

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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Historical Society and the Mill Valley
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TIA SMIRNOFF

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Nancy Emerson in 2016**

TITLE: Oral History of Tia Smirnoff
INTERVIEWER: Nancy Emerson
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In this oral history, longtime Mill Valley resident and tireless contributor to the community Tia Smirnoff discusses her life, family, work, hobbies, and the changes she has witnessed in town over the decades. Born in San Diego, Tia moved up to Mill Valley more than 50 years ago after marrying her husband Andrew. She and Andrew raised four children together, but because of her work in after-school care for many decades Tia's "children" number many more than this. Tia recounts how she originally got involved in after-school care at Marin Terrace School and later at Tamalpais Valley School, as well as the story behind her iconic wardrobe of coveralls, engineer's cap, and reflective sunglasses. Tia describes her decades-long involvement with the Girl Scouts, her work with the Special Olympics, a period of coaching Little League, and a period of teaching art in Mill Valley's elementary schools — taken all together, an extraordinary amount of love and labor that she has contributed to the community. Tia reminisces about old Mill Valley, recalling many shops that used to exist downtown, where she would go to buy groceries, clothes, and household needs. And, finally, she describes her love of arts and crafts, which include making teddy bears, marionettes, and dolls.

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Oral History of Tia Smirnoff
November 4th, 2016

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Tia Smirnoff, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:02 Nancy Emerson: This is Nancy Emerson with the Mill Valley Historical Society, the Mill Valley Library oral history program, and I'm here on November 4th, 2016 interviewing Tia Smirnoff. Good morning, Tia.

0:00:14 Tia Smirnoff: Good morning. I'm Tia Smirnoff — Esther¹ — and I've lived in Mill Valley for over 50 years.

0:00:25 Nancy Emerson: Can you explain where you were born and how you came to Mill Valley?

0:00:31 Tia Smirnoff: I was born in San Diego, and I came to Mill Valley when I married my husband.

0:00:36 Nancy Emerson: Okay. And who is your husband?

0:00:37 Tia Smirnoff: My husband is Andrew Smirnoff.

0:00:41 Nancy Emerson: How did you happen to meet him?

0:00:43 Tia Smirnoff: On the beach. I played volleyball, and he was a jogger, and somehow we just ended up talking and liking each other.

0:00:52 Nancy Emerson: Great.

0:00:53 Tia Smirnoff: Then we moved up here. We built our house in Mill Valley, down by Marin Terrace School, which was knolls — just mountains with no houses. There was probably about five houses up there. And now, there's millions of them.

0:01:08 Nancy Emerson: You said that you've been here for over 50 years. Do you remember the date that you moved here?

0:01:14 Tia Smirnoff: No, it's just a blank. I'm not good at remembering dates. I never have been. If my husband was alive, we would have been married probably about 55 years now.

0:01:27 Nancy Emerson: Wow. He passed away?

0:01:29 Tia Smirnoff: He passed away a couple of years ago.

¹ Esther was Tia's given name. See below.—Editor.

0:01:33 Nancy Emerson: Was he from Mill Valley?

0:01:37 Tia Smirnoff: He was from San Francisco, and they used to travel through Mill Valley to get to the Russian River, and he just bought lots here. It was his dream to come down here, and I followed his dream. And it was a good dream. I'm happy where I'm at.

0:01:53 Nancy Emerson: So you built, you said you built your home.

0:01:57 Tia Smirnoff: We built our home.

0:01:58 Nancy Emerson: Up by Marin Terrace School, which is up on the —

0:02:02 Tia Smirnoff: Harvard and —

0:02:03 Nancy Emerson: Harvard, those —

0:02:05 Tia Smirnoff: All those college teams.

0:02:05 Nancy Emerson: College teams, yeah. [chuckles] And you had some children?

0:02:10 Tia Smirnoff: I have four children. I don't know how old they are. Lydia, Sandia, Mark, and Michelle.

0:02:19 Nancy Emerson: Great. And they all live in the Bay Area?

0:02:21 Tia Smirnoff: No, they're all over the place. Novato, San Francisco — just all over. [chuckles]

0:02:30 Nancy Emerson: Okay, now let's see. You introduced yourself as "Esther," but you go by "Tia."

0:02:35 Tia Smirnoff: I go by "Tia." I was born a Tia. I was always a Tia. And then when I came down here, I guess I wanted to make my kids bilingual, so I called myself "Tia." And it was a lot easier because nobody else had that name, and I knew when they were calling me, they were calling me.

0:02:53 Nancy Emerson: That's true. So Tia is a Spanish word, right?

0:02:56 Tia Smirnoff: Yes, for "aunt."

0:02:56 Nancy Emerson: So, were you raised in a Spanish family?

0:03:00 Tia Smirnoff: I am a Mexican. I'm a Mexican Indian, yes.

0:03:02 Nancy Emerson: And did your siblings call you Tia, or did you become Tia as an adult?

0:03:11 Tia Smirnoff: No. That was sister. My sister, Mija. Mi hermana. But they didn't call me Tia. Well, they did now and then, but then there were so many of us that were Tias and Tios. [chuckles]

0:03:28 Nancy Emerson: It wouldn't be as unique.

0:03:29 Tia Smirnoff: It wouldn't be as unique in the family as it would be out of the family.

0:03:34 Nancy Emerson: Great. Well, you're renowned in Mill Valley for many things, among them the work that you've done with children, and your other voluntary activities, as well as your wardrobe. Can you tell us about them?

0:03:50 Tia Smirnoff: Well, it started when I started working with kids and they would be playing in the mud or whatever, and I ended up holding their watches and their chains and their stuff, and I had pockets. I had to have a lot of pockets. And the coveralls were what I needed. The pockets held all the stuff. And sometimes, I took the stuff home, I had to bring it back and figure out who belonged to what, with all these watches, and jewelry, and all that, while they played with mud and dug the school up. And the hat, it was the same thing. I needed something to be out there watching them. So, I didn't want a round hat because it would fly off, but this one stays on.

0:04:31 Nancy Emerson: So, from the beginning, have you always had the engineer's cap?

0:04:35 Tia Smirnoff: No.

0:04:35 Nancy Emerson: The hat that you have? Have you used different hats?

0:04:38 Tia Smirnoff: Yes. I used to wear a scarf, and that didn't work so well. But I like the hat. I like the way it fits.

0:04:48 Nancy Emerson: Well, it certainly is part of the image of you.

0:04:51 Tia Smirnoff: It seems like it. I didn't intend it to be that way, but it did, and that's my wardrobe.

0:04:57 Nancy Emerson: Well, the third thing that we haven't talked about is your sunglasses.

0:05:00 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, yes.

0:05:00 Nancy Emerson: You wear reflective sunglasses.

0:05:03 Tia Smirnoff: Right.

0:05:03 Nancy Emerson: Is there a reason for that?

0:05:04 Tia Smirnoff: Well, the light does hurt my eyes. I used to wear dark glasses. And one day, I realized I couldn't see what I was looking at. So I went to the eye doctor and they gave me this. And I liked the mirrored glasses because when you look at children, they're looking at themselves, and they're talking to themselves, and yet they know I'm behind there. [chuckles] It works.

0:05:30 Nancy Emerson: It does work. [chuckles] It does work. Well, great. So, can you tell us how you got into after-school care, child care, and what you've done with it since those early days?

0:05:40 Tia Smirnoff: Well, they needed after-school care because the parents are starting to work. And they just said, "We're gonna open up an after-school care in Marin Terrace." And I just went in and told the principal I was interested and he said, "Okay." Because the kids were coming to my house, anyways; I had a whole bunch of children after school. And I just got those children, moved them down, and start charging them. I was babysitting without knowing I was babysitting. And they enjoyed it. I used to charge them \$1 a day.

0:06:16 Nancy Emerson: This is when you did it at your house?

0:06:19 Tia Smirnoff: No, this is when I did it at the school.

0:06:21 Nancy Emerson: Okay. And then the school invited you to come?

0:06:23 Tia Smirnoff: Yes. Like I said, the parents started to work and there was no place for these children to go. They were just going all over the neighborhood. And then when I got there, I'd charge them \$1, and they would come down and play until 6:00 p.m., and have something to eat and play in. And it was good, because also somebody was watching them and they weren't out on the streets.

0:06:44 Nancy Emerson: Yeah. It was a benefit.

0:06:44 Tia Smirnoff: And then when Marin Terrace closed, the principal invited me to come with him over here in Tam Valley. And that's when the schools were closing, and there were two rooms that they had in storage. So I got the storage room, one storage room, put the storage in the other room, and opened up my own place there. And the principal was Bob DeVilbiss, he was very supportive. And then, the kids just came in and played — beautiful playground. I'd go watch them. Then I had to get somebody else to help me on the outside. And I would hire these high school kids, who were fantastic kids. And then we just stayed here.

0:07:30 Nancy Emerson: So, Marin Terrace would have been — I know you don't remember the dates exactly, but it would have been maybe 30 years ago? And then you've been here 25 years, would you say?

0:07:44 Tia Smirnoff: I've been here close to 40 years.

0:07:46 Nancy Emerson: 40 years.

0:07:47 Tia Smirnoff: No, more than 40 years now.

0:07:48 Nancy Emerson: More than 40 years.

0:07:49 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. More than 40 years.

0:07:50 Nancy Emerson: Taking care of kids after school.

0:07:52 Tia Smirnoff: Taking care of kids. And now I get to see the kids grow up, and they bring me — that's the best part of taking care of kids, is they always come back. Well, a lot of them come back, and I get to see their families. And I like that part.

0:08:08 Nancy Emerson: I bet. I bet that's really satisfying.

0:08:11 Tia Smirnoff: It is very satisfying.

0:08:11 Nancy Emerson: Plus, I would think, when you're walking around town, people always say "Hi" to you, right? [laughs]

0:08:19 Tia Smirnoff: They do. They do.

0:08:20 Nancy Emerson: Kids and adults.

0:08:21 Tia Smirnoff: Yes. I only know Mill Valley as a very friendly town. Good people. Good kids. Everything just seems to fit in just right. It's a good place to be.

0:08:31 Nancy Emerson: Yeah. Now, you do this daycare every single day that there's school?

0:08:37 Tia Smirnoff: Yes.

0:08:37 Nancy Emerson: Right. So you don't get much vacation.

0:08:40 Tia Smirnoff: This is what I like to do. I enjoy my job. I like being here, I like taking care of the kids. I like dealing with their happiness and their problems. And it's just a good place to be.

0:08:54 Nancy Emerson: You've made a particular kind of environment for the after-school care. It's not very structured.

0:09:06 Tia Smirnoff: No. It's called supervised play. My job is to make sure that they play and they don't get hurt. That's what I call my job. And make sure that nobody hurts them and they don't hurt anybody. And they seem to be very happy. It's like what we had in our own neighborhood — that you could come in at night-time and have dinner. Now, the kids can play and then they go home. I tell the parents I get the best part of their kids' life.

0:09:32 Nancy Emerson: That's true.

0:09:33 Tia Smirnoff: They're great kids. They take care of each other, and they take care of me. And they're learning.

0:09:39 Nancy Emerson: Learning to play. [chuckles]

0:09:41 Tia Smirnoff: Learning to play. They're learning to give, they're learning to negotiate, they're learning to be responsible. Hopefully, they're learning not to litter. I see them putting their stuff in the trash. All those things that they need to know.

0:09:55 Nancy Emerson: You're teaching them.

0:09:56 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:09:56 Nancy Emerson: How many children do you have in the program now, would you say?

0:10:04 Tia Smirnoff: Well, it's a drop-in, so every day changes.

0:10:08 Nancy Emerson: Would there be 100 kids here?

0:10:10 Tia Smirnoff: At one time? Legally, no.

0:10:12 Nancy Emerson: Okay.

0:10:15 Tia Smirnoff: No, I would say probably —

0:10:17 Nancy Emerson: 50?

0:10:18 Tia Smirnoff: About 50. Maybe less.

0:10:21 Nancy Emerson: Okay.

0:10:22 Tia Smirnoff: But they come and go. And some come in just for five minutes and then the parents are late and they come pick them up, or some parents are stuck on

the bridge, then we stay 'til they come pick up. So I just want the children to be kids. We have a creek. They love the creek. As soon as the water comes in, they go out and play and get nice and muddy.

0:10:46 Nancy Emerson: Yep. It's a good compromise for working parents, I think. They have their children safe.

0:10:52 Tia Smirnoff: It is. It's good. There's a need. And they're such good kids. It's not work, it's fun. I just sit there and watch them work and see who gets along with who and how they play, and make sure that they stay safe.

0:11:08 Nancy Emerson: Beyond that, was it your love of children that took you into the Girl Scouts?

0:11:19 Tia Smirnoff: It was my daughters. [chuckles]

0:11:23 Tia Smirnoff: My daughters wanted to be in it, so we just went in there and started doing that. I didn't want to be a leader, but nobody else did, so I did it.

0:11:32 Nancy Emerson: And how long have you — are you still a leader of Girl Scouts?

0:11:35 Tia Smirnoff: I'm still a leader, yes.

0:11:36 Nancy Emerson: So that's been going on for 40 —

0:11:38 Tia Smirnoff: No, I've just got my 55-year pin.

0:11:42 Nancy Emerson: 55, okay.

0:11:42 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:11:43 Nancy Emerson: As a leader or as a member of the Girl Scouts?

0:11:46 Tia Smirnoff: As a leader.

0:11:47 Nancy Emerson: Yeah? So you continue to be a leader.

0:11:50 Tia Smirnoff: I continue to be a leader. I went to all their camps, and was a craft counselor. I like crafts.

0:11:57 Nancy Emerson: And have there been any special any experiences with the Girl Scouts that you would want to talk about?

0:12:06 Tia Smirnoff: Gee, there's so many good experiences with the girls.

0:12:11 Nancy Emerson: But wait, before we go there, sorry. What age level are we talking about for your Girl Scouts?

0:12:18 Tia Smirnoff: Girl Scouts? Well, I went from Brownies, which is first to second grade — in those days, it started late — until Cadets, which is the highest they could go. And with my daughters, I went there twice.

0:12:34 Nancy Emerson: Which was high school?

0:12:36 Tia Smirnoff: No, before they hit high school.

0:12:38 Nancy Emerson: Okay, so, middle school.

0:12:38 Tia Smirnoff: After their high school, they don't want to go. But I went with them twice. Now that my daughters aren't involved in this, I'm just doing Girl Scouts, fourth and fifth graders, mainly.

0:12:52 Nancy Emerson: Okay. And does your troop meet here at Tam Valley?

0:12:56 Tia Smirnoff: My troop meets here on Tuesdays and —

0:12:57 Nancy Emerson: And are they mostly Tam Valley girls, then?

0:13:00 Tia Smirnoff: Yes.

0:13:00 Nancy Emerson: Tam Valley, all students?

0:13:01 Tia Smirnoff: But they're bringing in other kids from middle school. I thought I was done and then they came to me and said they wanted to be in Scouts. So I took them on. And we do a lot of community service.

0:13:14 Nancy Emerson: So, for example, what kind of community service?

0:13:16 Tia Smirnoff: They've done — other troops have done Special Olympics with me. They don't do it every day, but they just go once or twice. And we do the Mountain Play, we do the Fall Arts Festival. Any time they needed girls to do a presentation, like, we were at the Plaza for some kind of a Chamber of Commerce Day. They do a lot of things with Tam Valley. Creekside — not Creekside, but Breakfast with Santa, they help in the Haunted House. All kinds — just getting involved.

0:13:55 Nancy Emerson: And the public service, are they face painting or what kinds of activities?

0:14:00 Tia Smirnoff: They used to do face painting, yes. They used to do face painting. And on the Mountain Play, they help the elderly people, the disabled people, get

to the platform. And on the Fall Arts Festival, we do a project and then we do a spider web with the big spider in the middle that the kids like. And let's see, what else?

0:14:24 Nancy Emerson: How about at the Art Festival?

0:14:26 Tia Smirnoff: That's the Art Festival, they do that. They do the spider web.

0:14:29 Nancy Emerson: Oh, the spider webs, right.

0:14:30 Tia Smirnoff: And do a project.

0:14:33 Nancy Emerson: And then you're also doing crafts. Do you go camping?

0:14:37 Tia Smirnoff: Yes. Well, we used to go camping. I can't do it now, but I used to go camping and do craft counselling, and all kinds of places, all Girl Scout things. And then we did a low-income camp called Tamal Fair that we did with the church.²

0:14:55 Nancy Emerson: What was that? Hosting children from low-income families?

0:14:58 Tia Smirnoff: Low-income children that would never get a chance to be camping.

0:15:01 Nancy Emerson: So your girls were helping —

0:15:02 Tia Smirnoff: No, the girls did not help. That was an adult thing. And they needed adults, 'cause the children were — it was boys and girls.

0:15:15 Nancy Emerson: So was that a Girl Scout-sponsored event, or something that you got involved with because people knew you?

0:15:22 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. I got involved because they needed a craft counselor, and somebody knew me from Girl Scouts, and they put my name up, and they called me and I liked it.

0:15:29 Nancy Emerson: Have you done that more than once?

0:15:31 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, we did it that for about maybe 10 years. And then our funds ran out, and they did something else.

0:15:40 Nancy Emerson: You have been involved with the Special Olympics in Marin County, how did that come about?

0:15:47 Tia Smirnoff: That came about because I think I saw an ad, or somebody told me that they needed help, and I went down there and I dealt with the lowest-functioning

² The Episcopal Church, with Father Murray.—Tia Smirnoff.

adults, and same thing. I could take the bus as it was at the College of Marin. Very convenient, and I didn't have to go looking for it. And it's been very rewarding.

0:16:12 Nancy Emerson: What kind of things were you doing there?

0:16:13 Tia Smirnoff: I was coaching frisbee and softball throw and 50-yard dash, but they took the frisbee out because they got too Olympic. The frisbee was not in the Olympics, so they took that out. And the kids really enjoyed it. But now, the softball throw is, and the 50-yard dash is on — I think it's a 50-meter. Now, everything has changed. Things have changed a lot.

0:16:40 Nancy Emerson: And how long would you say you've been involved with Special Olympics?

0:16:43 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, I've been involved with Special Olympics at least 50 years.

0:16:46 Nancy Emerson: 50 years?

0:16:46 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:16:47 Nancy Emerson: So you've seen all these changes?

0:16:48 Tia Smirnoff: I've seen the changes.

0:16:50 Nancy Emerson: But you're still helping out, you're still coaching?

0:16:53 Tia Smirnoff: Right now, I go down. I can't walk very well, so I go down and I visit them and see them. And I've seen them grow up. I've seen some have passed away because of age or whatever.

0:17:06 Nancy Emerson: Is that something that you do every week or every month? Or is that at certain —

0:17:13 Tia Smirnoff: I used to do it every week. Every Saturday we used to go down and practice and get them ready for the big meet. And we used to go travel to Los Angeles and have a big meet out there at that big campus.³

0:17:28 Nancy Emerson: Oh, at the Rose Bowl.

0:17:28 Tia Smirnoff: And here, we'd have it at Berkeley every other year. And now, they changed it. I don't know what they do now. It didn't make any difference who you sent out there. We would take turns. If you went last year, you don't go this year. So everybody had a chance to go down there. And now, you have to do it like Olympics, you have to qualify for it, which is kind of sad, because then my kids would never — but they're happy. They're happy just knowing that their friends are going.

³ University of California, Los Angeles.—Tia Smirnoff.

0:18:01 Nancy Emerson: And they like the chance to perform these activities, even if they're not the best.⁴

0:18:10 Tia Smirnoff: They like the attention they get. Well, last year we had it at — I think it was Novato. No, it was Terra Linda. They like the audience. They like performing for them. They like their ribbons, and they like their medals, and all that. They're very happy ones. We usually have a whole day in May that we have the Olympics here. And they qualify, and then they go to somewhere else. It's not all L.A. now. It's all different towns that have a special meet of that type.

0:18:43 Nancy Emerson: Are there other activities that we haven't talked about?

0:18:50 Tia Smirnoff: Let's see. Activities, like what?

0:18:52 Nancy Emerson: That you have been involved in, or would you like to just go into.

0:18:53 Tia Smirnoff: Oh. Little League.

0:18:54 Nancy Emerson: Talking about Mill Valley?

0:18:56 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, I was a coach at Little League.

0:18:58 Nancy Emerson: Little League?

0:19:00 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:19:00 Nancy Emerson: Hmm.

0:19:00 Tia Smirnoff: I was a Little League coach for the little ones, guys, and we practiced here at Tam Valley. I had a big team.

0:19:11 Nancy Emerson: So the little guys, excuse me, but the little guys would've been kindergarteners, maybe, or first-graders?

0:19:15 Tia Smirnoff: First-graders. I think they're mainly first- and second-graders. And I don't know what they call them now, but they used to be called the "Peewees" or something like that. And we were the "Muddies" because Tam Valley was all full of mud. [chuckles] Mudcats. And that was fun. That was fun, having it. It was mainly boys with a couple of girls. And they just played well, they were troopers. We had to change some rules for the league, because we had a special needs child. And their [the other team's] chant was not a good chant. So, [my team] made me stop the game, go across the field, talk to the coach, tell him we won't accept that kind of chant. And then they stopped it, and I've never heard the chant again. So that was very important. But that

⁴ They are the best!—Tia Smirnoff.

wasn't me doing that, that was my team that said that they need to stop that, for the child. So that's the kind of kids that we had. I'm sure we still have them. They were very supportive of each other.

0:20:28 Nancy Emerson: Then you saw these little ones grow up into bigger baseball players over the years, I bet.

0:20:35 Tia Smirnoff: Right, right. They were mainly Tam Valley kids that were in my team. I knew them and they could stay. After I finished working at 6:00 p.m., we would practice on the field. And that's when I was down there by where the library was at, in "Buggles" they were called.

0:20:51 Nancy Emerson: Further down the property here at Tam Valley?

0:20:54 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:20:55 Nancy Emerson: I'm thinking that there weren't too many women coaching Little League.

0:21:00 Tia Smirnoff: There weren't. [chuckles] There were no women coaching.

0:21:01 Nancy Emerson: So you were unique. [chuckles]

0:21:02 Tia Smirnoff: There were no women coaching. But they needed somebody, and they said — my son was in Little League, and they said, "There's so many little kids on it in Tam Valley." And I said, "Well, I'm in Tam Valley. I can do it." And I did. By doing that, I also got — other people came in, and there was a young kid that, one day said, "How do you get to be a coach?" I didn't know anything about baseball. I didn't know there was a strategy. I just knew that you hit the ball and you run. [chuckles] And I got him to be a coach, too. And that's before soccer came in, before all these other — they just had baseball, and that was it. That's the only thing they had for the kids.

0:21:46 Nancy Emerson: So, are you still coaching Little League?

0:21:47 Tia Smirnoff: No, no. [chuckles] I'll watch the game. I would rather watch a kids' game than an adult game.

0:21:51 Nancy Emerson: Oh, for sure. Yeah. So then when soccer came in, did you get involved with soccer?

0:21:58 Tia Smirnoff: My kids did. No, I didn't. No.

0:22:01 Nancy Emerson: So you were a fan, then.

0:22:02 Tia Smirnoff: Right, right.

0:22:02 Nancy Emerson: But not a coach or —

0:22:04 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. And sometimes, when I went to Little League to see my son's games, I would cheer for the other — if somebody did a good catch, I would cheer for them, and the parents would get so emotional why I was rooting for the other team. I said, "That's my kid. He needs a cheer." [chuckles] And my son didn't worry that I was cheering. He knew what I was doing. I was more looking at the kid than I was at what team he was in. Sometimes they were against him, and I would still cheer for the other team, and the parents would get upset. Like, "You should be loyal to your team." But I'm loyal to the kid.

0:22:44 Nancy Emerson: You, especially. You have so many kids. [chuckles]

0:22:48 Tia Smirnoff: Right. Little League coach, and Boy Scouts. I did Boy Scouts, too.

0:22:51 Nancy Emerson: You did?

0:22:51 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:22:52 Nancy Emerson: For your son?

0:22:53 Tia Smirnoff: For my son, yeah. All the way up to fifth grade.

0:22:57 Nancy Emerson: Were you doing Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts at the same time?

0:23:00 Tia Smirnoff: Yes.

0:23:01 Nancy Emerson: You must be an amazing time manager. [chuckles]

0:23:04 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, you just don't put them all on the same day. [laughs]

0:23:09 Nancy Emerson: Did you ever sleep? [laughs]

0:23:11 Tia Smirnoff: Very well. I sleep very well.

0:23:13 Nancy Emerson: You're just so busy.

0:23:14 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. I don't remember not sleeping. I sleep real well. That's not a problem.

0:23:20 Nancy Emerson: Wow! Well, in this long time that you've lived in Mill Valley you've seen a lot of changes, I'm sure.

0:23:30 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, a lot of changes, yes.

0:23:32 Nancy Emerson: Can you recall any?

0:23:34 Tia Smirnoff: Well, some of them were that we used to buy our shoes in Mill Valley, my kids' shoes. We used to buy our television from Mill Valley. We used to buy our drugs — there were two drugstores in Mill Valley, right across the street from each other, so we'd buy our drugs there. Everything was in Mill Valley. We used to buy our sheets in Mill Valley. Now, I can't buy anything in Mill Valley. First of all, I'm not that age. They're only selling things to the pretty young ones, which is cute, because they do look cute. [chuckles] But everything was there. And we went to Crocker Bank before it was — what is it? Wells Fargo. And do you remember, there was a store down on Miller Avenue that had a belt, that you'd buy your groceries, and it would roll them all the way out to the sidewalk, and you'd pick up your groceries down there, and get in your car and go? Do you remember that?

0:24:35 Nancy Emerson: I don't remember that.

0:24:36 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. It's now a laundromat. And if you go to the laundromat, you'll see that it's got a slope down, that's where the groceries would go down. Yeah.

0:24:45 Nancy Emerson: Is that the laundromat that's by the Marin Theater?

0:24:48 Tia Smirnoff: Yes.

0:24:49 Nancy Emerson: And by Jolly King Liquors store?

0:24:50 Tia Smirnoff: Right. Yeah. And that place used to be a place that had a whole bunch of little shops, kind of arty shops, where people would sell their wares, like handmade wooden things or handmade fabric things, like weavings, and things like that. It was pretty nice.

0:25:11 Nancy Emerson: I think that was The Port.

0:25:12 Tia Smirnoff: The Port. That's what it was. The Port, yeah. The Port. And the theater behind there used to be — they used to have their presentations at Brown's Hall, which is now the Buddhist temple. And I used to sew for that. A gentleman used to come pick me up at my house. Sali Lieberman used to come pick me up at the house. And I'd go sew their costumes for them. Tuck in, tuck out, or add this or add that, and then he'd drive me back home. He used to live somewhere around where I live, up the hill. And then they made that big theater. And they did a Sali Lieberman — a small, little hall. That was kinda neat. So we did that.

0:25:56 Nancy Emerson: When you were doing the shopping in Mill Valley — you don't drive.

0:26:02 Tia Smirnoff: No, I don't drive.

0:26:03 Nancy Emerson: Right. So how did you do that?

0:26:04 Tia Smirnoff: Well, if you go down the hill from my place, which in those days, I could get down there in less than half an hour. We used to take the Greyhound. The Greyhound charged \$0.80 to go only to Mill Valley. And it ran every hour or something like that. But it charged \$0.80 cents for the kids — it's just \$0.80 cents, no matter if anybody got on. And it used to stop off at the Depot, so we could get off and do our shopping and come up. And my idea was if you can't carry it, you can't bring it. So, we used to take backpacks, and if the kids wanted anything they had to put it in their backpack. Oh, and then my husband would take us on Saturdays, when he would get home. We'd go shopping for their shoes and all that stuff. But if we had any whims that we wanted, we would go down there.

And in fact, I would ask the kids what they wanted to do, in summertime, and I would say, "What are we going to do today? Disneyland's not an option." [chuckles] They would say, "We want to go down and get an ice cream." So we'd go to Baskin-Robbins and get an ice cream. And on the way, they'd go to the bike path, which used to be the railroad tracks. They loved the railroad tracks, because they had all kinds of little treasures, nails and things like that. And we could stop off at Jerry's Market and get a nice sandwich, which used to be a drug store and a grocery store.

0:27:37 Nancy Emerson: That's where Whole Foods is now, right?

0:27:39 Tia Smirnoff: Yes, where Whole Foods is now. And, let's see, where else we went. And then on the side, where Brown's store used to be, where the Buddhist temple is at, they had another store that used to sell handmade stuff, like jewelry and things like that, and I don't remember what their name was. Do you remember that?

0:28:05 Nancy Emerson: Uh-huh.

0:28:05 Tia Smirnoff: There was a store there that sold that. And we'd just walk all the way down to Mill Valley and go there, window shop. And they had two jewelry stores in Mill Valley. One was a McDonald's, which was a drug store, and then it was McDonald's. And then across the street, there's a bank there, across from the depot. It was another jewelry store that we used to like to go look at. And then the Depot had some great books. They didn't have food, they just had books. The Greyhound would drop us off right there. And the buses would pick us up there later on, and then they put the buses down by the street. But the thing about it was when the bus dropped you off there, you had about a half an hour wait, so you could go in and get some books, and then go back on the bus.

0:28:54 Nancy Emerson: The next bus back?

0:28:56 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. Or they started having transfers, so you could get off the bus and get back on.

0:29:03 Nancy Emerson: If you wanted to take the bus to College of Marin, for example, would you catch that at the Depot, or would it be down —

0:29:10 Tia Smirnoff: No, I'd take a bus — and still would — you take a bus by Safeway. When the buses came in, you'd take it at Safeway and go to Strawberry, and then get the bus from there to the College of Marin. It drops you right at the front door.

0:29:26 Nancy Emerson: And you're saying that's still how you would go?

0:29:27 Tia Smirnoff: That's still doing it. Yeah, yeah. They just change their time, they don't change the schedule. I mean, they change the time but they don't change the route, 'cause a lot of people have to go to college on that. And we've ridden our bikes to Special Olympics, when the girls helped. We rode our bikes there one time. And then there used to be a pizza place up there that we stopped off on the way back. But all that, it's just getting the kids involved in everything. And let's see, where else — oh, and across from — that's a good one. Across from Tam High, there used to be a restaurant. I guess it was a restaurant, it was called Hamby's. Do you remember that?

0:30:15 Nancy Emerson: Uh-huh.

0:30:16 Tia Smirnoff: Oh. There was a Hamby's right across — right now, it's some kind of a therapy place.

0:30:23 Nancy Emerson: Oh, okay. Just down Miller?

0:30:24 Tia Smirnoff: As you make the turn going up Gomez. There was a Hamby's there. Hamburgers. It was really good.

0:30:33 Nancy Emerson: So was that a hotspot for the teens from the high school?

0:30:38 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. But they're the ones that closed it down.

0:30:40 Nancy Emerson: The high school closed it?

0:30:40 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. Because there were steps going down, and they would sit there with their feet like this and eat their hamburgers. And people would not go over there because teenagers are teenagers, and they wouldn't cross it. I went in, they would just move. I said, "Come on, guys, I'm going through." They would move. But people were just afraid of the teenagers, I guess. The guy couldn't handle that. All his business was down there. But the kids enjoyed it. Just too much.

0:31:13 Nancy Emerson: Right. [chuckles]

0:31:13 Tia Smirnoff: And then there was a Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, Jack in the Box, all those places out there.

0:31:21 Nancy Emerson: I do remember those.

0:31:22 Tia Smirnoff: Tam High's always had open campus, so the kids could go and eat wherever they want. I don't know, I guess they still have places to go. You just know that you don't go down there between 11:00 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. [chuckles]

0:31:38 Nancy Emerson: If you're not a student, don't go for lunch. [chuckles]

0:31:40 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, that was a good one, though. And Jerry's Market was a drugstore, where Whole Foods is at. The craft, the groceries, Hamby's, Jack in the Box, the Greyhound, the Depot, jewelry store — oh, and there was a restaurant called The Palate.

0:32:02 Nancy Emerson: I don't know about that, either.

0:32:03 Tia Smirnoff: The Palate was down by where — I think there's a linen store there now. You know where Dimitri's was?

0:32:14 Nancy Emerson: Mm-hmm.

0:32:15 Tia Smirnoff: It's down towards Mill Valley —

0:32:16 Nancy Emerson: Okay, on Throckmorton.

0:32:17 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. But it burned down. And there was a studio in there called Curtis. He's the one that took pictures of the American Indians.⁵ Right next to that. And somehow, it burned. And so, all of that went flat and then they started rebuilding it again. But all his photographs and all those — I think they were prints. He had a lot of photographs of the same thing, so that means it was prints. A lot of that went down, and it was kinda sad, 'cause it was kind of interesting to go down and see his displays on his windows of different people doing different things. I don't know if it was his, but it was his stuff that was in there. And it burned down. And Dimitri's is now a brewery.

0:33:06 Nancy Emerson: Right. [chuckles]

0:33:07 Tia Smirnoff: And then the library was where across the street from Mt. Carmel Salvage Shop.

0:33:16 Nancy Emerson: Right.

0:33:17 Tia Smirnoff: My kids used to love to go there. On the bottom was the children's area.

0:33:21 Nancy Emerson: In the library?

⁵ Tia refers to the American photographer, Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952).—Nancy Emerson.

0:33:22 Tia Smirnoff: The library, mm-hmm. They had benches all the way around, and the books are all the way around, so the kids would just — I mean, it was really a nice place to be. And the sad part about that is, now, it has all these trees growing, and you don't see the building. You just see the trees. I wish that we could see the trees — I mean, I wish we could see the building. But that was kind of interesting.

0:33:48 Nancy Emerson: That made a transformation from library to private home.

0:33:51 Tia Smirnoff: Private homes, yeah. And it's that brick wall and you used to go down to the cellar, more or less. And it wasn't cold. It was just a nice, cozy, little spot. That was kind of interesting to see that. The lumber yard was there. They would always give us free sawdust. What do you use sawdust for?

0:34:11 Nancy Emerson: Right, what do you use sawdust for? [chuckles]

0:34:13 Tia Smirnoff: You put white glue in it and make it like a clay, and then you sculpt it. And after you're done with that, we used to make puppet heads. After you sculpt it, you sand it. You just have to be careful, 'cause sometimes, it would splinter on you. But if you wear gloves, it wouldn't hurt. But the Boy Scouts used to love to do that, just make little puppet heads.

0:34:36 Nancy Emerson: Great use for sawdust. [chuckles]

0:34:38 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. When they said "free sawdust," I said, "What are you gonna use free sawdust for?" And I thought, "Oh." Somewhere in my books, I saw that you get free sawdust — not that you'd get free sawdust, you would get sawdust and add glue to it. And I tried it. Or you can make little bowls, whatever. It was just like clay, except you don't have to bake it. It was good. I see they still have the sign, "Free Sawdust." I don't think anybody else used it but me. [chuckles]

0:35:03 Nancy Emerson: They still have some there for you.

0:35:04 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, probably. I should try it again, see if I can do something with it. Free sawdust was really good. Okay, let's see. Yeah, we made the wood sculptures. Oh, they used to have a materials store in Mill Valley. In fact, I think they had two materials stores. They had variety stores.

0:35:24 Nancy Emerson: Bride?

0:35:25 Tia Smirnoff: Variety.

0:35:25 Nancy Emerson: Oh, variety. Great. Like a general store?

0:35:26 Tia Smirnoff: Yea, five-and-dime. There was one down, now, that I think it's by the new restaurant that opened up there.⁶ Somewhere around there, there was a variety store. And then there was one going up to the Library. And I think that gentleman, Fred Myers, I think that's his name, Fred somebody, I think he belongs to the Seniors.⁷ I haven't seen him for a while. But he had a variety store there.

0:36:00 Nancy Emerson: I've seen the sign that where it said "Five and 10 Cent Store" — five-and-dime, right? — along Throckmorton, as you're going up to the Library.

0:36:06 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, that's the one.

0:36:07 Nancy Emerson: Yeah.

0:36:07 Tia Smirnoff: Then they opened up another one. And then there was another one down where, on the corner, on the main street. I think there was, by the locksmith's place, that they used to have a hardware, I think that was a hardware and a variety store.

0:36:34 Nancy Emerson: Oh, and variety.

0:36:34 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, I think it's done by one person that was a Mayor of Mill Valley.

0:36:38 Nancy Emerson: Okay.

0:36:39 Tia Smirnoff: A woman.

0:36:40 Nancy Emerson: Okay.

0:36:40 Tia Smirnoff: Ruth somebody. I used to take care of her kids.⁸

0:36:44 Nancy Emerson: Oh. Okay.

0:36:45 Tia Smirnoff: So, Mill Valley was a real town where you could buy — you could live there. Now, you have to go out to buy anything, except go to the groceries. But that was kinda — let's see. Oh, and they had the bead place. Did you guys ever go to the bead place, the Sundancer?

0:37:07 Nancy Emerson: No. [chuckles]

0:37:09 Tia Smirnoff: I think there's something like "Nine" in the name of the building. The Artisans, remember the Artisans?⁹

⁶ Playa opened in 2016.—Nancy Emerson.

⁷ Fred Myers was a member of the Mill Valley Seniors Club, which meets at the Mill Valley Community Center for a variety of activities. —Nancy Emerson.

⁸ Tia is referring to Ruth Schneider, who became Mill Valley's Mayor in 1990.—Nancy Emerson.

0:37:14 Nancy Emerson: Mm-hmm.

0:37:15 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, right above the Artisans, there was a bead store that the kids used to love to go. After their ice cream, they would go down and get the beads. And they had tables and tables and tables of beads. And the guy would just sit there and just, I don't know what he was doing, listening to music or something while you go shopping, and then you bring him your things. He'd count them and give them to him. You paid for it. That was kinda nice.

0:37:38 Nancy Emerson: With your Girl Scouts, do you still do things like that? Do you do beading, whatever?

0:37:43 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, yeah.

0:37:44 Nancy Emerson: Yeah? Just thinking about —

0:37:44 Tia Smirnoff: We do everything. We try. I mean, these girls have been here since probably fourth grade and now they're eighth grade. So we've done a little bit of that. We've done sewing, we've done beading. I tried to teach them knitting, and that's pretty hard for them, but I'm gonna try again. There's so many good things they could do with knitting.

0:38:06 Nancy Emerson: Good skill.

0:38:07 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:38:08 Nancy Emerson: I guess I'm thinking there's another bead store in Mill Valley now in the Locust area.

0:38:12 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, yeah.

0:38:13 Nancy Emerson: Maybe it replaced the one that was downtown.

0:38:15 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, I don't think anything could replace it. You'd get a handful of beads and it'd cost you \$0.50. Now, you get a handful of beads, it costs you \$50.

0:38:24 Nancy Emerson: Yeah, that's true.

0:38:25 Tia Smirnoff: And they're good beads. And we used to do the Indian beading on the looms, where you go back and forth, and the seed beads and all that. That was good. And before Artisans, it was storage. There was a storage place before Artisans came in. I think before Artisans, I think that was a chain store. And let's see.

⁹ The Artisans was a gallery for local artists that was located on E. Blithedale at the time Tia is referring to. In 2006 it moved to San Rafael and was subsequently closed. —Nancy Emerson.

0:38:48 Nancy Emerson: Do you recall the car dealerships downtown?

0:38:52 Tia Smirnoff: No.

0:38:54 Nancy Emerson: Okay.

0:38:54 Tia Smirnoff: I didn't see that.

0:38:55 Nancy Emerson: Maybe not something that was really interesting to you.
[laughs]

0:38:58 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, it wasn't. [chuckles] It wasn't interesting. I don't remember having any car dealerships. There was a bike shop. The bike shop now used to belong to Mr. Reynolds. The one on Miller Avenue, which is now something else.¹⁰ I got a lot of my bikes there, I used to buy bikes like crazy, and every time there was a good deal, he'd let me know.

0:39:19 Nancy Emerson: [chuckles] Somebody always needed a bike.

0:39:20 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. I used to ride my bike all over the place. I used to teach at Old Mill, at —

0:39:26 Nancy Emerson: You did?

0:39:28 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. Art. I taught art at Old Mill. I taught art at Homestead and Tam Valley and Marin Terrace.

0:39:37 Nancy Emerson: Wow! So tell me some more about that.

0:39:39 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, I started in Marin Terrace. One of my kids went to Marin Terrace, so I started volunteering, and then they had a kiln that had been there. Nobody used it, so I learned how to use it. And I started teaching arts in a little room, I think it was 12 x 12. So, teachers would send the kids down there and we'd do art. And then when I moved over here, like I said, there was storage room, I moved that storage room and I made the art room. I pushed all the storage to the side and made it. Half the room was the art room. And they had a kiln also, so I just felt at home.

And the teachers from Marin Terrace that came over here said, "Would you do art with me again?" And I said, "Sure." So I started doing it, and then the other teachers would say, "How come you're doing it with her and not with me?" I said, "Because they asked." I don't want to step on somebody's toes. They asked if I would do it, and the room was available. And like I said, I had Bob DeVilbiss, and he was very supportive. And whatever I wanted to do, he agreed to it. There was no harm on that. And then pretty soon, another teacher said, "Well, you know, you're doing it with them, will you do it

¹⁰ The bike shop was located on Miller Avenue, probably in the same location as Tam Bikes (357 Miller), though with a different name and owner.—Nancy Emerson.

with me?" I said, "Yeah. Sure." So I started doing the art. And then somehow, I started getting paid \$100 a month for doing art, 24 hours, and then doing my after-school [program]. I wasn't doing anything anyways, and it takes so long to walk home to come back, which a lot of times, I did. [chuckles] And then Kiddo! took over, and they got different people to do it.

0:41:16 Nancy Emerson: Ah, I see.

0:41:17 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, 'cause I had no art education. I was just a volunteer, just a parent volunteer.

0:41:25 Nancy Emerson: So would you say you did it for more than 10 years?

0:41:27 Tia Smirnoff: Oh yeah. I did it for a long time. Before Kiddo! came in. Kiddo! came in and started hiring educated people, I guess. They made a plan. I went to the meeting, and they were saying they wanted people with this education, that education. I said, "Whoops, there goes my job." And sure enough, they found a way. Well, the kids are happy, that's the main thing. And they loved art. So what else?

And then the principals from Homestead came and wanted me to teach their children. They were having a shortage of teachers. They didn't have Kiddo! I guess that's when Kiddo! came in, because there was not enough room and I was cheap. I would volunteer just to go, or they paid me minimum, minimum-minimum. And then Old Mill needed a person. They came and asked me if I would do it. Sure. And then I would volunteer at Edna Maguire now and then; I guess when their art teacher wasn't there. When they needed a sub, they called me. But I wasn't getting paid for that one. And I went to Park a couple of times, just the same thing. I don't know how or why, but they would come and say, "Can you teach art on this day?" I'd say, "Yeah, sure. I'll be there."

0:42:53 Nancy Emerson: So, I guess you might say Mondays at Tam Valley, Tuesdays at Homestead.

0:43:00 Tia Smirnoff: Right.

0:43:01 Nancy Emerson: And just make the rounds.

0:43:02 Tia Smirnoff: Right.

0:43:02 Nancy Emerson: Of the elementary schools.

0:43:03 Tia Smirnoff: Mm-hmm. And then come back here and do my thing. And then slowly, they started getting, like I said, they started getting different teachers, and I didn't have to go to Edna Maguire anymore. I don't understand how. I don't know who told them I was available but they would just call and say, "We need somebody at this place. Can you be there?" I said, "Yeah, sure." And sometimes I got paid, sometimes I didn't. I don't remember, but I'm sure I did, sometimes. And it was fun, knowing all the things and

knowing all the kids and meeting people. Sometimes, I'd have to go to Old Mill at 11:00 at night and turn the kiln a little higher, so I'd walk down and walk back.

0:43:53 Nancy Emerson: Wow.

0:43:54 Tia Smirnoff: And sometimes, I'd get a ride. It was interesting. I don't know why. [chuckles]

0:44:01 Nancy Emerson: You've had such an impact on the children, in particular of Mill Valley, but —

0:44:06 Tia Smirnoff: It's been fun. It's been really good.

0:44:08 Nancy Emerson: Such a wide reach.

0:44:10 Tia Smirnoff: Some of the kids I meet, I don't remember. Most of them, I do. If they're Tam Valley ones, I do, 'cause I've had them longer. But at the other schools, some of them would just come and say, "Oh, you were my art teacher." I said, "I don't remember that." [chuckles]

0:44:23 Nancy Emerson: Yeah. Well, I guess we could try to wrap up here and —

0:44:34 Tia Smirnoff: Oh, and Tam Valley had a hardware store.

0:44:37 Nancy Emerson: Tam Valley had a hardware store?

0:44:38 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, down here at —

0:44:41 Nancy Emerson: In the junction?

0:44:42 Tia Smirnoff: Across from Walgreens. Walgreens wasn't there, that's new.

0:44:45 Nancy Emerson: Of course, yeah.

0:44:46 Tia Smirnoff: But there was a hardware store there, a real nice hardware store.

0:44:49 Nancy Emerson: In the location where Walgreens is?

0:44:51 Tia Smirnoff: No, there's a body building or something in there. And there's a coffee shop at the side. That was a hardware store.

0:45:00 Nancy Emerson: That was convenient for you.

0:45:01 Tia Smirnoff: It was good, yeah. And the guys were so good. I would just go down and say, "I need this, and I need that," and they would find it for me. And also, if I had a problem, they would tell me how to deal with it. That was really good. And then

Goodman's came in. And once Goodman's comes in, it wipes out the little guy. And there was another hardware store in Mill Valley, also.

0:45:24 Nancy Emerson: I remember that.

0:45:25 Tia Smirnoff: So, it just —

0:45:27 Nancy Emerson: Yeah. Well, Tam Junction used to be another shopping center, I guess, for the local people, right?

0:45:36 Tia Smirnoff: For the local people, yeah. They had a post office there. They had the laundromat, they had the [grocery] store. I don't remember who came first, Bell or Cala. One of those was there first. The community center was just being built. It was just being organized. But we used to go to Kay Park. Have you seen Kay Park?

0:46:05 Nancy Emerson: Mm-hmm.

0:46:06 Tia Smirnoff: There used to be weeds up to your waist. And they had that round spinning thing that the kids loved. But that was all there was.

0:46:18 Nancy Emerson: That's been fixed up, though, now.

0:46:19 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. We would look at the map, and they would say, "There's a park here. Let's go to it." So we'd go to it, like Kay Park.

0:46:26 Nancy Emerson: How about the one that's down at the very end of Tam Valley? That park, way down there.

0:46:31 Tia Smirnoff: No, Kay Park is residential.

0:46:33 Nancy Emerson: Right, but then there's another one that's way back.

0:46:36 Tia Smirnoff: Eastwood it was, or something.

0:46:36 Nancy Emerson: Eastwood, yeah.

0:46:38 Tia Smirnoff: We used to go down there, too, and that was just a vacant lot. And now, it's beautiful. They worked hard and they worked hard on Kay Park, too. And we used to go to Sycamore Park, too, 'cause that was on the map. All those have improved. I worked on Sycamore Park when they had —

0:46:54 Nancy Emerson: Did you?

0:46:55 Tia Smirnoff: Same thing. They put an ad in and they said, "We need help at Sycamore Park," and my kids went in and had such a good time there. Just because it was a park. Just sit there and eat or run or play, whatever. And so this last time, they asked for

help, and they fixed it up really nice. Really, it's nice. They still don't have bathrooms, though. [laughs]

0:47:21 Nancy Emerson: Next wave of improvements, maybe.

0:47:22 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. No, I don't think they would. Kay Park, the neighbors, don't want — and the same thing, I think, is at Sycamore Park, and there's another one higher up. There's two parks on the same street. I don't remember what that one is. But they used to go down there.

0:47:41 Nancy Emerson: Your kids did?

0:47:42 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:47:42 Nancy Emerson: And you. [chuckles]

0:47:43 Tia Smirnoff: We used to all go down there. Yeah. My kids didn't travel alone; I went with them. [chuckles] It was a long way from home. We used to walk to see my son's baseball games, after school go down —

0:47:57 Nancy Emerson: To Boyle Park.

0:47:58 Tia Smirnoff: To Boyle Park, yeah, which is really improved also.

0:48:01 Nancy Emerson: Yes.

0:48:03 Tia Smirnoff: They've been working hard, taking care of the kids. I remember when — what is that park down here? Hauke Park. Well, it's not a park. That was kind of — we used to fly kites there.

0:48:19 Nancy Emerson: So it was an open space, but not officially a park?

0:48:22 Tia Smirnoff: Right. Open space, with nothing in there but grass and weeds and little mounds, where we could take our kites out there. And we used to fly kites at the Seminary also. That was kinda nice.

0:48:36 Nancy Emerson: Yeah?

0:48:37 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:48:39 Nancy Emerson: I think soccer has needed play space in all of those parks, so they've been improved to provide soccer fields, right?

0:48:49 Tia Smirnoff: Right. And they used to play baseball there, too. I think we had games there. They used to have baseball. And I haven't been there for a long time.

0:48:57 Nancy Emerson: At the Seminary?

0:49:00 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. We used to go down to the Seminary. My husband used to like to fly a kite, so we'd take all the kids to fly kites. And the middle school wasn't there. It was an open space. That's where we had the horse corral.

0:49:17 Nancy Emerson: Oh, horses? Yes. What about horses?

0:49:19 Tia Smirnoff: My daughter had a pony.¹¹ So, we used to go down there, and she was probably about eight or nine years old. Oh, there were elderly gentlemen and she was the queen of the place, 'cause she was the only kid there. And they would teach her things and she would listen to them. And say, "Like this?" And they thought that was the best thing that somebody would listen to them. [chuckles]

0:49:43 Nancy Emerson: So this was a private horse club that was in that area?

0:49:45 Tia Smirnoff: It's the S.M.H.A., Southern Marin Horseman's Association.

0:49:49 Nancy Emerson: Okay. And they were there where the community center is now?

0:49:53 Tia Smirnoff: Where the community center is. That's why all of that good stuff is growing there. [laughs]

0:49:57 Tia Smirnoff: And they used to have little rodeos — not rodeos, but skill things, where you ride. They didn't ever do the cow thing. I would've maybe cried if they did that.

0:50:10 Nancy Emerson: Oh, like roping the cow?

0:50:11 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah, they didn't do roping. No roping. They did skills like jumping and going into obstacles and things like that, and having the horse run a certain way. I didn't understand it. And we had a snack bar there, so they could buy snacks.

0:50:28 Nancy Emerson: So did kids from town come and watch these things? Or even adults come and watch the events?

0:50:32 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. People would come down. They would come down and some of the guys, well, they were very competitive among themselves, when they were teaching my daughter. And she used to win a lot of ribbons. They taught her well. And I think the main thing that they liked was that she listened. She listened, and she asked questions, and they just thought she was the smartest thing in the world. She's the cutest, the best.

0:51:03 Nancy Emerson: How old was she at this point?

¹¹ Tia is referring to her daughter Michelle.—Nancy Emerson.

0:51:04 Tia Smirnoff: She was probably about nine, eight or nine years old.

0:51:08 Nancy Emerson: And she had her own horse?

0:51:09 Tia Smirnoff: She had a pony. She had a pony.

0:51:10 Nancy Emerson: How did she acquire the pony?

0:51:13 Tia Smirnoff: A pony, she acquired because somebody found — [chuckles] Our neighbor saw this pony was going to be given away. No, it was gonna be sold, and they thought she'd like a pony. They bought it for her. They just said, "Look what we bought for her." [chuckles] I said, "Oh, my God. What am I going to do?" And in those days, land was free all around our neighborhood. There were no houses, so we could just put a fence up, and they kept him in there. But that little rascal used to run away a lot and she used to go looking for him. He never crossed the freeway, though. But he would go out and he'd eat up people's gardens. [chuckles]

He would go chomp 'em up, and we could hear him clomping, clomping, and she would go out, find him, and bring him in. And she would say, "Get over here! Come over here!" And he'd look at her and he'd come. It was a two-inch hole, he would get out of that. And then she found a friend who had a horse. They were looking for a place, so they put the horse and the pony together in a lot. So now, she had an adult that she could go riding down the Tennessee Valley, and they rode out there. And the lady taught her how to repair the fence and how to — things I never knew. So the pony didn't have to run away, go out of the lot. But she had that pony trained like a dog. She would say, "Get over here, Paco."

0:52:42 Nancy Emerson: So how long did she ride?

0:52:44 Tia Smirnoff: She rode for a couple years and then got too big that her feet dragged on the ground. She was at middle school, I think, almost going to high school. And she said, "This isn't fair. This isn't fair to him, that I'm so big." So she looked around and tried to find somebody for him, and she found this one boy in Santa Rosa that wanted a pony. And she went out and checked him out a couple of times, making sure he was the right guy for her pony. 'Cause that horse was only treated with kindness, and she wanted to make sure that this kid knew who he was. Then finally, she approved him and said, "He will take care of him." So she sold him for \$1. She didn't wanna sell him, but my husband said, "If you sell him, you're done with the responsibility." He said, "If you don't sell him, if something happens to the kid, you're responsible." So, she sold it to him for \$1 and she said, "I don't wanna sell my friend." But she sold him.

0:53:42 Nancy Emerson: And then she didn't ride after that? She was finished?

0:53:44 Tia Smirnoff: No. Well, she rode horses, then, after that, yeah. Wherever she could find a horse or somebody. And she would do things like you sponsor a horse. You

take care of him while somebody goes on vacation and you get to ride him. So that's kinda neat.

0:53:56 Nancy Emerson: Okay. So she stayed with her horse skills for a long time?

0:54:00 Tia Smirnoff: I think she can, if she wanted to. She would ride in San Francisco, off the Presidio. And that one, you pay. But over here, you sponsor a horse, 'cause when somebody would go on vacation, they'd need to feed the horse and all that. By feeding the horse, she gets to ride him. Otherwise, she'd have to pay. So it worked out good.

0:54:22 Nancy Emerson: Were you a horsewoman when you were young?

0:54:24 Tia Smirnoff: No. I don't know the first thing about horses. [laughs] Not a thing. And this is what the woman said, "Look what we bought for the baby." I said, "Oh, no. What am I gonna do with that?" [chuckles] How do you feed them? Do they wear diapers? [chuckles] And then after, she had a place for him, and then she decided that she wanted him closer, she wanted him in the backyard. So she put him in the backyard, but he lasted there for about one week. She had to clean up the poops and all that every single day, like every three hours. [chuckles] And she decided she'd put him back in the corral, and clean up there once a week. But it was a learning experience. It was good. [pause] No, I've had a good life.

0:55:09 Nancy Emerson: It sounds like you've had a great small-town life with a great impact as a resident.

0:55:16 Tia Smirnoff: It's been a good life. I don't have too many complaints. I've got a couple, but — [laughs]

0:55:21 Nancy Emerson: None that you want to talk about?

0:55:22 Tia Smirnoff: Nah. No. Not worth it. I don't want to put space in my head for those.

0:55:27 Nancy Emerson: Oh, good idea.

0:55:29 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah.

0:55:29 Nancy Emerson: Well, thank you so much for recording this interview, and hopefully, it'll be available for all your students and all the adults.

0:55:39 Tia Smirnoff: It's been fun talking about Mill Valley — the changes. And I think if you leave and you come back the next week, things are still changing. Look what they're doing down on Miller Avenue. How is that gonna come out? 'Cause hopefully, it's gonna come out as nice as they want it to. But right now, it's crazy.

0:55:57 Nancy Emerson: [chuckles] That's true. And you've probably seen it in a couple of other renovations over the years, haven't you?

0:56:03 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. But not as big as this.

0:56:05 Nancy Emerson: This is a big one.

0:56:06 Tia Smirnoff: It used to be ugly coming into Mill Valley. And now, they planted, by Tam High, they planted all this stuff. It's really nice. They are working hard on it. And I think one time, they planted something that died because it wasn't something that could take all the motor exhaust or something like that. But it is nice. It's good coming into Mill Valley.

0:56:27 Nancy Emerson: It makes it a more welcoming entry.

0:56:29 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. And the same thing with Tam Valley. With that store being there, it looks a lot nicer.

0:56:33 Nancy Emerson: Oh, for sure.

0:56:34 Tia Smirnoff: They've done a great job.

0:56:35 Nancy Emerson: Yeah, it's good. Okay. Thank you so much, Tia.

0:56:40 Tia Smirnoff: Okay.

[break in interview]

0:56:45 Nancy Emerson: This is part two of the interview with Tia, because we found a few more things that we want to talk about. Okay, so Tia, you were gonna tell us something about some hobbies.

0:56:56 Tia Smirnoff: Okay. Besides kids, my hobbies were miniatures, teddy bears, cloth dolls, and puppets.¹² And I used to go to conventions, just to go visit the city. If they had a convention in Kansas, I would go to that. Then you do workshops, and you meet people. And it's just a fun time to be. On the puppets, we would stay at colleges. So I've been to a lot of colleges. MIT, Cal, San Diego, Boston, all these colleges. We use it during summertime, and we get to see the college and get to see the town. Get to meet good people. And it was so much fun. This is my adult time. Besides taking care of the kids. And that's during summertime.

0:57:45 Nancy Emerson: At these conferences, were you learning techniques, or were you exchanging your collectibles?

¹² Also, origami and string figures.—Tia Smirnoff.

0:57:50 Tia Smirnoff: Both. We were learning how to do different things. Like, in miniatures, if I was having trouble gluing things, there'd be somebody there would show you there's different glues for different things, or having... We used to make a lot of furniture. Henry would have trouble, like, "How do you do this, make things happen?" And they would teach you how to do that. And we'd have a luncheon. We'd have breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and every time you sat down for something, there would be a little present there for you that somebody had made. And we had people, like 300 or 400 people there. Then they started going down, down, down. And I haven't done that for a long time, 'cause I can't travel well. But I think it's down. Our club has disbanded, because we couldn't keep it together. Everybody was passing. They were just gone.

0:58:49 Nancy Emerson: Sounds like young people aren't coming into these clubs.

0:58:51 Tia Smirnoff: They weren't. They weren't coming in. And we've invited and invited them, but they just weren't interested. And yet now, I still get their magazines, and I see that there a lot of young ones starting. They're starting to get them young, like 10 and 12, so they would continue.

0:59:06 Nancy Emerson: Did you do these different collectibles at the same time? Were you doing miniatures, and teddy bears, and dolls?

0:59:12 Tia Smirnoff: Yes.

0:59:13 Nancy Emerson: And puppets?

0:59:14 Tia Smirnoff: Puppets, I think, was my longest one. I've always loved puppets, or teddy bears. They just happen, and then all of a sudden, you find these other people that like to do the same thing. For teddy bears, I used to travel to San Jose. And we used to have conventions in San Jose at the Red Barn, a lot. And the same thing, you teach. You sell. I don't sell, but you buy things and you learn how to do things. And I'm not one of the professional ones, but these people get big bucks for whatever they make.

0:59:57 Nancy Emerson: What did you do with the items that you made and collected?

1:00:01 Tia Smirnoff: No, I keep them. Some of them, I can't find, I put away.

1:00:06 Nancy Emerson: But you never sold them?

1:00:08 Tia Smirnoff: I don't sell them. No. I make them and I don't sell them. Cloth dolls, the same thing. There was a cloth doll exhibit at Petaluma about two months ago, and you see all these fantastic people make dolls. Dolls are not just a form. They decorate them, they dress them. Some are made just with cloth, and their bodies. It's really neat.

1:00:35 Nancy Emerson: So you're still going to some of the close-by conventions?

1:00:38 Tia Smirnoff: I go if I know it's on, just to look and see what they're doing.

1:00:43 Nancy Emerson: Are you making any, still?

1:00:44 Tia Smirnoff: Right now, I'm making some dolls, but they're just cloth dolls. There just the two-piece, back and front, and arms and legs. And I'm crocheting a little dress for them because they need some dolls for a bazaar. They need me to make something for a bazaar we're gonna have at the Mill Valley Community Center. So I was gonna make a couple dolls. I will make them, by the time we get it done. But they're little ones. And if they sell, fine. If they don't sell, I'll just add them to my — [chuckles]

1:01:14 Nancy Emerson: So is your house full of these little guys?

1:01:19 Tia Smirnoff: They're so full, yes. [chuckles] They're so full, they're on the floor. I need to make cupboards, or something to put them up on. But no, I like the stuff I make. My smallest puppet I made was probably about two inches. And I made a teddy bear, and I made a Mexican little girl.

1:01:40 Nancy Emerson: Were these puppets that would fit on a finger?

1:01:42 Tia Smirnoff: No, these are marionettes. I just made them for display. They fit into — looking like that, yeah. That's what I teach at the Fall Arts Festival. I like to make a puppet. Because I had a friend called Lettie who used to be a professional puppeteer. And then we just worked together and I learned a lot from her. And she's gone now. But now, the grove in Mill Valley, when the Fall Festival goes on, they call that Lettie Schubert Grove.

1:02:20 Nancy Emerson: And you're teaching making puppets and marionettes to the children in the —

1:02:25 Tia Smirnoff: I have taught, yes. I made up my own marionette. I have a nice, cute, little dog that I like to teach kids. And I've taught adults, too. I taught one adult lady who's going to take it to prison to teach the female inmates how to make a little marionette. It's a little dog that's very easy to make. What else? I've taught that puppet to young girls who are pregnant. There's some kind of a rescue for girls who are pregnant and have no place to go. We did a workshop on that. And that was kind of a hit, 'cause they made it for their first baby, that they were very happy with. And I've taught teddy bears to a different set of girls, but the same organization. No, I like teaching.

1:03:22 Nancy Emerson: Yeah, that sounds like another —

1:03:24 Tia Smirnoff: I'm teaching a teddy bear workshop this — I think it's in February, for Girl Scout leaders. Simple to teach, so they teach the girls. The leaders learn, pass it on to the girls.

1:03:36 Nancy Emerson: That's wonderful.

1:03:37 Tia Smirnoff: So it's just a good hobby. Very simple, something they could do all the time.

1:03:42 Nancy Emerson: Great. And you're still doing it. Keeping busy and teaching it still, which is good.

1:03:49 Tia Smirnoff: Yeah. I like spreading my knowledge to whoever wants to listen.

1:03:55 Nancy Emerson: Yeah. Okay, thank you.