

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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PETER BRINDLEY

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Dale Komai in 2001**

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Peter Brindley was born in San Francisco in 1942. He spent what he describes as an idyllic childhood in Mill Valley, enjoying time with friends out in nature, seeing matinees at the theater, and cruising around Marin and San Francisco. During his youth, Peter especially enjoyed watching local baseball games at Boyle Park, as well as seeing the Oakland Oaks and the San Francisco Seals at larger arenas. Unable to join the army due to an injury, Peter decided to join the Police force in order to fulfill his duty to his community. In his oral history, Peter shares his experiences of growing up in Mill Valley, his career as a policeman, the isolation he and his fellow officers faced from the community during the Vietnam War, and the changes he witnessed in crime and drug rates as the drug and hippie culture spread throughout Mill Valley after the Summer of Love.

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Oral History of Peter Brindley
November 2, 2001

Dale Komai: This is an interview with Peter Brindley at his home here at 65 Elm in Mill Valley on November 2, 2001. The interviewer is myself, Dale Komai, representing the Mill Valley Historical Society. Peter, start with your early years. You were raised here in Mill Valley but technically you were born in San Francisco. Can you describe your growing up time?

Peter Brindley: My parents lived at 148 Elm. They had come here in about 1940. There were no hospitals in Marin, as far as I know, so I was born in Stanford Hospital in San Francisco in 1942. We stayed in Mill Valley at 148 Elm Street until about 1944 and we then moved to 61 Scott Street, which is down in Homestead. In 1947 we moved back to Elm Street at #55 and we remained there until 1960. When I was growing up I attended Homestead School, Old Mill School, Park School and Alto School, and graduated from Tam High School in 1960.

Dale Komai: What was your graduating class size at Tam during that time?

Peter Brindley: I think at that point, it was 230 to 250.

Dale Komai: In middle school and grammar school, how many kids were in your class, 40 or 50 or larger than that?

Peter Brindley: The class sizes were probably somewhere in the vicinity of about 30. The overall class or grade was probably somewhere in the vicinity of about 120. I was ahead of the baby boom, and shortly after I graduated from Alto, they built a new school, Edna Maguire, next door to handle the larger number of kids.

Dale Komai: When did your father come to the Bay Area? What were his circumstances?

Peter Brindley: My dad, originally was born in England and immigrated to Canada about 1910. He got his schooling in British Columbia, where he was an outstanding soccer player — rugby player — and about 1925 or 1926 he immigrated to Los Angeles. Stayed down there until 1937, I believe, or maybe '38 when he came to San Francisco. He was in advertising and public relations and worked for one firm for 41 years from 1928 to about 1969 or 1970. He worked in San Francisco and commuted every day.

Dale Komai: How far back does your mother go? Had her side of the family been in the Bay Area for a long time?

Peter Brindley: No, they immigrated to Los Angeles from Denver in the early '30s. My parents met in Los Angeles. My father was a widower. He had a young son at that point named Gordon. They met and married in 1938 and subsequently moved to San Francisco when my dad was transferred.

Dale Komai: Describe your growing up here in Mill Valley. You've lived in Mill Valley virtually all of your life. What were your day to day activities, both during school and after school?

Peter Brindley: Well, living next to Boyle Park was very, very fortunate and because of that everything basically revolved around sports activities. We seemed to always have 20 to 30 kids down at Boyle Park and we had pick-up baseball games, football games. Sometimes we just rode our bikes. We spent a lot of time in the creeks. We were called "creek rats". In those days we just had a great time. It was idyllic, really. There were none of the pressures the kids seem to have today. So we just basically had fun. A group of us used to do a lot of camping up on Northridge behind my house. We built forts and tree houses. One guy had a tree house of about 800 square feet in an oak tree and we spent a lot of time in that. Just had a great time. Played golf, played tennis. Swam at the tennis club. Basically no worries. It was cool.

Dale Komai: You were raised at 148 Elm Street. I assume that house is still there today?

Peter Brindley: Yes.

Dale Komai: And does it still look pretty much the same?

Peter Brindley: Well, when we moved out of there I was about two or maybe two and a half. Interestingly enough, though, I always had in my mind the floor plan of the house. A number of years ago I went in and it was exactly as I remembered it, which was really quite interesting. We then moved to Scott Street and moved from there when I was about six. And we moved to 55 Elm Street and that's where I spent most of my younger years, next to Boyle Park. Which, interestingly, is right next to where I am living now.

Dale Komai: Tell about any mentors or teachers you looked up to in school.

Peter Brindley: Well, actually there were two that really stand out in my mind. They were both in elementary school. One was a lady named Betty Grimm, who originally was a principal at Homestead. I stayed in contact with her until she was killed in an accident about 1970, I think. She really provided me with a lot of guidance, and was a wonderful, wonderful woman. My fifth grade teacher was a fellow named Don Castelli¹. He was the first male role model, outside of my father, that I had contact with. He had a great impact on my life. As I recall he was a veteran of World War II and was very strong in teaching social responsibility and how we were to act. Held us to a very high level of discipline in the school and we'd go out at lunch time or recess and he'd be right in it with us. He was really quite a remarkable man and I was very fond of him. He too has passed on as far as I know. He had a dramatic impact on us.

Dale Komai: You mention that sports had a big part in your life growing up. What did you think of the local baseball teams? Did you go to any of their games?

Peter Brindley: During the years we were growing up. Mill Valley had a semi-pro team called the Mill Valley Merchants or the Mill Valley VFW and they played at Boyle Park every Sunday.

¹ Correct name is Bill Castelli.

In those days there was a large grand stand and all the fellows that had come back from World War II would play in a league that included Tiburon, San Rafael, Richmond and San Francisco. These games would be very highly attended, probably 500 or 600 people at every game. People would park their cars up along Buena Vista right in center field. One guy I remember, a fellow named Fred Berrick, owner of the Old Mill Tavern, had a red Cadillac or Oldsmobile convertible, and he'd sit up there. Always seemed to be surrounded by women. He'd be dead center field, and the guys would try to aim for the car a lot of times.

I was a bat boy for them for about four years. Being around those fellows was very educational, too. In terms of larger arenas, we used to go to the San Francisco Seals games, the 49er games and Oakland Oaks games. We really enjoyed that. I was very disappointed when the Dodgers didn't come to San Francisco, although I love the Giants now. I actually cried as the Brooklyn Dodgers were my heroes. I was very, very disappointed that we didn't get them. I love the Giants.

Dale Komai: Did you get to meet any of the famous ball players, or see them in action?

Peter Brindley: Well, actually one of my biggest thrills was watching Ted Williams. The Seals were a farm team for the Boston Red Sox and Ted Williams came out to play an exhibition game and so I was able to watch him. There was one fellow I really liked to watch. His name was Mike Baxes². He played for the Seals and ultimately he went up into the majors, Kansas City A's, team I believe, before they moved to Oakland. His wife, when I joined the police department, worked for the police department so I got to know them. He gave me his baseball card, which was really neat, which I still have. So we became friends. It's nice to get to know one of your heroes.

Dale Komai: How did you get around town and the Bay Area, bus or walk or what?

Peter Brindley: We walked and rode our bicycles 99 percent of the time. There was no public transportation as there is now, so anywhere we wanted to go we had to get there on our own. When we were going to Alto School, which was the middle school, in the 7th grade, they had a bus so we got on at Park School and in 8th grade, to be cool, we rode our bikes there. I rode my bike to Tam until my junior year and then I got a car, and that's how we all got around.

Dale Komai: What were some of the recreational spots you used to hang out in, in middle school and high school?

Peter Brindley: Boyle Park. I spent a lot of time there. Then on Saturday, all the kids would go to the Saturday matinee. You'd get a double feature, a serial and five cartoons, for 7¢. Then you'd come out and emulate who you saw on the screen, Roy Rogers or John Wayne or whoever. Then as we got older we'd go on Sunday nights to the theater, and the theater seemed to be a gathering spot for the younger teenagers, and that's where you went to meet your girlfriend and sit in the loges and neck and all that kind of stuff.

² Mike Baxes played second base and shortstop for the Kansas City A's for two seasons, in 1956 and 1958.

But it was really a neat place to be in Mill Valley in those days. They had a number of small restaurants and coffee shops. There was a place called Stiveson's on the Square where Bank of California is today. La Ginestra was called Esposti's, we used to spend a lot of time in there. Later there was a small drive-in called C's, which was a half a block up from Tam High, where Kentucky Fried Chicken is now on Miller. We hung out there a lot. We used to have a lot of dances. They had dances at a place called Brown's Hall, which is now the Buddhist Temple near the intersection of Miller and Montford. Every Friday and Saturday nights we had dances there. Then we'd go to various places around the county. Fairfax had a women's club that had dances and we'd go there. San Rafael had a couple of places that we went to. And then as an older teenager those of us that were into hot rods and cars spent a lot of time in drive-ins. There was C's in Mill Valley and The Circle, which was in Corte Madera where the Cadillac dealer is now. There was the King Cotton down in the Canal area of San Rafael, there was uptown San Rafael called, I think, King James. There were several in San Rafael. So we'd make the circuit and drive around in the typical '50s deal and just had a great time. Not without conflict at times.

Dale Komai: What kind of car did you drive?

Peter Brindley: I had a '55 Chevy convertible, which was very fast, so we used to do a lot of drag racing and go out toward San Quentin. They had just put in the highway to the bridge and virtually had no traffic so we'd go out there and race and we'd go down to The Great Highway in San Francisco and there were literally hundreds of cars down there some would race, but basically a place to hang out. We had a lot of fun down there. They had a place near there called Playland At The Beach and we spent a lot of time there. No worries, lots of fun.

Dale Komai: Now, back in the early '70s, George Lucas made the movie *American Graffiti*, which was based on Petaluma. Did you find his representation of life in the late '50s and '60s parallel to what you experienced?

Peter Brindley: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, that was actually filmed in downtown San Rafael, based on his growing up in Modesto. But it was all the same throughout California. Interestingly enough, when they were putting that together George and his wife lived in Mill Valley and she contacted me because I was in the Police Department and someone had told her I might be able to find some of these cars. So, I gave her some names and I think a few of them were in the film. Yes, that was a fairly good representation of what it was like, what was later called "cruising". San Rafael was really the focal point for most Marin County kids and they'd go up and down Fourth Street, literally hour on end, back and forth, back and forth. And that's what that movie depicted.

Dale Komai: Your father was in advertising all his life. How did he feel about you getting into law enforcement?

Peter Brindley: He was not happy about it. He had seen a Los Angeles police officer killed in front of him, I guess sometime in the '30s. As I recalled the story, he was sitting in an intersection in his car and saw the officer fighting with someone in the intersection and in those days, many of the police officers carried what they called cross draws. The handle of the gun was pointing out from the body and in the course of this fight, the gun was pulled out by the bad guy

and he shot the officer in the chest and so, at that point, my dad thought that law enforcement was a very dangerous occupation.

Dale Komai: What made him turnaround on that over the years? Was he able to see why you went into that line of work?

Peter Brindley: Well, he was very supportive. The reason I got into it, primarily, I wasn't able to serve in the military because of an ankle problem. And I felt like this was one way to contribute. Plus I found it absolutely fascinating on two levels. One was you had to have your wits about you to deal effectually with the public. When I first started, you frequently had to deal with situations on your own, because the department wasn't large enough to always have a backup officer. We didn't have portable radios. When you got out of a car you were essentially on your own. You had to be an effective communicator in order to resolve a lot of the problems. So, I found that part fascinating. I was generally successful. And the other was that I came in right after the Miranda Decision had been enacted by the Supreme Court. Because of that, subsequent court rulings from all over California either at the Superior Court level within your county or the Appellate Court decisions or ultimately the California Supreme Court decisions made everything very much in flux, in terms of law, and I found that the task of trying to keep up with that was absolutely fascinating. It still does, trying to understand the nuances of what the courts are saying and how to apply that so that you don't get a case thrown out.

And as a patrolman and later as a supervisor it's crucial that if you're going to do the job, you should do it properly. You had to keep up, day to day. One day they'd say to do it this way and the next day you'd get another notification that another court had ruled and you had to do it exactly the opposite. So it was very much in flux, but so fascinating. From that standpoint, my dad understood it and was supportive. My son is now a police officer and he's on the SWAT team in Sacramento and has been an officer there for seven years. And I know now what my dad was thinking — even though I was involved in it and have absolute confidence in him and his department, there's always something there that you're always concerned for their safety. Particularly in his position where so much is high-risk situations. So, I don't think my dad ever lost his concern for our safety but he was supportive.

Dale Komai: You started out on the Police Force in 1966. Tell us about the political and social climate of the San Francisco and Marin County area at that particular time, and how it affected your work.

Peter Brindley: Well, when I started, the flower children had not yet arrived. It was about another year before the Summer of Love. When that started happening, we started seeing a lot of these kids that had come from all over the country, it kind of overflowed into Mill Valley and all of Marin County: Sausalito, Mill Valley and Fairfax seemed to have gotten the brunt of it. Initially it wasn't a very difficult situation. It was new to us and because we had so many people coming in and they'd come on foot, in cars or motorcycles or buses or however they got here, so we'd have an awful lot of contacts with them. A church down on Camino Alto, the Methodist Church, opened up a drop-in center and that attracted a lot of kids.

Then it seems that very shortly thereafter, what happened to the whole thing, which initially was OK, was drugs. They started out with marijuana and we started seeing a lot of LSD and especially a lot of methamphetamine. What caused us the most problems was the people that

were on speed and they were injecting it, many of them. They created a lot of difficulties for the community. With all these people coming in, and it turned out after the first wave of the first kids had come and gone, we started attracting a lot of bums. We had a significant number of people from out of state that were ex cons. Charlie Manson was here. And people like him were very common. What then started occurring was we started having a whole lot of overdose cases. We then started getting residential burglaries. My first residential burglary was in 1966. The chief and captain responded to the location with red lights and siren. In the early '70s I was taking 10 or 11 a night. Other officers were taking the same amount. We were over well over 400 or 500 for about five years. They were significant burglaries, not just little break-ins. In those days they were taking primarily electronics, stereos were new.

When the Hunt Brothers cornered the silver market, it seemed like every piece of silver in the county disappeared, because it was up to \$55.00 an ounce. Jewelry, of course. So they were significant burglaries that had a huge impact on us, on the whole community. It made the alarm system companies. At one point we had in the police department when we were monitoring the alarms; I think, we had over 400 residents who came to us, and there were others, so that's how freaked out people were. So it was an ugly time. We had a lot of fights. We had a group that used to hang out by the bus depot which is now called The Depot, that would number between 10 and 50 at any given time, many of them strung out, some under the influence. In 1978 Chief Walsh did an analysis of our crime rate and our city of about 12,000 and we had a crime rate of a 35,000-sized city. So the council basically almost doubled the department. We went from 12 to 24 members in a period of about 18 months. And with that we were able to stem the tide and we were able to put people into investigative slots so we could do more effective follow ups and so on. And that worked quite well.

From a social standpoint, it was very near anarchy. The police were the only real visible points of authority for cities, not just Mill Valley but everywhere. They took a lot of heat because of what the federal government was doing in Vietnam and how they were dealing with different issues. We were put out to deal with these situations. As a result of that, the police became quite isolated within their own communities. There were people I grew up with in this town who would not talk to me when they saw me in a cop car. They'd flip me the bird and yell obscenities at me. These were people in their mid 20s that I went all through school with. It was very disheartening. It was difficult on the officers. We lost a lot of officers because they just didn't want to deal with it. Very hard on the officers' families, in some cases the wives were targeted. We had one officer here, they set his house on fire. It was an ugly time, an ugly time. That lasted until the end of the war and for about a year thereafter. It was pretty tough on everybody.

Dale Komai: What sort of turned things around to reduce the crime rate?

Peter Brindley: Well, I think a number of things started happening. One, there wasn't the focal point of the war. And people started calming down on that and a lot of the people that were living in communes in town started getting forced out because of the escalating value of property. Toward the end of the '70s, property started really moving here, forcing those people out. Unfortunately, I think with that it kind of changed the tone of the town in some ways. When I was growing up the town was very diverse from the standpoint of what is now called social economic levels. The town had working class guys and business executives, artists. With the escalating property values, the working class people have been essentially forced out, unless they

were fortunate like we were, to be able to buy a house. There is no way that they could buy a house and so they started moving out and the more affluent people started moving in.

I think in my early days there was a cohesiveness and a community feeling that was much stronger than it is now. There were a number of service clubs whether it be the Lions Club or Rotary or the Onappha, which was a club that my dad belonged to. And when something needed to be done, the people of the community just got together and did it. Two things that stand out in my mind because I was young and it affected me, and I'm sure that there were more, they wanted to start Little League in the middle '50s. So a bunch of people got together and they brought in some heavy equipment and they graded a spot down by the back of Marin Theatre Company where the condos are now. And the property owner let them use it free. They prepared the site and built a little league field. There was another thing about our first Recreation Center, here in Mill Valley. There was nothing for kids. A guy named Chuck Mowers owned a restaurant on the frontage road called the Marvel Mar and he sold it to the children of Mill Valley for \$1.00. The fathers got together, the same general group, the Brabos, the Riechmuths, the Woods and many more. All the guys got together and prepared the site and they moved the building over and the kids had a Recreation Center. Long before the city became involved directly with daily activities, they would have dances down there and activities. That was a pretty neat deal.

Dale Komai: When were women allowed to join the police force?

Peter Brindley: By 1980 we had, if not the first, at least the second female municipal law enforcement. There were several in the sheriff's office that had been there a number of years, but we hired a woman named Lynda Flanders and she's an extraordinary woman and proved herself. She was a very, very effective communicator, and was able to very effectively deal with family disputes and often times resolved the issues. She stayed with us for three or four years, and then went to San Francisco where she just recently retired. An excellent officer.

Dale Komai: What kind of things did she and other females bring to the force that's beneficial?

Peter Brindley: I think female officers put a different perspective on things. They're more apt to try to resolve things through communication. I've always found that, at least initially at entry level, they are somewhat better communicators. And they analyze things better than young officers, there's a macho component of new policemen that you have to deal with and train out of. And the women didn't seem to have that. We've had a number of women over the years that have been very good. But that was one trait. I do some consulting now where I evaluate applications from all over the country and I would say that on the whole that women, at least initially until you get a lot of training, have better communication skills. With a female in a family dispute, for instance, it gave the female victim or female participant in this event, someone to connect to, than just having the house full of male cops. Quite often you could almost see the female connection which is most beneficial. On the whole, the females have done a good job in law enforcement

Dale Komai: When did you become police chief?

Peter Brindley: I became police chief in 1987, replacing Bill Walsh who was police chief since 1972. I retired out in 1997. I was also the Fire Chief, a position that was created right after Prop 13, which was a property tax limiting initiative which reduced the income of the city significantly. The Fire Chief retired and they approached Bill to take on this position. I think it was solely to save money. Bill did a hugely successful job in terms of being able to work in two different cultures, the fire and police departments. It was very, very effective in what he did.

Dale Komai: In summary, how would you characterize the changes that have taken place here in Mill Valley during the years you grew up?

Peter Brindley: Well, we could be here all day! I think one thing that when I was growing up, Hilary Clinton wrote that it takes a village to raise a kid and I agree with her. When I was growing up there were a lot more people that knew each other. You knew almost everyone in town. Where today, from my experience on the streets, a policeman that I would go on a burglary call and I would say, “Who are your neighbors?” And they would say, “I do not know. I’ve never met them.” That kind of stunned me. There’s just not the sense of community there used to be. People are so caught up in whatever they are doing. By necessity both parents work just to make mortgage payments and car payments, the college and all the stuff that goes with it.

With that we have lost something really important, which is the cohesiveness for a community. There is some here, but there is not as much as when I was growing up, as a child and seeing the interaction between the adults. The other things, in terms of youth, when I grew up there was freewheeling. Of course it was different times and there are safety concerns. We’d go out the door and check in at the noon whistle, which was a horn at city hall, and we’d have to be back at five when the horn went off. Other than that there was freewheeling. Now, it seems as if every kid is programmed. Going to organized soccer, then organized basketball, to baseball, to football and then you start all over again. There doesn’t seem to be the free time that I found so valuable. I’m a great believer in youth sports. I’ve coached little league off and on since 1970 and still coaching them. I’ve coached boys and girls soccer. I believe that youth sports activities provide something that is valuable to kids that they otherwise would not get. Especially in terms when working within a group for a common goal, some discipline, learning how to deal with not winning. Because you can’t win all the time. A lot of kids don’t understand that. But again, I don’t see the fun. It’s, “I have to go here or I have to go there.” I really think the kids need some free time to be kids. I just don’t see that now. So, it’s still the neatest community that I could ever live in. I feel very fortunate that I was raised here and able to pursue my career here relatively successfully, and most important, I raised my kids here. I just wish my kids could live here, which I don’t think they will be able to.

Dale Komai: Peter, thank you so much for your time and insights here in Mill Valley

Peter Brindley: You’re welcome.