

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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Bob Burton

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Stella Perone in 2016**

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In this oral history, longtime Mill Valley resident and former mayor Bob Burton recounts his life and discusses his involvement in the community. Born in 1930 in New York City, Bob was educated at Fieldston and Yale. After college, he worked for the New York Life Insurance Company, which gave him the opportunity early in his career to transfer to San Francisco. In 1966, Bob moved to Mill Valley with his wife, Elza, and their two children, Kenneth and Abigail. He soon got involved in city governance, serving on the planning commission and the city council. Bob discusses his work as a public servant as well as his and Elza's involvement—ongoing at the time this oral history was conducted—in the cultural life of Mill Valley.

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Oral History of Bob Burton
February 5, 2016

Editor's note: Minor corrections and clarifications have been made to the original transcript.

0:00:01 Stella Perone: It's February 5th, and this is Stella Perone at 114 Hazel with Bob Burton and Elza Burton. Good morning.

0:00:11 Bob Burton: Good morning. Welcome.

0:00:13 Stella Perone: Bob, why don't we start with you? Why don't you give us a brief historical sketch about where you were born and how you got to Mill Valley?

0:00:26 Bob Burton: Sure, okay. I was born in New York City — longer ago than I'd like to think about — and I was brought up in Manhattan.

0:00:33 Stella Perone: Can you give me the year?

0:00:35 Bob Burton: Yeah, sure, 1930. Brought up in Manhattan, I went to a private school and a private high school in Riverdale, New York. The school was called Ethical Culture and the high school was called Fieldston, which is part of the Ethical Culture system. Still in existence, it's one of the best and oldest private schools in New York. A lot of famous people have gone there and still go there. When I got out of high school, I went to Yale University — thought I was gonna be an engineer but abandoned that after a year and studied economics. My degree was a BS, and I think that's appropriate for economics — everything I've heard since then. And this was the time of the Korean War. It was 1952, and so I had to make a decision whether I was gonna allow myself to get into the service and be drafted or get an additional deferment. My uncle was a successful lawyer, and there'd always been some thought that maybe I would maybe join his law firm, so I went to law school. I went to Columbia, and after three years, there were still questions of the draft, so I had to make another decision: do I try to get a job and have it interrupted, or do I go down and volunteer for the draft?

0:01:51: And for a minor reason, which is not really necessary to disclose here, when I went down, I was a 4F.¹ So after tearful goodbyes, I went down to volunteer and for a very minor, a temporary ailment, they said, "We don't really need you. You're 4F," so that was it. I did practice law in New York for nine years. I never really liked it. Part of that time was with my uncle's law firm, and I learned that working with a family member isn't always the best way to go and ended up nine years later by being hired by New York Life Insurance Company as an expert in estate planning business, insurance, and all of that. I was in the home office for little over a year when they offered to transfer me to either Chicago or San Francisco to initiate a new program out in the field working directly with the company's offices and the agents. And, needless to say, I chose San

¹ 4F is a classification in the Selective Service that means "not acceptable for service in the Armed Forces."—Editor.

Francisco as the area to come to. We had never lived anywhere but in an apartment in Manhattan — although I think my wife had lived briefly in a suburb. We really were urban people, but we decided to try something different since it was at somebody else's expense. We didn't have enough money to buy a house, but we found a house in Mill Valley that was both for lease and purchase, and we negotiated a lease with an option to purchase.

0:03:23 Stella Perone: What year is this?

0:03:23 Bob Burton: This was 1966, so we have now been here for 50 years. The house was right here, but it was a very small, kind of funky house that had been pieced together over the years with a couple of rooms added just before we bought it, which just made it big enough for us with our two kids to live in. When I started my job, my office was in San Francisco, and I had a fairly nice territory. It was all of Northern California, all the way up to the Oregon border, down to Bakersfield in the center of the state, on down to Monterey and Salinas area, along the coast — and it fortunately included Hawaii. That territory changed over the years, but I continued to work in that capacity for New York Life for 22 years. When we first came out here, it was kind of on the understanding that I would be invited back to the home office after a few years, that this was just kind of one of those assignments out in the field and I'd be invited back. And in fact, four or five years, I'm not sure what it was, after we came out here, I was invited back.

0:04:36: It's obvious from the history that I've already given that I said no, that we wanted to stay here. Along the way, I had decided that if this ever came about, and I said no, I really didn't know what the company's reaction would be. I thought I needed to protect myself, so I became a member of the California Bar, which is too long a story to recite here. It was kind of interesting because I don't really think I passed the exam, but I did get a passing mark. It kept up my record of never having failed an exam in my lifetime, but my own feeling was I didn't pass it. In any event, I didn't need that protection. New York Life didn't do anything about the fact that I didn't come back, except I really restricted my ability to get promoted to anything significant, which I think would have happened if I had gone back, based on the people that followed me and who did get promoted back in the home office. When we moved here in 1966, it was quite a rainy winter, and it was rainy the day we moved in. And our kids, were they both at Old Mill School?

0:05:48 Elza Burton: No, they —

0:05:48 Stella Perone: Their names and the years they were born?

0:05:50 Bob Burton: Our son, Kenneth, was born December 1959, and our daughter, Abigail, was born in June of 1963. So yes, they both went to Old Mill school.

0:06:03 Elza Burton: No.

0:06:04 Bob Burton: No, oh.

0:06:05 Elza Burton: Excuse me. Abby was two when we moved here.

0:06:08 Bob Burton: You're right.

0:06:09 Elza Burton: She did not go to Old Mill School.

0:06:10 Bob Burton: Okay.

0:06:11 Elza Burton: Kenneth went to Old Mill School. He was put into kindergarten.

0:06:15 Bob Burton: In any event, the Dipsea trail, which is right next to our property — the top of the second flight of steps — was nothing but a big mudslide with occasional pieces of wood and rebar holding it up or pipe holding it up. At that time Dean Meyer was running for the city council, and one of his platforms was to rebuild Mill Valley's steps and trails. In those days you had to be here longer than we were here in order to be able to vote. I think the election was in April, and I called Dean and said, "What do I do about this?" And he said, "Well, the best thing is to come down and bug the city council as often as you have to until they rebuild the steps." So that is exactly what I did. And in 1967, around June, the steps were rebuilt, and what we see today is still what was done back in 1967. (Side comment: the Dipsea Foundation feels they're inadequate and are gonna rebuild them this coming summer. A lot of people don't feel that's necessary, but they're going to do it with their money instead of city money. So be it.) But those steps have lasted almost 50 years, which is really quite remarkable. And the races run on it, the Double Dipsea — everything is intact. But roundabout that same time, we had some rather conservative neighbors across the street, and I believe this was also in June 1967 that Elza got a call from the wife of the family across the street.

0:07:58 Stella Perone: Can you say the name?

0:07:58 Bob Burton: No, I'd rather not. And her comment was, "We have to go to tonight's city council meeting because they're about to do an absolutely awful thing to our town and we need to stop it." And Elza said, "What is that?" "Well, they're proposing to rent 12 units around town to poor people, and we just can't take the risk in having those people enter our wonderful community." They were not rich people, so where they got that attitude is quite beyond me. But in any event, Elza said, "Sure, we'll be there." She didn't say what position we would take but just said, "Yes, thank you for letting us know. We'll be there." Well, it was an interesting meeting. (Back comment: Dean Meyer's other slogan when he was running for council was, "Keep Mill Valley green." He really meant green, the way it is — natural.) In any event, the relevance of that for the meeting will come up in a minute.

0:09:00: It was a crowded council chamber. I should comment that one of the current council members, Jim Wickham, his father was then the vice mayor, George Wickham. At that point Al White was the mayor, and people made unbelievable comments that just

made my blood boil, including, “We have to keep Mill Valley green, you know what I mean?” — meaning “let’s not have any colored people in town,” and several white people, they just weren’t willing to say it. It was just really horrendous because one of the reasons we had chosen Mill Valley was because it was supposed to be an open, accepting kind of atmosphere here in town. My wife had done research before I came out for a meeting in November before we moved. And when I came out — she never told me what she had found — I made the same decision that if we could possibly afford it, we would live in Southern Marin. We actually exercised the option to purchase six months after we moved in with the help of some money from her father, and we’ve been here ever since. The house is not the same as it was then: it was a very funky little house and it’s a rather nice large house right now.

0:10:16: In any event, I just was listening to all of this, and along the way George Wickham, the vice mayor, made a comment which stuck in my brain — and Jim really won’t mind this ’cause I’ve told him — the comment was: “Well, I don’t think this is a good idea because these people will have incomes below the average in the community, and they’ll probably feel uncomfortable here.” That was his comment. So, after all of this, I finally got up to the microphone — and part of my job with New York Life was to give speeches, so I wasn’t bashful about anything, and I’m pretty quick on my feet, still am — and I opened my comments with, “I would like to remind the vice mayor that if he’s correct that people with incomes below average are uncomfortable in the community they live in, then I guess half the people in Mill Valley are uncomfortable.” And the place broke up.

0:11:12: And then I went on to be very, very blunt and say, “Look, when you say ‘Let’s keep Mill Valley green,’ why don’t you be honest? You mean white. You mean you don’t want any blacks in the community.” And then I went on to talk about why we moved here, that we liked the diversity, it was important for our kids to be exposed to it, etcetera, etcetera. Nobody spoke after me. The council voted and, including the vice mayor, they approved it unanimously, five-nothing. A week later, I got a phone call from Al White, the mayor, and he said, “I liked what you had to say at that meeting. How would you like to be on the planning commission?” And I said, “Well, what do they do?” And he explained it, and I said sure. So, I got appointed to the planning commission. Al White was quite a liberal guy, as I am, and he was not very happy with some of the candidates who were running for council in the following election, and so there were actually two of us, a guy named Ed Ferrell and I, who he called upon to run for the council.

0:12:20 Stella Perone: Can you say who the other candidates were?

0:12:22 Bob Burton: One of them, I think, was Bob Andresen, who did get elected. No, I don’t remember who the others were; maybe Jerry Hockey was one of them, I’m not sure. But he didn’t feel that they were in his real, very liberal tradition. In any event, he convinced the two of us, in his beautiful house down on Throckmorton, to run for council. It was really too soon. I hadn’t even been here for a full two years yet. I had just gotten out of the planning commission. But we nevertheless decided to run. I only lost by

100 votes. Ed lost by a little bit more, but I did lose, so I stayed on the planning commission and in 1970 became its chairman. It's okay to say chairman 'cause that's what I was then. And then in 1972, I ran for election again. And this time, I was comfortably elected. It was interesting, because a lot of my job required me to travel around the state, as I described before, based on my territory. And yet, that was also when we were doing a huge remodel to this house.

0:13:31: I'd done a lot of the basic design, but we did hire an architect to do all the detailed drawings. He was also on the council with me. His name is Ivan Poutiatine. And that was going on at the same time that I was running for council, chairman of the planning commission, traveling around the state. And to this day, I don't understand where I got the time or the energy, but I did a lot of the work around the house. I did all of the electrical wiring; I did all of the TV cabling, with cable that the cable company gave me; I did telephone wiring; I did some of the physical labor — not a lot, but some, especially some of the detailed work. And yet, I made it. I didn't lose my job, and I did get elected to the council. There are some things I remember and some things I don't remember about what was going on. I would guess that three major projects were considered strongly during the time that I was on the council. One was downtown, and what to do with the Depot Plaza. It was actually not finalized until after I was on the council. The other was Miller Avenue, which was a mess. And of course, they're now gonna spend \$14 million to do something, which I don't think is very good.

0:15:00: I think it's largely a waste of money, but I don't know how to express that opinion publicly, so I don't mind expressing it here. The other was we needed a public safety building, and that whole issue has a long history as well. Where the middle school is currently located used to be city property, and where the Public Safety building is out on the other side of the water was school district property, and they had decided — I'm not sure whether this was when I was on the council or just before it — to swap those properties, so that the middle school is where it is now — now it's school district property — and the property on the other side of the water belonged to the city. And the big decision was, where do we put this public safety building? The facilities at city hall downtown, where there are still fire engines and the police were there as well, just had become inadequate, especially with a lot of the development in east Mill Valley, nobody could get there in time.

0:15:53: So, we looked at a few sites. We looked where the old community center was, which was a funky old building where the current one is, and we also looked at where the current public safety building is. At that time, there had been a proposal — more than proposal, it was part of the city's plans — that Sycamore Avenue was to be extended past the middle school, across the water to the public safety building. And the fact that that street was scheduled to go in was the only reason we approved the building on the other side of the water. I mean, we had federal money to build the bridge. This was when I was mayor, actually, when the public safety building itself was completed.

0:16:46: I'd like to tell one little side story, which if they wanna edit it out after I'm through, that's fine. But I worked very closely with Bill Walsh and the architects on the

design of the public safety building, and one of the conversations was regarding the men's rooms. Anybody who's ever seen a men's room knows that there are often separating panels between the urinals, and the big question was, "What materials do we use to build these panels?" Because painted metal doesn't work out very well in the long run. Either stainless steel or plastic laminate, like Formica, works the best. We're in the middle of the conversation and Bill said, "We don't need any panels. Our men have nothing to be ashamed of." Just thought that would be an interesting, little side comment. So there are no panels there, which is fine. My name is on the plaque out in front of the public safety building, as the mayor of the time. And towards the end of my second year as mayor, when I seemed to be well-supported by everybody in town, it was time for the council to take its final vote on building the bridge over the water for access, and it was not to be limited to public safety vehicles but for anybody.

0:18:00: Well, the people in the Sycamore neighborhood were just up in arms about this. I know that they had been opposed to it, but little did I know how organized they became and how they put pressure apparently on some people. The end vote was three to two against it, and I will be very happy to say who voted for it and who voted against it. Ivan Poutiatine and I voted for it; Jean Barnard voted against it, Bob Capron voted against it, and Gerry Hood voted against it. I will come back to say something about Jean Barnard in a moment. But both Bob Capron and Gerry Hood said to me, many years after, that it was the stupidest vote they had ever made. Bob Capron didn't even know where the road was gonna go out near the freeway. He thought it was gonna go right through a project — what is that project called that's out over the water? I don't know.

0:18:56 Stella Perone: Eucalyptus Knoll?

0:18:57 Bob Burton: No, south of —

0:18:58 Stella Perone: Shelter Bay?

0:19:00 Bob Burton: Shelter Bay, yes. He thought it was gonna go right down the middle of that when in fact it —

0:19:04 Stella Perone: Can you just real briefly say the pros and cons of the Sycamore extension?

0:19:10 Bob Burton: Well, the pros are that it would serve the middle school, which is one reason that there's such a nice road in front of the middle school. The pros are that it would give direct access to eastern Mill Valley, another exit route from Mill Valley. We have very few exit routes. We have two one-lane roads, one south and one north. And it would give immediate access for the public safety vehicles. Nearby, we have Tam High, we have the Redwoods, we have the middle school, we have the Methodist Church, we have the community center. And some day, somebody in the Redwoods is gonna need service, and they're gonna get there five minutes too late, and it's because there's no direct access. I know the police and fire would love to have direct access. I can't put myself in the minds of anybody else. Jean Barnard often seemed to vote based on what

the last few people he talked to had said. I never really found out why Bob Capron and Jerry, who had voted against it — they never really said why. They just said it was the stupidest vote they had ever made.

0:20:15: In any event, just to finish this story before I go back to Jean Barnard, based on my strong support of this road — and everybody in town knew about it — apparently the Sycamore Avenue group got together — some of them I still know, and one of them, at least, has become quite friendly with me, but I will not mention his name because I don't think that's appropriate. But the week before the election, everybody assumed I was a shoo-in; I was running for reelection in 1976. A nicely printed piece got put into the *Mill Valley Record*, which was called, "Citizens for Open and Responsible City Government," and it was full of half-truths. Its whole purpose was, "I don't care who you vote for, just don't vote for Bob Burton, and these are all the awful things he's done all by himself to our town" — even though as mayor you only had one vote, etcetera, etcetera.

0:21:14: It was beautifully printed, which it wouldn't have been if it had just been a little ad that was very small in the *Mill Valley Record*. That weekend that piece arrived in everybody's mailbox. And up to that point, it was assumed that I would be reelected. Even Dick Jessup's told me, because he was running at the time, he said, "Every place I go to they say they're there supporting you, how can anybody do anything?" Well, I ended up losing, and rather heavily, because of that, and if you can find some old issues in the *Mill Valley Record* that talk about this, they said it was the dirtiest election in Mill Valley's history. And, of course, the way elections have gone since then, they're all pretty dirty now — maybe not local ones.

0:21:57 Elza Burton: Excuse me, can I say something?

0:21:58 Bob Burton: Sure.

0:22:02 Elza Burton: The flyer that was distributed by hand in front of the Mill Valley Market and Safeway, probably, and other central places in Mill Valley, had a cartoon showing this —

0:22:14 Bob Burton: No, no, no, no. This was a year later, sorry. Your timing is wrong. This was not in front of the —

0:22:20 Stella Perone: Do you have a copy of it? I would love to attach it —

0:22:23 Bob Burton: I don't know.

0:22:24 Stella Perone: We could attach it to that to the —

0:22:27 Bob Burton: I'm not sure I could find it.

0:22:27 Stella Perone: And you don't know who did it?

0:22:29 Bob Burton: I do know.

0:22:29 Elza Burton: Oh yes.

0:22:30 Bob Burton: I do know some of the people, and I would privately give you the name of one of them afterwards. But no, I hate to correct my wife, but this flyer didn't have any cartoons or anything else. It was very formal and it only got distributed by that ad in the *Mill Valley Record* and in everybody's mailbox the weekend before the election, so there was absolutely no chance to respond, to correct the misinformation or do anything. A year later —

0:22:57 Stella Perone: Wait, who beat you in the election? Who won that?

0:23:01 Bob Burton: Well, Flora Praszker, Dick Jessup, Gerry Hood got reelected. I'm guessing those are the only three seats that were up because you can never have more than three at a time, so those were the three people who won.

0:23:19 Elza Burton: And then — can I say something?

0:23:20 Stella Perone: Then you were seen a year later?

0:23:21 Bob Burton: Yeah. I showed you up with something, and Flora Praszker was there. She's been friendly to me since. But her comment to me was, "What are you doing here? You were phased out." Lovely, no? In any event, a year later — and I rarely uninvolved myself in Mill Valley affairs ever since because I had a pretty sour taste in my mouth — there was a citywide election: do we put in this road or do we not put in this road? And that's when the flyer that Elza was talking about surfaced and it really talked about Ivan Poutiatine and me. We were gonna profit financially because we have both been asked to join a local savings and loan that was being formed, so we had an interest in an investment banker that was interested in the property and the property values, none of which was any true. The bank eventually went under and we had practically nothing in it. I'm still forgetting, though, I'm a lawyer, which is libel and which is slander, but I considered it one of those. I even decided to let it go, but I didn't. By the way, the vote of the community was 51% against and 49% for, so it was almost like Hilary and Bernie in Iowa. In any event, it's still not built. Elza wants to interrupt, yes.

0:24:54 Elza Burton: Yes. I wanted to tell you about this flyer that was handed out. It was really an ugly cartoon, showed him as a horribly, ugly person, and the road going across the bay, the water, was entitled Burton Boulevard.

0:25:13 Bob Burton: Which I would have been delighted to have it called [laughs]. It wouldn't have bothered me at all.

0:25:17 Elza Burton: No, but it was disgusting.

0:25:20 Bob Burton: Yeah, but it still only went down 51-49. Bottom line is there's still no bridge there.

0:25:24 Stella Perone: Do you think that was the same group of people that did the flyer when you were running for reelection?

0:25:28 Bob Burton: No, but I know who it was.

0:25:30 Elza Burton: Absolutely.

0:25:30 Bob Burton: I will mention one of the people who was involved in both of these. His name was Bill Devlin. This election was halfway between city council elections. People wanted to express their disagreement — that's fine, but I really did consider it libelous. And so, just before the next city council election, which was a year later, when Bill Devlin was running — and he had been on the planning commission, I think — I was never much of a fan of his. I sued the whole group that had floated this flyer. And because of that, he lost the election, and I have never seen him involved in anything in Mill Valley again since then.

0:26:18: So, this is interesting. I'll just give a little sideline here. I was appointed to the advisory board of the County Flood Control Zone 3, which covers the Mill Valley area incorporated and unincorporated, Homestead Valley, Tam Valley, and even some of Marin City, I'm quite sure. I'm still on that 40 years later, and I've been a chairperson for I don't know how many years. So that's something that hung over consistently from the time that I was on the council. Going back to Jean Barnard, when she became mayor — every mayor was a two-year mayor, up to that point in time, that was the term of the mayor. And I believe that's the right thing to do, because even though the mayor has no real power, they can exert an influence on the town or the city, on how things go, and I don't think that one year is sufficient to do that.

0:27:23 Elza Burton: At that time, as when Bob got appointed to the planning commission, the mayor nominated individuals for the different boards and committees. Unlike now, where it's an open — what's the word?

0:27:39 Bob Burton: Everybody can apply.

0:27:40 Elza Burton: Anyone can apply. They get interviewed by the whole council and it's much more of what one might think is democratic. [chuckles] But at that time, the mayor did have some power in recommending certain people, which the council had to approve. Really, quite different from the way it is now.

0:27:58 Bob Burton: Exactly. That changed somewhere along the line where it just became like an appointment by a committee more than anything else. But that's how I got on the planning commission, because Al White recommended me and the council approved me, and I did get approved for a second term. Back to the story about Jean Barnard. She was the mayor starting in 1972 and she's very well known around the

community and very popular. I think she had been on the water board and a couple of other things, I'm not sure exactly what. In any event, as her first year progressed, the other three men on the city council — and I will be happy to name them: Bob Capron, Gerry Hood, and at that time Ed Boessenecker, husband of Joan Boessenecker, who was a mayor later on — were very unhappy with her as mayor.

0:28:57 Stella Perone: Jean?

0:28:58 Bob Burton: Yeah, they just didn't like the way she was conducting city affairs. So somewhere, in the course of her first year, they brought forth a motion at the city council to change the term of mayor from two years to one year. And it passed on a three to two vote, obviously voted for which way. They immediately followed it with a second motion, which was to make it applicable to the incumbent, which, no matter what you think, to me is nothing short of outrageous. But it, too, passed on a three to two vote. So now we get towards the end of her first year and maybe three weeks ahead of time or four weeks before it comes time to elect the new mayor, these three men come to me and say, "We have gotten such holy hell from all the women in town for what we did. Have you got any suggestions as how we can dig ourselves out of that hole?"

0:30:01: Well, I should have said, "You should stew in your own juice. You brought it up. It was a terrible thing to do. You dig yourselves out." But I'm a nice guy and I said, "Well, if I were in your shoes, I would reelect her for a second year one meeting before you have to," so there's no crowd there that makes it look like you were reacting to what the crowd says. And that's what they did. So, she served a second term.

0:30:25: When I became mayor, I was very calmly and nicely and voluntarily elected to a second consecutive year. If you look at the records up in city hall, I'm the last person that had two consecutive years as mayor in Mill Valley. They're all one year now. Some of them have repeated a year because they're on the council for a certain period of time, but they're not consecutive. It's just automatically rotated around. To this day, I know the police and fire would like to have something other than a pedestrian bridge go across the water. Even if it's limited to public safety buildings or egress in the event of an emergency, that's fine with me. I don't care about anything else, except the traffic has become so horrendous that it sure would be nice to have another way out of town.

0:31:17: I don't know what else specifically to say, but I stayed out of things for quite a while. One of the things that we had done was the Miller Avenue project, which was only the two blocks between Locust and Evergreen. It had some good things about it, but it had one very bad thing about it, it was the way that elevated section which separates what some people call a parking bay, on the right as you head out of town, or what they like to call now a frontage road, which it never was intended to be. But there's an elevated section with two elevated platforms on each side of it. There are trees and lights down the middle. One was supposed to be a bike path and the other like a second sidewalk.

0:31:58: Well, that tells you that there was enough room that you could have had two bike lanes and the whole thing should've been moved closer to the outbound side. So,

there was a bike lane on the inbound side and a bike lane on the outbound side. Had that one change been made in the program, there never would have been any disagreement that it was the best way to go. This is not the place for me to say why the frontage road or parking bay solution was done. But there's one good reason, it's simple. If you look at the next block, starting about halfway towards Reed Street, kinda where Jack in the Box used to be and the Super Duper Burger now is, there's practically no curb. The whole thing is essentially a curb cut that can get into the businesses. And the idea of the parking bay was that there would be public parking on the street side along with private parking and it would be like a parking lot. I believe maybe that was one reason that they had the second sidewalk because there'd be no sidewalk there. But that was the idea behind it. Now, that's still in the area which can't have any landscaping because there's no place to do anything or any curb, and it's still kind of weird, but that was the thinking behind it.

0:33:15: Along the way — sorry, backtrack. While I was on the council — and I was with the Marin County Council of Mayors and council members, of course — they appointed two people to the Marin County Transit District, and I was one of those two people for the last two years in office. There are still two representatives appointed by the cities, but I think it's now to TAM, Transportation Authority in Marin. In any event, once I got off the council, they also immediately created a Marin County Transit Commission, which was like advisory to the transit district, and I was appointed to that and stayed on it until it disbanded in the late '80s. I was the chairman for the last couple of years.

0:34:09: Just an update, 'cause I did start to get reinvolved and did start to go back to meetings. I made my voice heard when I thought things were good, and my voice heard when I didn't think they were so good. I did get appointed to the transportation committee back around 2000, I think, around 1999 or 2000. Of course, we made a lot of suggestions about improving traffic. When David Parisi was on that same committee with me — and he's now the consultant for the traffic's task force that recently concluded its work — he kept referring back to the work of that transportation committee and the things that were done. So that's another matter of public record.

0:35:00: Charles McGlashan was a very good friend of mine. When the sales tax measure was approved that created the transportation authority in Marin and the money for like 20-some odd million dollars a year of sales tax revenue, half of which goes to the Marin Transit District and the other is divided among safe routes to schools, local roads and streets, and all of that. It's all for transit and transportation issues in the county of Marin. Different from the smart tax, this was entirely independent of that. And Charles got me appointed to the citizens oversight committee of that board, and I'm still on it. I was one of the original members and I'm still on it today. Three years ago, I believe, it was my family that instituted this, they went to the city council and said, "My husband has been on some public body serving Mill Valley for 45 consecutive years and I think he deserves to be recognized for this." And indeed, they did, through this sort of a meeting, I have the framing of the element. I could show them to you. Both the county, Kate Sears, who I'd also become friendly with, and the city council for getting me the accommodation for that. Well, I'm still on two boards, the same two. I'm still on the citizens oversight committee and the flood control zone, and it's now 48 years. Who

knows what the future holds in store.

0:36:34: My wife and I have always been very interested and active in the arts, and, right from the start, we went to Marin Symphony concerts regularly. We have sung with choruses both at the College of Marin with Winifred Baker — with whom we toured Scotland. I was the baritone soloist on that tour. We sung with the Marin Symphony — Elza no longer sings with the symphony, except that she did at the Holiday Pops Concert this past fall. But I still sing with the Marin Symphony, and I've become quite friendly with the conductor, Alasdair Neale, who I think is spectacular. I just wish that the county would do a better job of supporting that wonderful, wonderful orchestra that we've got.

0:37:19: They don't seem to be able to get the word out, but maybe this will help; I don't know. We've done a lot of other things. I was asked to be on the founding board of the New Century Chamber Orchestra, which I did for a while. We still go to their open rehearsals in the city periodically on Wednesdays. We go to Marin Theatre Company, and I'm going to let Elza talk about that in a minute. We've went to the Saturday Night Movies at the Throckmorton when they first started, so we've been involved. We're not active, but we're members of the California Film Institute, which puts on the Mill Valley Film Festival. I'm trying to get the name of this gig, the film festival. So really, anytime anything has come up before the city having to do with the arts or that, including the Sweetwater. When the Sweetwater first came up and was proposed, a lot of people were concerned. But I was one of those that strongly supported it and, of course, it became an institution in our town, and in its reincarnation over across from city hall is now a much broader kind of a venue for everybody with very good food in there in their cafe. But, again, this was one of the things that I supported.

0:38:46: I'd like to comment on another thing that came up while I was on the council, which was important: the Community Church proposed the Redwoods. A lot of people felt it was very bad to have seniors living that close to the hubbub of a high school, and the hubbub of a middle school, which was planned in that day but not yet built.

0:39:08 Stella Perone: And the market.

0:39:09 Bob Burton: And the market and all that. Well, the market wasn't there for their comment, but it was the hubbub. They should be off where they can have their nice, quiet retirement and taken care of. There were enough of us around that said, "That's ridiculous. Let's make them part of the community," and so the Redwoods did get built where it is right now. And coincidentally, Elza's mother was one of the first occupants and went from sort of independent, because she had Parkinson's Disease, but as it progressed, she went further and further along, and that's where she died. But I feel good about that because it's been such a wonderful institution. I wasn't responsible for it but I did have something to do with the fact that it ended up where it is. So, having to do with the Marin Theatre Company, which of course started out as something called the Mill Valley Center for the Performing Arts, I'm going to turn this over to Elza for the moment.

0:40:02 Elza Burton: Thank you. I'm not quite sure how I got involved, except that

Mayor White's wife was involved. The Marin Theatre Company, which was originally the Mill Valley Center for Performing Arts, was the brainchild of Sali Lieberman, who had come here from Europe because of Hitler some years earlier, and was very involved with politically liberal activities, and that's how he and the mayor Al White got kind of friendly and close. Al's wife, Maxine, and Sali, and a small group of other people — whose names I really can't tell you, 'cause I don't remember — decided to form this Mill Valley Center for Performing Arts. We met frequently in our old living room before we remodeled the house, and actually Sali once fell in our driveway after the meeting and broke his arm which was awful.

0:41:32: We needed a place to have a theater, and so we put on productions for quite a long time at the Mill Valley Golf Club House, which was a lovely setting. In fact, I recall one year we did "The Lion in Winter," and instead of doing it on the stage, we staged it in front of the big stone fireplace and made it part of the set. It was wonderful. I didn't remain very active, but I did do the costumes for the very first production, which was called "The Physicist." The costumes were pretty simple because everybody was a doctor, and all I had to do was borrow or rent doctor shirts, jackets — whatever they call them. I did not stay very involved after that. I was busy being a volunteer in the schools and other things. So, it later became Marin Theatre Company, and at the time that it did Bob was on the board, and that's about all I have to say about that.

0:42:52 Bob Burton: I don't remember whether the name change occurred after we built the new theater or before. I'm not sure which it was, but it was around about the same time, in the mid to late '80s, I think, when this all happened. We hired a new artistic director; and, of course, the theater that we built, which is in the building down on Miller, is still there, and I think it's functioning beautifully. Marin Theatre Company has become one of the most respected regional theater companies around. We go to other theater; we go to the San Francisco Playhouse; and we've been to other kinds of strange little productions in the city. Almost always, some of the people in them had been professional actors and actresses at the Marin Theatre Company, so that's really good.

0:43:45: But because of all of this, I was also on the board — well, let me go back. I was with New York Life. The office was in San Francisco. We lived here. And even though I did a lot of traveling — actually my territory changed over the years — I lost Hawaii — but that's okay, I've been there often enough — I picked up Alaska and Washington, and Oregon, which was nice, and even Idaho. So, I really had a wonderful time going to these different territories and learning a lot about them and the people there and the different cultures.

0:44:17: But around 1984, the company decided to move the regional office, which is where I was housed, from San Francisco to Walnut Creek. Well, in those days there wasn't even the 580 freeway through the Richmond area. It was one hell of a drive; that's all I can tell you. I had, strangely enough, bought a DeLorean at the end of the 1981 model year. I just got turned on to it. They weren't selling very well, so I got a pretty good deal. So, at least I had a decent car to use when I went back and forth to Walnut Creek. And it was kind of exciting because almost everywhere I went in the territory —

when I was still with New York Life — I would take the car and everybody would go “ooh” and “ahh,” and all of this.

0:45:07: I will tell you a little sidelight story about it. Our son Kenneth, who has very wry sense of humor sometimes and comes up to things that nobody would dream of, he was away when I bought that car, and I had never owned anything but very simple, ordinary cars: a VW bug, then a Renault 16 before the DeLorean. I wasn't a car buff, but just the stainless steel, the whole thing just turned me on. And, of course, in front there were three initials, which were DMC, which stood for DeLorean Motorcar Company. Kenneth was away — I don't remember, it was one of his trips; he was always away somewhere — and when he came home, I had to go to the airport to pick him up — not in the DeLorean because it was a two-seater. There were three of us with him, so we came back, but the car was parked in the middle of our driveway. We came down and he saw this thing and didn't say a word, but his eyes looked kind of strange and he walked around the car a couple of times, and then he stood in front of it, looked at it, and said “Hmm, DMC, Dad's Midlife Crisis.” [chuckles] I used to tell that story when I was out on the road and always got a big laugh when I was putting on these meetings.

0:46:27 Stella Perone: He's very witty.

0:46:28 Bob Burton: I thought that was great. I had that car for 16 years, and it ended up being totaled — well, only damaged on one little corner of it, but it was totaled because it would cost more to repair it than to get rid of it. So, I had 16 years of fun, which is pretty good. It was a stupid car to have up in the hills of Mill Valley, 'cause it was wider than most cars and of course, our streets don't allow that. It had the worst turning radius of any car in the world. Right now, if I go up to the street to turn around above our house with this scenario, in any car, we can do it one turn. It took three turns in the DeLorean — back, forth, back, forth, 'cause it had no turning radius. But it was fun and I enjoyed having it.

0:47:12: As I said, we moved to Walnut Creek and I hated it. First of all, it was a reverse commute, so it wasn't the traffic, except that the Caldecott Tunnel was always a problem because there were then, I think, only two bores. I'm not even sure the third would have been open up, but if it was it was for commute traffic and I was going in the opposite direction, so it was always a horrible jam up there. I was also driving into the sun, both in the morning and the afternoon, and it was really uncomfortable. And around about that time, New York Life was trying to thin the ranks — not to get rid of specific people but just reduce the workforce somewhat — so they were periodically having some golden handshake offers across the board if you had a certain number of years of service, which you could accept or not. One came along in 1986, and I decided to accept it.

0:48:11: I'd only been with the company for 22 years, so my retirement benefit was not great, but it's now gone on much longer than I think they thought it would go on, which is like 30 years. One of the great inducements was they were gonna pay me for two years more of work which I didn't do, and that my pension would be based on that salary, and that my wife Elza and I would get medical and dental insurance at no cost to us for the

rest of our lives. Boy, has that been a benefit to us! Unbelievable benefit. I've had some problems. I had a vascular surgery on my legs back in 2003. It didn't cost us a nickel between Medicare and our insurance. Elza had her lung cancer. I've had AFib [atrial fibrillation]. And we don't pay any premiums. Between the two, we might have some small deductible at the beginning of the year, but we've had rather large expenses and they've all been covered, which was fabulous.

0:49:17: I had a little bit of a change of career and there were two possibilities that were opened up to me with people that I knew from New York Life, but I ultimately decided to go with one in San Francisco. The company was called Management Compensation Group, and they specialized in benefits for the executives of major corporations. Some of our clients were Safeway, McKesson, the United States Leasing. We picked up Gallo, we picked up Shaklee — those kind of companies. I was there for four years and then the head of the company, who had always been interested in not political affairs but is interested in industry organization, was just about to become the executive director of what was then the National Association of Life Underwriters. (It's now, the National Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors or NAIFA.) He went to Washington, and I was very concerned about the future of the firm, so I had make some decisions. And I actually decided to go back to work for New York Life as an agent in 1990, and just because of the people — the manager, and a couple of other people — I joined the Oakland office, and Oakland wasn't such a bad drive then. I didn't mind that.

0:50:41: I was 60 years old. I had never been in sales, and to be honest I wasn't very good at it. My hope — and this is what the manager of the office had said — was that there be a lot of joint work with other agents because of my expertise. And there was some, but agents are very funny. There was one case with somebody I knew very well, and he was a pretty decently smart guy, but he couldn't get this case going. And so the manager put us together on a basis that we'd share 50/50. I spent about two hours on the case and it closed, and he was infuriated that I was getting 50% of the commission because I only spent two hours on it. Well, the only reason I spent only two hours on it is because I have spent the last 30 years or 25 years doing that sort of stuff and that's what I was supposed to do. But I've learned since then that agents are very reluctant to share commissions. They don't understand that 50% of something is better than a 100% of nothing. I stayed with that for a while.

0:51:47: But in 1995, the other possibility — which had been offered to me back in 1986 or '87 — was to join a father and son who were with New York Life — Allen Silver and Lloyd Silver — because they had some big cases and they wanted my expertise. And, in fact, I did that, and I did rather well over the years. It was called the Silver Group, and that was also unopened. It moved to Alameda, which was just as good because it was right through the tube and at the foot of Webster Street, and we were there until 2006. Along the way, his son, who was not really an insurance guy but more of an investment guy and a computer type guy, left the firm and, for reasons which are beyond the scope of anything now, formed a company in San Francisco through which people who did brokerage in our industry rather than dealing with their own company. But independent agents who did brokerage would do their business through them, so they

would not have to establish individual relationships with a bunch of different insurance companies. They were all over the place, and they, almost all independent agents, worked through them. And we worked through them, too. In fact, a woman that we had known worked for them as the underwriting expert in processing all business. And the rainmaker of the Silver Group was not Bob Burton, it was Alan Silver. He was the nephew of a very well known New York Life agent named Ben Silver, so he inherited a lot of clients and he was very successful.

0:53:38: But at some point in life, I guess, people get tired of being rainmakers and doing that kind of stuff. And so, in 2006 he and I moved into San Francisco and joined this firm that worked with agents. I don't wanna go into the long history of that firm. It did not succeed. It eventually went under. People took it over, and moved it out to Walnut Creek again — *déjà vu*, all over again. So, I was going back to Walnut Creek every day and eventually the whole orientation of the firm became different, and I was back into the business of being an agent. Alan Silver and I did share quite a bit of business together and still do. We're working on some cases now, but that's my professional career. I'm still very active as a life insurance agent. The last two years were very good to me. I've made a lot of money. I'm very smart at it. I have recently created a website and there are six testimonials on there, a couple from lawyers who I've worked with in the estate planning field, and the other from clients and another one from a financial advisor. To be very honest, I have never seen testimonials like that. I think Elza will confirm that they're quite spectacular.

0:54:54 Elza Burton: Absolutely.

0:54:55 Stella Perone: What's the name of your website?

0:54:57 Bob Burton: Burton Insurance Services — burtoninsuranceservices.com, or burtonlifeinsurance.com. Either one will get you there. It was just recently created, and so far it hasn't really developed into much. But I'm doing okay. And as a matter of fact, one of the reasons I can't go on very long today is I have an appointment up in Santa Rosa on a new case. Because we had so much involvement in so many different aspects of the arts, whether it was theater, music, the Film Institute, the Throckmorton, singing with choruses, our whole history in Mill Valley, my being on two boards of two different organizations, the Oakland East Bay Symphony and the New Century Chamber Orchestra — Elza's putting up her hand. Okay, I will recognize you Elza. What do you wanna say?

0:56:00 Elza Burton: Thank you. What I wanna say is that Bob never mentioned that he's been a musician all his life. He's a wonderful pianist. Started at age five because his sister was taking lessons and he started playing her stuff. That's been a very big part of his life — and mine — and we go to a lot of concerts.

0:56:22 Bob Burton: As long as you brought that up, Elza and I went to high school together. We were not classmates. She was a year ahead of me. She's three months older than I am. She was the youngest in her class; I was among the oldest in my class. We knew each other, but we were not friends. She actually cast me in a play that she put on,

which was *Our Town*, because she wanted to play Emily. And I was —

0:56:49 Elza Burton: Simon Stimson.

0:56:50 Bob Burton: Simon Stimson, who was the organist at the church and who was drunk all the time. It was because I was able to play the piano that she cast me as that. That's kind of a little sidelight. We met when I was in law school because I had a friend, my roommate from college, and she and a friend of hers from high school, and we went to see *A Star is Born* on a Sunday morning.

0:57:14 Elza Burton: The Judy Garland version.

0:57:15 Bob Burton: The Judy Garland full-length version of *A Star is Born*. And I don't know, her friend said, "Well, there's that Bob Burton. Let's not bother with him." We ended up sitting next to each other. I knew how to get in touch with her, but I didn't know how to get in touch with Elza. So, I got Elza's phone number through that, and the rest is kind of history. But the first date — I mean, I had no money in those days. I was in law school. I was living at home. I had a scholarship to Columbia Law [School]. My parents were not rich. So whenever I went on a date, I didn't have any money to spend. Occasionally, we'd go for a drink somewhere and have a dance. So, I invited her to my parents' house. My parents were also superb pianists. They could do something which I can't do, which is to sight-read, and I envy them that. In any event, the first date was playing the piano for Elza at our house, and I gather that captured her heart. Here we are. This year, we will have been married for 60 years. So as long as you brought up piano playing, I thought that was an interesting little insert.

0:58:22: In any event, two years ago, our daughter — it's almost three now — nominated us for a Milley Award. One other thing I should have mentioned, because it's really important in this connection, is that Elza about two years ago, a year or two ago, retired after 25 years on the board of the Mill Valley Chamber Music Society, and for many of those years was handling subscriptions and tickets and all of that. So that was another major piece of the history.

0:58:57: I've gone to all their concerts, but I was not otherwise active in that organization. We had the support from people all over the place who had already won Milleys in the past. I can name a lot of them: Rita Abrams, Phil Phath, Lucy Mercer, Theresa Rea. Rea was a chairman of the Art Commission. Bill Horne was president of the Chamber Music Society. David Martin was acting and performing at the Sweetwater, way back when. So, we had all of these people who had already won Milley Awards, who strongly, strongly supported us. And the first year we came back, we were told we missed by a hair to another couple — by the way, our category was not as a painter or as a musician; it was kind of a miscellaneous category of general contribution to the arts — who did this for a living, put together things. But we were told they just squeaked by. Well, you stay in the pool for two or three years — and the second year, we lost to — I keep forgetting her name.

1:00:21 Elza Burton: Joanne Hively.

1:00:22 Bob Burton: Joanne Hively, who I'm really sad to say is in terrible health right now. We've seen her, and it's just sad what's happened to her health. But we'll be up next year and maybe we'll win and maybe we won't. But based on our history, if I were judging people, I would award it to us because we've done so many different things in so many aspects of the arts, and we've been so supportive of it over the years. That includes, by the way, what was called MV 2040, which was the new general plan for Mill Valley, and I guess that it was about two years ago that this was done. There was a major committee — called the General Plan Committee — and then there was a series of subcommittees. One of them was called the Community Vitality Committee, and I got appointed to that. A lot of people were talking about how we needed to do more for the arts and so a special arts subcommittee of that committee was formed, and I was appointed to that.

1:01:26: One of the other people, by the way, who supported our nomination was Jasson Minadakis, the artistic director of the Marin Theatre Company. He was on that committee with me and Teresa Rea. So that was another major activity of mine, because there was much more material in the general plan now regarding support of the arts than there ever had been in the city of Mill Valley. I don't take responsibility for it. It wasn't my idea to create this committee, but I was honored to serve on it and support what it attempted to do. So, that's pretty much my history. I'm still around. I still work. I'm still on two public bodies. We still go to lots of performances. I'm still active in the city. I'm still often a thorn in their side.

1:02:16: I've written a couple of *Marin Voice* articles recently. One was strongly in opposition to the parking solution for the Main Street section of the Miller Avenue Plan, which is to park in the middle of the street, median parking, which means everybody has to jaywalk in order to get anywhere. I just think it's totally outrageous. I still do not understand why the city council did it. I did attend most of the meetings of the Streetscape Task Force — which is always a difficult thing to say — for two years, and there were three different solutions proposed. One was median parking, one was the kind of frontage road, with some modifications for bike paths and stuff like that, and the other was basically parking on each side of the street. The final recommendation of the council didn't even include median parking. And the only people who were really in support of median parking at that point were some of the business people on this task force. The material we had been given by the consultants said that it would have the least loss of parking of any of the three solutions, and so that was one of the reasons it was adopted: to support business along Miller Avenue. As the final plans were developed, it has the greatest loss of parking. There are going to be about a loss of 50 spaces along the plan. I don't know how happy anybody is about that, but that's a fact of life.

1:03:48: My *Marin Voice* article was hoping still to stop it by saying, "Get to the city council if you agree with me because this is terrible." I gave a lot of the history. But so be it. That's done. On that same subject, I have since written about a three-page letter to the council saying, "Look, as you know, I was opposed to median parking, but here it is and

here are all my thoughts on how to make this thing work as well as it can.” There were little details here and there about lighting, about materials, about traffic things, about bus stops — it wasn’t about the overall part of the plan. And one of the council members Skyped me. I met just this week with the city engineer, and he had read my letter several times and had a million things marked, and we discussed all of them and he was very appreciative. He’s not the decision maker. But I think if he says, “This is something we ought to do or look at,” I think it might happen. So, I continue my involvement.

1:04:48: The other that that everybody is unbelievably frustrated with is the afternoon traffic, trying to get to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. It locks up 101 north in the right hand lane well before the exit to Lucky Drive, and again, up in San Rafael at Bella Boulevard. Caltrans is just so intransigent about so many things, and there have been lots of articles in the paper about, “Why can’t you just do it? We’re just putting a third lane on.” And they said, “Well it’s more complicated. We’ve gotta have all of this and all of that.” The final plan has been approved, and I gather the funding has been approved, but the biggest piece of that plan is on the Richmond side. After you get off the bridge, there’s a huge retaining wall on the right. And that retaining wall, if you want three lanes there and still have a shoulder for bikes and stuff, has to be moved back. So, that’s the biggest and most expensive part of the project.

1:05:58: My suggestion was a simple one: Do what you have to do with the Marin side under the bridge. Open the third lane. But before you get to Richmond, merge two lanes into one — meaning that two lanes merge into one all over the place, and when traffic is moving, it works. If anybody’s been on the new Presidio Parkway, as soon as you come down Richardson Street at an angle and you get on the elevated portion of the roadway, the right two lanes merge into one. This is a brand new structure that they just built. Every entry ramp onto every freeway is two lanes merging into one. You go down to the bottom of the hill towards the Golden Gate Bridge now, and with that new median divider that they have to keep moving and the equipment that it requires, every lane merges, and I haven’t heard of any accidents. I think it’s extremely awkward. But everywhere you go, all over the place, if traffic is moving, two lanes can merge into one. It’s when the traffic isn’t moving that mergers become difficult.

1:07:04: So to me, this would’ve enabled the thing to get done. Right away, I wrote a *Marin Voice* article on it. Who knows what’s gonna happen? I had trouble trying to find it on their website, but I finally did, and I printed it out and I’m gonna send it to some other places, including the Metropolitan Transportation Committee, Caltrans, the board of supervisors, etcetera. So, the bottom line is I haven’t faded into the background quite yet.