

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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

JOHN GARBER

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Stella Perone in 2015**

© 2015 by the Mill Valley Public Library

TITLE: Oral History of John Garber
INTERVIEWER: Stella Perone
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 9 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: August 27th, 2015

In this oral history, John Garber recounts a life oscillating back and forth between sports and acting. Born in 1941 in Fresno, California to Armenian-American parents, John moved with his family to San Francisco at the age of 6. John describes the development of his passion for sports on the playgrounds of the schools he attended in San Francisco and later Los Angeles. John recalls going to Idaho State University to play sports, but then discovering drama there, and dropping out to pursue a theater acting career. In 1962 he moved to Mill Valley and established an extremely popular tennis program at Boyle Park, which led — after a sojourn in New York City to explore acting opportunities — to a job as recreation supervisor for the City of Mill Valley. John describes resigning from this position after some years, returning to New York, and then moving to Los Angeles, where he worked in the movie business for 11 years. In 1989 John returned to Mill Valley, where he was still living at the time this oral history was recorded.

© All materials copyright Mill Valley Public Library. Transcript made available for research purposes only. All rights are reserved to the Mill Valley Library. Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the:

Lucretia Little History Room
Mill Valley Public Library
375 Throckmorton Avenue
Mill Valley, CA 94941

Oral History of John Garber

Index

Armenian background...p.1
Barnard, Jean...p.7
Boyle Park...p.4
Cacoyannis, Michael...p.5-6
College of Marin...p.4
Columbus High School...p.1
Cortland, Al...p.8
Crncich, Corinne...p.8
Cunningham, William...p.7
Dimitratos, Don...p.5
Drama...p.3-4
Enchanted Knolls...p.4
Father...p.1-2
Golyn, Rudi...p.7
Hope, Bob...p.4
Idaho State University...p.3
Kite Hill...p.5
Laguna Honda Elementary School...p.1
Langhof, Dennis...p.4
Lieberman, Sali...p.6
Livingston, Jim...p.2
Los Angeles career...p.8
Lowell High School...p.1-3
Mill Valley Center for the Performing
Arts...p.6
Mount Carmel...p.4-5
Neighborhood Playhouse...p.5-6
Neff, Benny...p.1
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest...p.7
Peterson, Rob...p.8
Sankowich, Lee...p.7
Shaskin, Eddie...p.1
Smith, Gordon...p.4
Stanley, Kim...p.8
Stella (aunt)...p.4
Strasberg, Lee...p.6
Washington state tennis
championship...p.2

Oral History of John Garber
August 27th, 2015

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by John Garber, who made minor corrections and clarifications.

00:01 Stella Perone: This is Stella Perone with John Garber, August 27th. John, why don't you start off and say date, where you were born and some brief biographical sketches?

00:17 John Garber: I was born on November 14th, 1941 in Fresno, California, on Ventura Boulevard. My family, father and mother, were all Armenians. Our ancestors came from Turkish Armenia. They came over during the genocide in 1915. And my grandfather was working out in the fields at 11 years old, picking grapes to help support the family. He eventually bought a gas station in Fresno and did pretty well in that and then bought a farm out towards Sanger. So, I grew up in Fresno out on the farm. At the age of around 6, our family packed up their bags and we moved to San Francisco, and I went to Columbus High School on Lawton, and I also went to Laguna Honda Grammar School over on 7th and Irving. I grew up on the playgrounds in the city of San Francisco and when you grow up on the playgrounds on the city of San Francisco, it's like, "Who's the best on the playground?" On the playground you play every game conceivable, and the only thing that really mattered to me was to be the best in every one of those games.

02:06: That's from a yo-yo to ping-pong, to basketball, to handball, to football, you name it. I was the best on the playgrounds. And then we moved to Los Angeles and we lived in East L.A., El Monte and Covina. And once again you go to the playground, and on the playground you see who's the best. So my athletic background came from the playgrounds of Southern California and Northern California; and when I say my "athletic background", all we did was play. We just played to see who could win the point and then the game is over with. Today, these kids are doing all this extra stuff besides what they're playing, and in my opinion it's causing a lot of injuries. And so and it would also be good if these kids today would not specialize in one sport. When we were kids growing up, we played everything, so it gave our body a chance to rest and then we move on to another sport, and another sport, and that's the healthiest thing to do.

03:16: Anyway, so that was kind of my background growing up. And then we moved from L.A. back to San Francisco and I ended up going to Lowell High School. I went there, not because of my grades, because in the classroom I was just thinking about being on the playground. The classroom did not matter to me; all that mattered to me was being the best on the playground. So at Lowell High School, I was playing during the summer over at Washington High School — we had just moved there — and I ran into this guy, Eddie Shaskin, who was a student at Lowell and he said, "You should come and play basketball at Lowell and I'll introduce you to Benny Neff," who was the head coach at that time. So I went over, I ended up going to Lowell High School.

04:04: After basketball, the first season, I went out for the baseball team and I got into

a discussion with the baseball coach because he wanted me to play third base. And I said, "Let me warm my arm up." He said, "Take third base." I said, "Let me warm my arm up I just finished basketball." Anyway, I said, "I don't think I want you to be my coach." So I left and then I wanted seventh period PE, so I thought I'll go out for the tennis team. So I go out for the tennis team and the coach says, "I know why you're here because you want seventh period PE." I go, "Yeah." He says, "Okay." He says, "You go out here and I want you to play all the oldest guys out here in Golden Gate Park and hit the ball over the net 10 times without missing and then in a month you can challenge anybody on the ladder that you want. And if you beat them, then I'll let you stay on the tennis team." I said, "Okay."

05:00 Stella Perone: Well, had you ever played tennis before?

05:01 John Garber: I'd only hit a tennis ball against the wall; that was it. No, I'd never played tennis before.

05:05 Stella Perone: Okay. So this is freshman year at Lowell?

05:08 John Garber: This is my freshman year at Lowell. So at the end of the month, he says, "Okay, who do you want to challenge?" I said, "I'll challenge the number three guy on the team." He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Yeah." And at that time, Lowell had probably, for many years, one of the top tennis teams in the country. Our coach, Jim Livingston, was ranked number three in the nation in doubles and 13 in singles.

05:34 Stella Perone: Did you know the number three guy? Excuse me for interrupting.

05:37 John Garber: Did I know the number three guy that he played with?

05:39 Stella Perone: No, no, the number three guy you said you wanted to challenge.

05:41 John Garber: Yeah, I know who I played.

05:42 Stella Perone: You challenged him?

05:43 John Garber: I challenged him, yeah. So I challenged number three guy and we played and I beat him 6-0, 6-0. So the coach — I said, "Well, what should I do now?" He says, "Go and play tournaments." I said, "Okay." So I went and started playing tournaments, I ended up winning tournaments, I ended up winning the Washington state tennis championships, this is six months after I pick up a tennis racket. I didn't know anything about how you're supposed to hit a ball — this is how you hit a forehand, this is how you hit a backhand, overhead, volley, all that stuff, I didn't know anything about it. All I knew is you hit the ball and you win the point, bottom line. So that was my introduction to tennis, but because I loved basketball so much, which in my opinion, or my father's opinion, was my best sport, I started playing basketball again. So, going back and forth between those two things, I ended up getting a scholarship for tennis, ended up walking on to the basketball team and then ending up starting on the basketball team in

college, beating out a lot of scholarship athletes only because in San Francisco, I had the opportunity of playing with professionals and semi-professionals when I was 17 and 18 years old. And when you play against the best, you gotta get good. Okay, so where do we go from here?

07:04 Stela Perone: Okay, you've covered a lot of territory.

07:09 John Garber: That's background.

07:09 Stella Perone: Okay, that's background but that's great. So was your father a real athlete and real interested in your athletic endeavors?

07:16 John Garber: Well, I have to say this about my father: When I was a little kid, he would take me out to the baseball games that he was playing in. He played center field, and I was so impressed with his athletic ability. And there would be these Armenian picnics, we'd go to this Armenian picnics, and they had these softball games. My dad would go out in the pitcher's mound, throwing the windmill — and they called him “the deer” for his speed. So my dad was really a good athlete, but he never told me what to do. He started a family when he was 20 — my mom was 18 — and after five children, and working to try to support the family he never really — now as a father, and me playing athletics, I have to say this about my dad: he never, ever interfered. He would come to the games and watch the games, but never say anything to me about, “You did this poorly” or “You did this well.” And I have to say, all of the parents whose children I worked with in Mill Valley, they always kept out of it. They let me do what I needed to do. And that's the other thing: parents, get out of it. Let the kids just do, and the coach do, what they're doing. We got too many parents getting involved in kids sports today.

08:49 Stella Perone: Okay. So your first organized team sports were at Lowell, you played basketball and tennis.

08:56 John Garber: No, I played organized sports since I was in the third or fourth grade because we had playgrounds and on those playgrounds we had leagues down in Southern California where you play under the lights.

09:07 Stella Perone: Got it. Okay, after Lowell, what college did you go to?

09:11 John Garber: I went to Idaho State.

09:12 Stella Perone: Okay. And?

09:14 John Garber: And then from Idaho State, I dropped out because I wanted — I had spoken to the drama teacher there and she said, “Doing athletics and doing drama, that doesn't really work, because we need you here to do plays on the weekends and you're traveling with, whatever. You should make a decision on what you're going to do here. And if I'm going to do drama then I don't really need college. If you're going to do drama you're going to do stage, you're going to do film, you don't need college. In fact,

probably college in a lot of ways might get in the way.” So I left, I came back to San Francisco.

[Pause in recording]

10:01: So I dropped out of college, came back to San Francisco and worked part-time at Sears & Roebuck, did a play at the playhouse in San Francisco, did a play at the Sausalito playhouse in Sausalito at that time. My Aunt Stella bought a home in Mill Valley and she said, “Come on over and stay with me. It’s a large home and we’ll go from there.”

10:29: I said, “Okay.” So I came over to Mill Valley, 135 Roque Moraes over in Enchanted Knolls, right across the street from Hauke Park. And I went to College of Marin, studied some drama there, dropped out and then someone said they needed a tennis instructor over at Boyle Park to run a tennis program for the summer. There were three courts there at the time, there was a hitting wall there on two sides, not just one side like it is today. So I went over Boyle Park and I set up this tennis program, next thing I know, I’ve got classes that are just totally filled. I mean when I say totally filled, I had adults and children on that court that’s 8 to 10 deep, on all three courts.

11:26 Stella Perone: John, had they had a tennis program at Boyle in the preceding years?

11:30 John Garber: As far as I know, no. But probably the people up at Mill Valley Tennis Club would know better than me because, like I said, I came here in 1962, so I don’t know what was going on there. I know there were a couple of players from Mill Valley that I had played against — Gordon Smith and Bob Hope and Dennis Langhoff — they might know, and they’re all local Mill Valley people that had moved away because of not having any wealth.

12:05 Stella Perone: Okay, so you ran the tennis program on Boyle?

12:06 John Garber: So I ran the tennis program on Boyle and then the school year came around and I was approached about seeing Mother Superior over at Our Lady of Mount Carmel about teaching physical education there. So I went over to speak to her and she said, “Here’s what we need.” And I said, “What’s that?” She said, “We need to win,” I said, “What do you mean you need to win?” She says, “Well, Mount Carmel, they keep losing to everybody in CYO [Catholic Youth Organization] and we’re tired of it.” I said, “Okay. You want me to set up something so you can win?” She goes, “Yeah.” She said, “We do track and field and we do basketball.” I said, “Okay,” and “We’re tired of being beaten.”

12:53 Stella Perone: Shocking!

12:53 John Garber: I know. So I started teaching PE from kindergarten to eighth grade, and we had a yard out there and we had a basketball court in the back of the

school, and we would do calisthenics in the yard. And when I say calisthenics, I am talking about jumping jacks, toe touches, calf raises, everything you can just do with your body. You don't need all this equipment that businesses are making vast amounts of money on. All you really need is your body to work with. And so, the boys and girls there would do all these calisthenics. Then after they did all the calisthenics, we would do relays or dodge ball or kickball, or whatever. And then the older ones, I'd have them run around the block. And so, then I put together some basketball teams and we ended up doing pretty well in basketball. Then track and field came, so we went over to Edna Maguire and they have a place called Kite Hill over there. So I figure if I run up Kite Hill, they're going to be pretty strong and their endurance is going to be pretty good.

14:07: So we would practice; we practiced track and field. And then when the county meet came, Mount Carmel — the fourth graders, the fifth graders, the sixth graders, the seventh graders, the eighth graders, boys and girls, all of them — won the championship. The whole school won the county championship. And what I attribute it to is the fact that they were able to have calisthenics a couple of times a week, where they're able to build up the flexibility and the strength in their body. And plus, the speed work we would do just running relays, or running around the block or going over to Edna Maguire and going up Kite Hill. So the track and field really became something that I go, "Huh, where do we go from here?"

[Pause in recording]

15:00: While I was at Mount Carmel, I was offered a part-time job working for the city in Mill Valley doing recreation work. And that connection was because of the tennis that I did at Boyle Park. So I said, "Yeah." I went over and I started working part-time at the old recreation center. We had some ping pong tables in there and a pool table, and I set up some programs at the various playgrounds. During that time, I auditioned for the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City and I was accepted. And so I thought, "Well, let's go give that a try," and I told the director of Parks and Recreations that I was going to do that and he said, "Well, if things don't work out," he said, in six months he was going to hire a recreation supervisor. "And the job is yours if you wanted it."

16:05 Stella Perone: Who was the supervisor?

16:06 John Garber: His name was Don Dimitratos. And I said, "Okay." So I went back New York, had gotten married the day before we went back. Went back to New York, started studying at the Neighborhood Playhouse, and saw that they were having auditions for a Greek tragedy that was going to be directed by Michael Cacoyannis, who was the director of *Zorba the Greek*, and Irene Papas was going to be in it. So I went down to the Circle in the Square in Greenwich Village to audition and the guy asked for my Equity card, I said I had no Equity card. He said it's only for Equity actors and actresses. I said, "Well, how can I get into Equity?" He says, "You gotta get into an Equity play," I said, "So how do I get into a Equity play if I can't audition?" And he looked me up and down, he says, "Well," he said, "Look," he says, "you come back later in the afternoon and Mr. Cacoyannis will be here and let him take a look at you."

17:08: So I went back that afternoon and I am waiting for him, finally, the man arrives and he starts walking around me in a circle, like I'm a painting or something. And he says, "Okay, fine," and I left. A few days later, I get a call that Mr. Cacoyannis wants to cast me in *Iphigenia in Aulis*. And I said, "Well, I can't take it." And they said, "Why can't you take it?" I said, "I'm going to the Neighborhood Playhouse. They don't want you to work professionally while you're there." And they said, "Well, why did you come down here if you knew you couldn't work?" I said, "I wanted to see how hard it was to get into a play." So then my wife said, "You're nuts. This is what you're here for. If you can start making a living at it, make a living at it."

17:56: So I said, "Okay. On one condition: if I could study with Lee Strasberg who is head of the Actors Studio." And so, I found out where Lee Strasberg lived over on Central Park West, and I went to his apartment building and as I'm walking by the doorman, I said, "Is Mr. Strasberg still in the same apartment?" He goes, "Yeah, it's apartment so and so". So then I go upstairs, I ring the doorbell. This short Jewish man comes to the door with a couple of little poodles and he looks at me and he goes, in a rough voice, "What do you want?" And I said, "Are you Lee Strasberg?" He goes, "Yeah." He said, "How'd you get by the doorman?" I said, "I asked him if you were still living in the same number and he gave me the number." He said, "Oh." He said, "What do you want?" I said, "Well, I'd like to study with you." He said, "Well, call my secretary." I said, "Well, does that mean I study with you?" He says, "You call my secretary and I'm going to call her and tell her you called."

18:57: So later on I called the secretary and the secretary said, "Mr. Strasberg says he wants you to study with him." The bottom line is, if you want something, you can get it, you just have to go get it. So I started studying with him.

19:18: My marriage was going bad so I said, "Let's go back to Mill Valley, I've been offered this job." And so, we came back to Mill Valley. I took over as a recreation supervisor for the city of Mill Valley. I was able to develop physical and cultural programs for the entire community, from pre-school, to elementary school, to junior high school, to college, to adults, to senior citizens — just playground activities at Edna Maguire, at Alto School, at Park School, at Homestead School where the children were playing various sports. We had leagues going in town. And when we got good enough, I would schedule games against other boys or girls, but mainly boys at that time. And we'd put them in a car and we'd go down to Redwood City or wherever, and we would play.

20:32: And the reason we did that is because I knew that if you play against the best you're going to get, if not the best, you're going to be better than most other people. So the physical programs in Mill Valley were geared to create the best male and female athletes that I possibly could. And a lot of them went on, got scholarships for various sports — outstanding Marin County athletes, Hall of Famers, world record holders, professional athletes. So that's what I did when I was recreation supervisor. I was also able to help start the Mill Valley Center for Performing Arts when Sali Lieberman came and said he wanted to start doing plays up at the old Golf Clubhouse, the Mill Valley

Golf Clubhouse. And so, that's how that all started.

21:39 Stella Perone: Roughly what year are we talking about now, John?

21:41 John Garber: We're talking from '68 to '73. From '68 to '73, '67 maybe tail end. So during that time while I was the recreation supervisor for Mill Valley, I was cast as Chief Bromden in Ken Kesey's, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which we started with up at the Mill Valley Golf Clubhouse. And then, Lee Sankowich and Rudi Golyn, the producers, picked it up and took it over to San Francisco to the little Fox Theatre off of Montgomery Street. So I was doing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* while I was running the recreation department during the day, seven or eight performances a week. After five and a half months, I came down with hepatitis and that ended my acting career with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. After I recovered from my hepatitis, I went back to work for the city of Mill Valley, and during that time, a new city manager was hired and he decided that —

23:07 Stella Perone: Name?

23:07 John Garber: Do you want me to give names? Okay.

23:09 Stella Perone: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

23:10 John Garber: His name was William Cunningham. And during that time he started wanting to fool around with the Park and Recreation Department, and not really representing city employees with the city council. Department heads would set up what their budget would be and what they needed and what the employees needed, but he wouldn't take that to the city council. So after I thought it got too rough, I decided to go and talk to him. And when I went in to see him, we talked and I didn't believe a word he was saying. And so, after I left, I went up to my cottage — I was staying up in Washington Park, up off of Panoramic Highway — and I decided to write a letter to the *Mill Valley Record* at that time and the *Independent-Journal* that I'm going to resign my position because of this man and all of the things that he's caused as far as problems for the Park and Recreation Department.

24:29: I figured I had nothing to lose because I had no family. And so during that period of time, the employees, because they had no representation, they went on strike; and when they went on strike, I had to cross the picket line every day, and they were telling me how they were having a hard time making their mortgage payments, and problems financially, and I think that just kind of sealed the fact that I had to do something about the city manager. And like I said, I wrote letters to the papers stating why I was doing this, and three days after I resigned, the mayor of Mill Valley, Jean Barnard, called me and said, "Take your job back, we're going to fire him." And I said, "Once I give someone my word, I never go back on my word." It was foolish thinking on my part, reflecting on that now, but that's what happened.

25:42: So then after that was all over with I went traveling for a while and then I came

back to Mill Valley and I started teaching tennis over on Laverne Avenue. There was a little chicken coop there and a single court and I was able to develop a couple of ranking players, Corinne Crncich and Rob Peterson. Rob Peterson today has world records in the Guinness Book of Records, and Corinne Crncich had gotten a tennis scholarship to Cal. While I was teaching over there, all this was happening and they were running tournaments, et cetera, et cetera, and then a gentleman in Mill Valley, Al Cortland, said, "I know how long you've been interested in acting and you've always had to do these other jobs in order to pursue an acting career and I'd like to sponsor you for a year and you just concentrate on doing your acting and see what happens."

26:54: So I said, "Well, let me think about it." So I asked my dad what he thought. He said, "Well, do you have to pay the money back?" I said, "No. He said, 'I'm part of the tribe.' He's got this money and he'd like to sponsor me." So I went back the next day and talked to him and I said, "Okay, let's do it." He said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I'll get on an airplane, I'll go to New York City and I'll study during the summer, and after the summer, then I'll go and see if I can find work." So I went back to New York City and studied with Kim Stanley.

27:31 Stella Perone: Year, John?

27:34 John Garber: 1978. So I'm studying with Kim Stanley, who starred on Broadway, starred in a film called *The Goddess*, was in *Streetcar Named Desire* with Brando on Broadway, and we'd have these sessions starting at 8:00 at night until 3:00 in the morning at the Cherry Lane Theatre where we would just do the scene work. And I remember one day, one night, she asked me to share a cab with her and she spotted this woman over there standing on the corner. She said, "Do you see that woman over there?" And I go, "Yeah." And she started telling me this whole history about this woman. I said, "How'd you know that?" She goes, "I don't know anything." She goes, "That's just my imagination working." I said, "Oh," and so what she was telling is imagination is important.

28:33: And then the other thing that she told me is that basically, the bottom line is communication. If you can communicate, you can act. That's it. So getting checks, I went out to Los Angeles, left New York, went out to Los Angeles, and got a part-time job at Paramount Studios in the gym. And I get a phone call saying that this guy who just directed *Saturday Night Fever* was looking for someone to train him and if I would be interested. I said, "Yeah, okay." So I started training him, and the next movie he went to work on was *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* with Richard Dreyfuss, and he asked if I'd come along with him and work as a dialogue coach on the film, and he'd give me a small part in the film. I said, "Yeah, okay." So I went and did that, ended up training him and working with him for 11 years, being in movies from *American Flyers* to *War Games* to *Blue Thunder* to *Partners*, Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*, a few other things. And then after 11 years, I just saw how it's an inflation/deflation process where you make money and then you don't make money, you make money, you don't make money, you collect unemployment, and it just got to be too nerve-racking. So I thought, "Well, let's get out

of here.” I had got out of here, moved back to Marin County. This was in 1989 and I have been here now since 1989.