill Valley, which was actually before I lived here.

Bill Devlin: Well, let me first of all, for the benefit of the transcriber, say that this is Bill Devlin here with Peter Rhodes. We're at his home at 450 Edgewood Avenue in Mill Valley. It's 3:00 on the afternoon of December 16th, 2007. Yeah, let's start with that, Pete. What is your first experience with Mill Valley?

Peter Rhodes: Well, I was an immigrant boy of 6 years when I came to this country. I had an uncle who liked to hike, so in 1927, when I was about 7 years old, he brought me over here on the ferry and the train, and then he connected with the one that went up the mountain. Went from the mountain down, the gravity cars, to the Muir Woods. That was my first experience with Mill Valley.

Bill Devlin: That must have been a good one, because I've heard several people with similar stories saying, "Wow, I like to hike here. I like to come on the train. This is a place I've got to be." But going back further, Pete, before we went on tape here, you said that you had emigrated here from the north of England. Whereabouts was that? Where did you grow up? Or was that early years?

Peter Rhodes: Yes. I was born in England, and I lived in a very low class district in the northern part of England, above Manchester. We came here in 1926.

Bill Devlin: So you were living in the city¹ then, for the first few years you were here.

Peter Rhodes: That is correct.

Bill Devlin: Your questionnaire says that you moved over in 1929. Do you have any memories of the fire at all here?

Peter Rhodes: The fire, I remember; I was living in San Francisco. I was a newsboy at Divisadero and California Street. We lived in a flat there. When I saw that smoke I ran to the top of the hill and I could see the big wall of smoke coming up from Mill Valley. That's my first experience with Mill Valley.

Bill Devlin: Divisadero and California. When my wife and I were in the city, we were at Divisadero and Clay, so we know that area quite well.

Peter Rhodes: It's interesting.

¹ San Francisco

Bill Devlin: What did your parents do in the city? They moved from the north of England to the city. What did your father do?

Peter Rhodes: My father sold brushes door-to-door. He had a strong north of England Lancashire dialect. He was difficult to understand. So he had a hard struggle. So at the age of 6, I was contributing to the family income. In fact, the first year, I think I was the sole source of funds for my parents.

Bill Devlin: Then when you moved over to this side, then, you would have been about, what? Ten years old or so, right?

Peter Rhodes: Yes. Ten.

Bill Devlin: Your father commuted to the city at that point?

Peter Rhodes: That's right. He did have a steady job then, by 1930, and he commuted by train. I sold papers at the stations and also on the trains, from Mill Valley [and] Sausalito.

Bill Devlin: Now at that point you would have been going to Summit School?

Peter Rhodes: Correct.

Bill Devlin: Whereabouts did you live then, at that point?

Peter Rhodes: We lived just near Park School, but at that time they couldn't admit me at Park School because they didn't have any spots. They were over quota. So I went to Summit School, and then I went to Old Mill after that.

Bill Devlin: When did Old Mill start up? Summit School was the predecessor, I guess, to Old Mill, right?

Peter Rhodes: Yes. Summit School was the predecessor, but Old Mill was sixth, seventh and eighth and Summit retained K through five.

Bill Devlin: So Old Mill started out I guess kind of like a middle school, huh?

Jean Rhodes: Did you go to Park after Old Mill?

Peter Rhodes: No.

Jean Rhodes: I mean after Summit?

Peter Rhodes: I never ever went to Park. Even though I lived almost next door to it, I didn't attend there because it was over quota.

Bill Devlin: Tell me. Your questionnaire here also says that you did some work while you were on this side, going to Summit or to Old Mill School. Tell us about your grocery store experience there.

Peter Rhodes: It was the People's Market.

Bill Devlin: Whereabouts was that?

Peter Rhodes: Well, it was at two locations.

Bill Devlin: Where Mill Valley Market is now?

Peter Rhodes: Yeah. Right. That was one place. And the other place was across the street from the depot. It was the second building as you went down Miller.

Bill Devlin: I know I've seen the pictures of the market back then. I guess that was what later became the Purity.²

Peter Rhodes: My recollection of the Purity is that. Let's see. If we're walking up from the station on the right hand side would be the theater. Right?

Bill Devlin: Mm-hmm.

Peter Rhodes: Well, I think that's the market that you're relating to, but my time was before that. It didn't exist for a time. It was [owned by a] family. I don't remember their name, but it was as you go down Miller from the depot there, it's on the right hand side, the second building.

Bill Devlin: You were involved in sports when you were growing up too, weren't you?

Peter Rhodes: Yes. There was a lot of activity for boys from 6 up to 14, some a few older than that, on the sand. Sometimes it's referred to [as] sand lots. One of them is where Whole Foods is now. That was a big empty lot. There were boys ranging from the age of 6 to 16, and there would be 25 to 30 boys sometimes. Then the firemen cleared a lot where the tennis courts are now, and put up some goal posts. So that's when we transferred from the Locust district to the present tennis courts.

Bill Devlin: Near where the Little League plays.

Peter Rhodes: Where do the Little League play?

Bill Devlin: Boyle Park.

² Purity Market

Peter Rhodes: I would just be more precise and say it's exactly where the tennis courts are.

Bill Devlin: And you did some caddying at the golf course too, huh?

Peter Rhodes: Yes.

Bill Devlin: Did you run into any famous people when you were at the golf course?

Peter Rhodes: Can't recall the names now, but there were occasional movie people. There's one movie family that moved to Mill Valley. I've forgotten their name.

Bill Devlin: You were also involved in sports at Tam too, right?

Peter Rhodes: Yes. That's right.

Bill Devlin: You played baseball? Football? What?

Peter Rhodes: No. I played baseball in grammar school, but I was a failure. And I finally quit when I was in the field and a ball came out, and instead of catching it, I allowed it to hit my Adam's apple. And that ended my baseball career.

Bill Devlin: What did you play for? You played football for Gustafson³ at Tam, didn't you?

Peter Rhodes: I did play for Gustafson.

Bill Devlin: What positions did you play there?

Peter Rhodes: I was a guard. I was what they call a pulling guard.

Bill Devlin: I see there's some mention here of some friends of yours, people you knew at Tam High who went on to become professional ballplayers. Bob Jensen, pitching for the Seals. Did you know him very well?

Peter Rhodes: Yeah. I would say for several years he was my closest friend. He was a bit of a character. I wasn't present on the occasion I'm about to relate, but it was a very hot day and he took off his shoes, when he was pitching for the San Francisco Seals against Los Angeles or one of the other teams in the league. He took off his shoes and was pitching with his bare feet. That's one thing I remember.

Bill Devlin: One thing I see here on your notes on southern Marin County is that there were 30 Japanese families that lived in the Lovell area, pre-World War II. I'd never heard that from anybody before. What was the story about that?

³ George Gustafson, Tamalpais High School swimming, football, baseball and tennis coach, 1933-1971

Peter Rhodes: Well, the thing that impressed me most about it was that I had a crush on one of the Japanese girls and her name was Tsuru Shibata. I have met people in recent years who knew her. She was from another state. But there was a group of Japanese families. If you go up the hill from the depot, right up from the depot. What is that street there?

Peter Rhodes: Lovell. They had houses — the Japanese had houses from the same side of the street as the library⁴ and they went up almost to the library, and they started just across the street from the fire department. Downtown.

Bill Devlin: Was there some reason — were they involved in vegetable gardening? I know that out in the valley there's that. It's interesting that they would gather in one particular place.

Peter Rhodes: I can't recall what the elders did who moved there, what they did. My memory's not so clear on that. I do remember this, that they were all very, very good students. They all got top college educations in different fields.

Bill Devlin: Were they relocated when World War II broke out?

Peter Rhodes: Yes, they were relocated.

Bill Devlin: One of the things we're doing with our oral histories is we have a couple subsets in addition to interviewing long-time residents, and one of them is War and Peace. That's why I was asking about that. You were in the service in World War II, were you not?

Peter Rhodes: Yes.

Bill Devlin: Tell me about that.

Peter Rhodes: Well, first I have to say that I was in a unique position. I was a declarant alien, meaning I intended to become an American citizen. And that means that I could not apply for my citizenship until I was 19, and then I had to wait two years till I was 21 before I could file formally, like a preliminary intention. But I couldn't start the procedure until I was 21. When I was 21, I was working my way through Stanford and I was the first Stanford student drafted. I couldn't get deferred and be in the Reserve. If I had been a citizen I could have, at the age of 21, gone into the army as a second lieutenant. It took me more than three years to get my citizenship in the army.

Bill Devlin: So did this interrupt your education at Stanford?

Peter Rhodes: Yes it did. I had to leave Stanford after one year.

⁴ The original Mill Valley Library was located at 52 Lovell Avenue from 1911-1966.

Bill Devlin: Where were you stationed?

Peter Rhodes: I was stationed at various places in Texas. The best duty I had was they sent me to Washington D.C. They sent me to University of Utah to study German, then they sent me to Washington for further language studies. I never did get overseas.

Bill Devlin: What did they do with you when they provided you with all that background? Were you doing some translating work? Or what?

Peter Rhodes: Not immediately. Put it this way. I was in a place in Texas where we had a lot of German prisoners. So that was fortunate for me. It helped me to become more proficient in [the] German language, and also I had studied German culture and so forth. I think it helped me do a better job with the prisoners, whereas some other officers were not treating them too kindly.

Bill Devlin: Whereabouts in Texas was that?

Jean Rhodes: LBJ's hill country.

Bill Devlin: Oh, somewhere near New Braunfels? In that area?

Peter Rhodes: Yeah. Somewhere there. My memory's not so good. It was the geographical center of Texas. If you have a map of Texas I could tell you where I was. It was the geographical center of Texas.

Bill Devlin: That sounds like it was west of Austin, somewhere around Fredericksburg or out that way, toward Johnson City.

Peter Rhodes: Fredericksburg, yeah.

Bill Devlin: When you went back to Stanford, what did you get your degree in?

Peter Rhodes: It was an "at large" degree. In other words, there were many other ex-GIs who were in a similar position. They started out in one field but then shifted to another field, for varying reasons.

Jean Rhodes: Wasn't it predominantly Political Science that you got your degree in?

Peter Rhodes: I would say I have more German language and area studies than anything else.

Bill Devlin: This is kind of like what we used to have at Cal called General Curriculum, and as long as you had a certain number of units in various areas, they'd

pass you through. So when you got out of college, did you settle back in Mill Valley? Or go elsewhere?

Peter Rhodes: Mill Valley.

Bill Devlin: I came back to Mill Valley. Did you have any brothers or sisters here?

Peter Rhodes: I had a sister, younger sister. Eight years younger than I.

Bill Devlin: She went on to do what?

Jean Rhodes: She left town to go to Ursuline⁵ in Santa Rosa. And became a teacher through San Francisco State, and married an attorney, and they lived in Sacramento for years, until she died this summer.⁶

Peter Rhodes: But there was a lot of violence.

Bill Devlin: You're talking about 19 —

Peter Rhodes: The war time.

Bill Devlin: '46, during the war.

Peter Rhodes: During the war. There was a lot of violence. So a number of people sent their children to private schools. Although we were not Catholics, she went to Ursuline.

Bill Devlin: You've had your own company now, P.J. Rhodes and Company, for over 50 years. How did you get into the export business?

Peter Rhodes: Well, my father was an export manager. Or a manager in an export company in San Francisco.

Jean Rhodes: Hills Brothers.

Peter Rhodes: Well, he was first with a company called Parrott and Company, which was a national brokerage company.

Bill Devlin: That may still be going. I recognize the name.

Peter Rhodes: It could be.

Bill Devlin: What kind of things have you imported and exported?

⁵ Ursuline High School, an all-girls Catholic boarding school at the time

⁶ 2007

Jean Rhodes: Exported.

Bill Devlin: Strictly export?

Peter Rhodes: Strictly export. Although we have done a fair amount of business involving sourcing the goods in one country in Asia and shipping them to another country in Asia. So we weren't limited to just shipping from here, although this was our main business. We had a fairly substantial business with second or third countries. I think it was really unique in that regard. Most of the other exporters didn't do that.

Jean Rhodes: Didn't you deal with the sons of the men that your father had dealt with?

Peter Rhodes: Yeah. I'd have to say that my father was a great help to me, not only in teaching me the ropes of the business, but getting some connections for me. No doubt about that at all.

Bill Devlin: Well, you must have been successful in your own right, because I see so many businesses where it gets into the second and third generation and falls apart, and obviously that hasn't been the situation. What types of things are you exporting now, Peter?

Peter Rhodes: Principally foodstuffs. But historically, it's been very diversified: live cattle, airplane parts, airplanes. Everything you'd find in a supermarket. It was very diversified at one time.

Bill Devlin: In coming up here today I happened to notice in the driveway that there are several vehicles with tarps over them. I seem to recall at some point coming up here to see your wife Jean and seeing the tarps off of them. I'm a car guy. Tell me what you have down there and what the story is.

Peter Rhodes: Well, the oldest one we've got is a 1956 Buick which my parents bought from the Buick dealer in Mill Valley. Then there's a '69 Oldsmobile, and the Cadillac.

Jean Rhodes: It's the only one running.

Bill Devlin: So you've just sort of collected these over the years and just sat on them.

Peter Rhodes: Yes. They were my parents' cars. They got a new one they turned over the old one to me.

Bill Devlin: Well, tell me about some things you like to talk about. I've kind of gone off the observations that you have on your oral history questionnaire here. There's got to be something that we haven't discussed that you'd like to talk about.

Peter Rhodes: Well, I think Tamalpais High School was a very important school. Very, very effective. One thing I liked about it is when most of us students made friendships with other students from other cities and towns in Marin county. So almost all of us knew people — contemporaries — from Sausalito, Fairfax, San Anselmo.

Jean Rhodes: Belvedere.

Peter Rhodes: Belvedere. The high school had a very good faculty and it had a very good school spirit. It was a broadening experience because there were sons and daughters of every social and economic class here. It was very important to me, and I think it was to a lot of my contemporaries. In other words, we didn't just restrict ourselves to friendships with other contemporaries in Mill Valley.

Jean Rhodes: What about your friend who was president of the student body who saved Anita Baker's⁷ life at Stinson? And she went on to marry "Red" Fay. What was his name? You have it right here in your file.

Peter Rhodes: His name was Flagerman. There were three brothers. At one time, all three brothers were there. F-L-A-G-E-R-M-A-N.

Bill Devlin: Plamondon. Marshall Plamondon, it says here.

Peter Rhodes: Flager. Flagerman. German now. F-L-A-G-E-R. I think what it means — it's a flagman.

Bill Devlin: That's how that would translate.

Jean Rhodes: Into German. But here he wrote all this to be. He lost his life saving Anita Baker.⁸ He grew up in Mill Valley.

Peter Rhodes: He held her up as long as he could and then he became exhausted and he went down and another fellow took over. I was at Stanford at that time. I remember going into the church there. You familiar with the church?

Bill Devlin: Oh yes.

⁷ It appears that Jean was mistakenly referencing former Mill Valley resident Anita Marcus, the wife of Paul "Red" Fay, U.S. Under Secretary of the Navy, 1961-1965.

⁸ A May 1940 article in the *Sausalito News* describes a Marshall Plamondon drowning in the surf at Stinson Beach, in an effort to rescue Eva Gene Marcus of Mill Valley.

Peter Rhodes: Yeah, that was a sad occasion. He'd been our student body president. He was also an athlete. Baseball, football, and so forth.

Jean Rhodes: You were part of the Vow Boys at Stanford.

Peter Rhodes: I wasn't one of the star players but I was one of the squad. They were the Vow Boys originally. They vowed they would never again be beaten by Cal⁹ and they weren't.

Bill Devlin: Some things don't change!

Peter Rhodes: Yeah. So they made a vow. They were freshmen, I think. They made a vow that they would never lose to USC. And they didn't. Not only that, they were the first team to have the T-formation. That was a great advantage.

Peter Rhodes: Shaughnessy. Yeah. He was a great person. A great leader. He invented the T-formation now used by most teams.

Jean Rhodes: When Pete met Condoleezza Rice when she was provost at Stanford, she was impressed that he was one of the Vow Boys.

Peter Rhodes: I was in a restaurant on the campus. This lady came over, she says, "I think you were one of the Vow Boys, weren't you?" I said, "How did you know?" She says, "Oh, I just had an inkling." She says, "My name is Condoleezza Rice."

Bill Devlin: She'd done her homework, I'd say.

Peter Rhodes: She was a real football fan. I'm sure she still is, although I'm no longer in contact with her.

Bill Devlin: Well, the real thing that would impress me is, did you beat Cal that year?

Peter Rhodes: Where did you go to college?

Bill Devlin: Went to Cal.

Peter Rhodes: You went to Cal, huh? Well, the thing is that. I don't know about the rest of the student body, but all us athletes had friends on the Cal team and when they weren't playing us, we were all pulling for Cal. Now I think the reverse is true.

Jean Rhodes: A lot of intermarriage. Chuck Taylor married a Cal gal.

⁹ Peter appears to mean the University of Southern California, not the University of California, Berkeley. A moment later, he refers to this vow as one to "never lose to USC," as does a 1945 *Stanford Daily* article that covers the role of the Vow Boys (1933-6) in Stanford football history.

Peter Rhodes: Yeah. And I'm sure you weren't pulling for USC.

Bill Devlin: No, no, no! I was very glad to see Stanford.

Peter Rhodes: You went to Cal.

Bill Devlin: I went to Cal. Right. Well, you've had quite a time here in Mill Valley and since then. I thank you very much for granting me a little bit of time to hear about it. What we'll do is we'll get you a copy of this transcript. Hopefully the tape is going to be good, and the additional comments that were made by your wife Jean.

Peter Rhodes: One thing I'd like to ask, because my memory's not so good. Did I mention about riding the gravity car before we moved to Mill Valley?

Bill Devlin: Yes, you did. You mentioned that was one of your first experiences here when you were growing up in the city.

Peter Rhodes: How long have you lived in Mill Valley?

Bill Devlin: Since '59.

Peter Rhodes: Oh, you're an old timer by today's standards.

Bill Devlin: Oh yeah. Anyhow, thank you very much. I'm going to turn off the tape now and enjoy the tea and cookies. Thank you very much.