Mill Valley Oral History Program
A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library

RICHARD DILLON

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Carol Wilson in 2000

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Born on January 16, 1924 in Sausalito, Richard “Dick” Dillon attended Central School in Sausalito and Tamalpais High School. He was drafted right after Pearl Harbor and sent to Europe where he was wounded, hospitalized, sent back to the front, and wounded a second time. Richard earned his master’s degree from UC Berkeley, taught at several universities, and eventually became the Sutro Librarian. In 1950, he married Barbara Allester, with whom he had three children. Richard was a Milley Award recipient for his long career in writing and teaching. He authored several books, the first of which was *Embarcadero.*

In this oral history, Richard describes daily life in Mill Valley, attending the local schools, memories of local residents and shops, the 1929 fire, and his experience in the service during World War II.

Oral History of Richard Dillon

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Carol Wilson: I am Carol Wilson and today is February 18, 2000. I am at the home of Richard H. Dillon at 98 Alta Vista Avenue here in Mill Valley. Mr. Dillon is a longtime Mill Valley resident and he lives here with his wife Barbara.

Let me start by congratulating you for receiving the 1999 Milley Award. I would also like to thank you for having me here today to interview you for the Mill Valley Historical Society. Where were you born, Dick?

Richard Dillon: I was born in Sausalito on January 16, 1924 at 524 Johnson Street which is now 508 Johnson Street and the house is completely remodeled so you wouldn't recognize the place.

Carol Wilson: Was that the family home?

Richard Dillon: Yes, that was my mother and father's home and I was born there. I would like to say that there is no historical plaque denoting the occasion as they have in England.

Carol Wilson: How did your parents happen to come to Sausalito?

Richard Dillon: My father was in the military. He was a career soldier and was stationed at Fort Baker and Fort Barry, so he lived in Sausalito. He married my mother who lived in Sausalito and they set up housekeeping there. My father was born in Watertown, Wisconsin. My mother was born in Chicago, Illinois so they were both Mid-Westerners. My father's name was William Tarleton Dillon. He was called "Captain" after he retired. My mother's name was Alice Mabel Burke. She always went by Mabel. She did have kin in Mill Valley, but I can't remember their names.

My parents were married in Sausalito and they lived in small quarters at Fort Baker. My father was a non-commissioned officer, I think. I remember seeing the house, but it is gone now.

My father was a career army officer. My mother was very sharp and intelligent, but I don't think she went to college. She did attend Girls' High and Lowell High School in San Francisco. She commuted from Petaluma, where she lived with her father, to San Francisco. She then worked in the City during the earthquake and fire. She had a story about going to the City after the earthquake to her office to rescue some things from her desk. She was a typist, or what they called a "typewriter". She couldn't make it through the tumbled-down bricks and dead cows. Apparently, they used to drive the cattle in from Butcher Town and it was a real mess.

Carol Wilson: Was there a ferry from Petaluma to San Francisco?

Richard Dillon: No, there was not. I recall that her father was in the fruits and vegetable business, but my niece thinks that he was in pickling business in Petaluma. I think that my mother ordered vegetables from the City and had them shipped to her father. So she did commute on the ferries from Sausalito.

My father was an electrician as a very young man in Wisconsin. He went to the Army during the Spanish-American War and then to the Boer War, illegally as an American. He was

fighting with the Boers as an Irish-American against the British. At that point he changed his name. My real name should be Dervin. What he did was change his name when he was with the Boer Forces. Somewhere in my papers I have a Change of Name document of 1899 signed by a cornet, which I believe was a second lieutenant in the Boer army. My father took his mother's name, so there was not much difference.

Carol Wilson: Why did he do that?

Richard Dillon: I believe it was illegal for an American citizen to go over there and fight for someone else. However, my son went to Ireland this summer and he said that apparently a lot of the people there changed their names often for some social or business reasons, not criminal. Quite often they take the other side of the family's name. My maternal side of the family's name is Dillon and my paternal side's name is Dervin. We are all Dillons now, but should be Dervins.

My father served in our Army during World War I and was gassed. When we were young, we used to visit him at Letterman Hospital in the Presidio. Some of my early memories were of taking the ferryboat from Sausalito to San Francisco to visit my father. I remember on those trips we would stop at a little coffee shop at the end of the streetcar line near the Presidio. I always had a fried egg sandwich, which was my favorite when I was eight or nine years old.

Carol Wilson: Was your father hospitalized a long time?

Richard Dillon: Yes, he suffered from mustard gas poisoning. He died in 1938 when I was fourteen.

Carol Wilson: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Richard Dillon: Yes, I had three brothers. John A. Dillon, known as Jack, lives here in Mill Valley. Eugene, who was the next to me in age, died in Fresno. I was the baby. William, known as Bill, was the oldest and he is no longer living. Bill was an F.B.I. agent, Jack was a banker, Gene was a teacher and I am a librarian and writer.

Carol Wilson: What schools did you attend?

Richard Dillon: I went to Central School in Sausalito. I remember playing on that field and attending the classes in the schoolhouse above the playground. I am glad to say that the building is still there and now houses the Library, City Hall and the Sausalito Historical Society. They have done a nice job on the old building.

After Central School, I went to Tamalpais High School. It was wonderful commuting on the Northwestern Pacific electric trains. I went there from 1937 to 1941.

I went to University of California at Berkeley in 1941 and when the war started, I received a deferment until I received and A.A. degree. By going double semesters, I was able to get two years done early. I received my A.A. degree in February of 1943 and was immediately drafted.

Carol Wilson: Do you remember any special teachers at Tamalpais High School?

Richard Dillon: Oh, yes. There were two teachers at Tam that I mentioned at the Milley Awards. One was Louis Wasserman, a teacher I remember well. He was a great teacher. He taught public speaking, which included vocabulary and how to quiet your fears in front of an audience. He had such high standards. His course was like a college course and I was impressed with it. His daughter, Abby Wasserman is active in the Milley Awards and she is the editor and publications person at the Oakland Museum. His son, John, was the famous jazz critic at the *Chronicle*.

Another wonderful teacher was John R. George who was our journalism teacher and adviser on the school paper. I wrote an awful Herb Caen-like column called "Rumah Hazzit" for the *Tam News*.

Carol Wilson: The *Tam News* was wonderful, wasn't it?

Richard Dillon: Of course, we made it that way. The Print Shop was there also, however I did not take Print Shop, I just wrote for the school paper.

Carol Wilson: Who was the Principal at that time?

Richard Dillon: Mr. Wood was still there. His nickname was the Duke and because I ran for office, they called me "The Duke". I remember they put up signs saying vote for "The Duke". When Mr. Wood saw them, he pulled them down.

The kids seemed to pick up that nickname for me. The Irish Dillons went to France — the Irish were always fighting somewhere. My father went to South Africa to save the Boers and didn't. In the eighteenth century the Irish went to France to fight the British. Somehow, one of my "relatives" became an heir to the Holy Roman Empire and it was a story that I told and I became known as "Duke" Dillon.

Carol Wilson: What kind of activities did you do in high school?

Richard Dillon: Everything, I guess. It seems impossible, but I always hated math. I washed out of navigation in the Air Force, I can't balance my check book, and I don't understand computers, and I have a manual typewriter, but I think I was in Math Club, which sounds odd. I was in the Rifle Club. We were not politically correct and we were allowed to become marksmen and expert in shooting .22's. I went out for track, but I was terrible, and hurt my foot, so didn't do much there. I was in Honor "T" Society and the California State Scholastic Federation.

Miss Vera Stump gave me the Spanish Medal for four years of A's in Spanish.

Carol Wilson: The Historical Room at the Mill Valley Library has all the past issues of the *Tam Pai*. Did you have a job as a teenager?

Richard Dillon: Well, I was a teenager during the Depression and there were not that many jobs. For four years I delivered the *San Francisco Shopping News*. It was a free paper that came out twice a week. I made on dollar and sixty-six cents a week and I put away a dollar a week for college. With sixty-six cents I would treat myself to a *Wild West Weekly* pulp magazine and a milkshake. That was my big treat.

Carol Wilson: Did you go to movies?

Richard Dillon: Oh, sure. My mother gave me money for movies. My father was rarely around. He died in 1938 when I was fourteen and before that, he was usually in the hospital.

Carol Wilson: Did you do any hiking in those days?

Richard Dillon: Oh, yes, we did that all the time. We went over to Jolly Beach at Cronkhite and over to Tennessee Cove.

Carol Wilson: Did you hike on Mt. Tamalpais?

Richard Dillon: No, not on Mt. Tam as it was further away and he had no car and were broke. To get there we would have had to hitchhike, which my mother did not like, or buy passage on the train and we didn't have money for that. We hiked mostly around Sausalito. We would take a bag lunch and make a day of it.

Carol Wilson: Do you recall the 1929 fire on Mt. Tamalpais?

Richard Dillon: I was rive years old then and I think I remember it, but I am not sure if I do or if I just remember hearing about it later. I have a vague recollection of my mother holding me up to the window to see Mt. Tam burning. We were in our "gas kitchen" in our old fashioned house. My job was to stoke the coal and wood stove in the other kitchen. At some time when I was little, my folks added on to the house what they called the "gas kitchen". It had a gas stove and it faced north so that we could see Mill Valley and Mt. Tam.

It did not impress me as much as the show did when it snowed in Sausalito in 1932 or 1933.

Carol Wilson: How about the Depression Years, do you remember them?

Richard Dillon: Well, I didn't know we were in a depression. We didn't have much money, but we always had real butter, and steaks or a leg of lamb on Sunday, and things like that. I remember how multi-ethnic was little Sausalito. We had *bacalao,* Portuguese dried cod, which was like Scot's Finnan haddie, also Italian pasta *asciutta* and dishes like that. There was no poverty, but we had no car, no vacations or trips. When my father was alive we did have a small cabin in Inverness Park. It was a tiny cabin and had tent platforms for the four boys. It was wonderful then, but it was vandalized during the war and left untended so my mother sold the property. Those were our only trips until my father got so ill that he couldn't drive.

Carol Wilson: Did you have a car then?

Richard Dillon: Yes, I don't think that my mother knew how to drive. My father drove or one of the older boys drove. Going to Inverness Park was our only vacation. It was so different then. It was real country with deer and other wild life. My Brothers teased me by telling me to watch out for the bears.

I must mention that we had a dog then. It was a Llewellin Setter. They are very rare today. They look like an Irish setter, but have blotches of orange-brown on their coat. His name was Bob and he was a very nice dog.

Carol Wilson: How about the train and ferry system, you said that you took the train to school. What do you remember about them?

Richard Dillon: They were wonderful and I really enjoyed them. Ever since, I have been interested in railroad history and maritime history, and the sea and ships and cruising. All the experience that I had on the train was going to Tam, of course. We took the Gerry to the city. I would go with my mother for a boring day of shopping at the Emporium. We would also take it to visit my father. But I do remember the nice meals that we had. Even during the Depression we got good meals. I even remember the restaurants that we went to. We went to the Paris Café, which was a French restaurant, and for seventy-five cents we had a fine meal. Another place that we went to was the Merry-Go-Round Restaurant, which I always liked because it had an endless belt with desserts going by and we could take our pick.

I have a memory of when I was in high school of hitchhiking to Mill Valley on the weekend to trade the magazines that I collected. We would trade two old ones for a new one. These pulp magazines were westerns or adventures or sea stories. I went to a little hole-in-the-wall bookstand near Esposti's. Do you know where that could have been?

Carol Wilson: Yes, there was a pool hall on Throckmorton and out in front there was a newspaper stand where magazines and candy were sold. It was near where La Ginestra is now. The Hub Theater was across the street. Do you remember the Hub Theater?

Richard Dillon: Was that where the barbershop is now?

Carol Wilson: Yes, the Hub Theater was Mill Valley's first theater. It was opened in 1915 with the showing of a Charlie Chaplin film. It was in use until the Sequoia Theater opened in 1929. Do you remember any natural disasters like floods or earthquakes or fires?

Richard Dillon: Well, we had earthquakes in the thirties, but they didn't shake us up too badly. There were no fires in Sausalito that I remember. Remember that I didn't move to Mill Valley until 1953. We lived in Berkeley before moving here. That is where our children were born. We bought this house in 1967 and before that we lived just down the block at 3 Altamont.

Carol Wilson: I wanted to ask you about World War II. You said you were at the University of California at Berkeley, is that right?

Richard Dillon: Yes, I was at Berkeley when Pearl Harbor was announced. I still have memories of the record I was playing at that time. It was Ray Noble's "Just Once for All Time". IT was one of his lesser-known pieces. I remember it was December 7, 1941 and I was studying for exams and I was very distracted, naturally, when I heard the news.

I remember the blackouts in Berkeley. It was black as pitch. Even the streetcars stopped during the blackout. I was sent an induction notice and I went to San Francisco to report and I was given a deferment while I was in college. I was deferred until I was nineteen years old, which would have been 1943.

I went to the Army. I was a terrible soldier. I was given my highest command almost on the first day. Because of my education, they made me an Acting Corporal. I had to escort a group of guys down to the Presidio at Monterey.

Next I was sent to Camp Wallace in Texas which was near Galveston. It was near a town called Texas City, which was later destroyed by a blast. Ammunition exploded and wiped out Texas City.

At Camp Wallace I was in the Coast Artillery. This was in February or March of 1943 and anti-aircraft was part of the Coast Artillery. So I was in the anti-aircraft branch of the Coast Artillery and we had 90mm aircraft cannons. I did not like it at all, so I volunteered for another job. Transportation Corps sounded great to me as it was based in New Orleans and I had always wanted to go there, but one had to be classified as a 4-F, not a 1-A, so that was out. The only other option was the Air Corps, which was part of the Army then. I was accepted for flight training. It was a waste of time, as I was terrible. I wanted to be a bombardier, but after all kinds of mechanical testing, they made me a navigator. I still don't understand how that happened as my mind doesn't grasp that kind of thing. I was a total loss and I washed myself out of the navigation by ruining a test. My next choice was to be an aerial-gunner, which was fine with me as it offered good pay and I would be a sergeant. What I did not realize was how few of them came home. So after washing out of the Air Corps, they dumped me into the Infantry.

I probably was the only person who, it would appear, would not get the hang of basic training. My friends think that this is very funny. I went through basic training three times**:** once in the Coast Artillery, then in the Air Corps, and finally in the Infantry. Then I sailed from Boston on an old liner. I remember the brass plates on the liner said in German, "Amerika". The name had been changed, of course, when we took it over. It was a World War I liner that had been captured or interned by us and then used as a troop transport. We sailed to Liverpool and landed in the middle of the night. Then we boarded a train and traveled immediately to Southampton and were put aboard a very dirty, unkempt Royal Navy destroyer and sent over to Normandy. This is long after the landings, probably in early October. It was very interesting seeing the breakwater that had been formed there. It had been made of sunken ships, including warships and transports, to make a p protective basin. Inside the breakwater were two mulberries, which were artificial harbors. Our American one had been destroyed by a storm, so we came in on the British beach. It was probably either Sword or Gold Beach. We landed on this floating harbor and marched ashore. We were then loaded into trucks. I remember seeing Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer and I will never forget it**:** seeing the sign and the church. I took my wife to see it in 1984. As I had been a reader all my life, I knew about these towns. I read about the road races at Le Mans and Laval. We were trucked to those towns and then boarded a train and went to Verdun, the great World War I battle site. My father had told me about it and it might have been the area where he was gassed during World War I. We could still see remnants of the war there. It was unbelievable to be in World War II and still see artificial mounds and gullies that were part of the trench warfare of World War I.

From Verdun we went to Dijon or somewhere like that in Burgundy. And then we went to Luneville, in Lorraine, where we were put up in a barracks. My wife and I visited it years later and it turned out to be royal palace grounds with cobbled stone court and iron fencing. It was a big stone structure. From Luneville we went east towards Strasbourg, which I never reached, to Le Foret du Perroy which was a real mess. That is the first place we saw combat. I saw my first dead Germans and all these blasted trees and things like that. It was there that I saw my first battle action. We overran a German tank that was hiding. It probably had motor trouble. They got it working and got out of there. They were probably as scared as we were. The tank ran and we hugged the ground and they fired a round or two at us. Some officer ran up with a bazooka southing, "where's the ammo?" I never did find out what happened, but they probably called in the artillery to get rid of it. That was the first time I saw any action, really.

Then we made an advance, and I saw my first dead Americans and it was not pleasant to see. The first guy I saw was a B.A.R. man, a Browning Automatic Rifle man. And then we saw surrendering Germans and I never forgot them. My memories are still sharp fifty years later. They were young kids surrendering and their faces were just drained of blood, just white with shock and fear. A lot of them were very young, just fifteen or sixteen.

We were near a railroad, which ran near Strasbourg, and we were on one side of a hill and the Germans were on the other side. We took over a German encampment, which was dumb as the trenches and foxholes were all dug. We were tired and though we might as well use the

area the Germans has prepared. The Germans were very efficient and had the encampment all plotted, to the inch, on their maps, we got artillery at night and mortar rounds during the day. Finally I got tired of being in the hole in the ground, being wet, so I got up and walked around to stretch my legs and was hit with a 50 mm. mortar round. I could hear it coming, sort of a fluff, fluff, fluff and boom. It knocked me down, knocked off my helmet and so forth. The date was October 23, 1944. I was wounded in the left and right foot and the left knee. I was injured mostly in my left foot. I asked my foxhole buddy, whom I hardly knew, to go get my helmet, which he did. He could have been killed! He helped get my boots off. I was in pain and I especially remember the intense heat as the shell fragments are red hot metal. Finally a medic came up and gave my some morphine. I remember the book came with big canisters of hot soup or field rations and he helped me into his jeep and took me out. On the way out we came under shell fire and we had to abandon the jeep. I found it is quite easy to walk on broken feet when you are being shelled. I guess that by then the morphine had taken effect. So we ran and hobbled and got off the road. When it quieted down, we went back to the jeep and went on to a field hospital. I remember they had immobilized me by putting me in double casts all the way up. Initially, they used sulfanilamide, which they no longer use as it has side effects. Penicillin wasn't in use then and they used sulfa on the wounds. I then went to a real hospital in Dijon and there I was operated on and cleaned up. I was put on a hospital train which was wonderful with its clean beds and comforts and went all the way down to Aix en Provence in the south of France near Marseilles. I was put into the old Hotel de Dieu, which was a hospital there, it was an ancient stone building. I remember that it snowed while I was there. It was a nice situation being in a hospital and well cared for. There were a lot of Italian prisoners-of-war who were very nice and they did a lot of the work in the hospital as there were not many nurses. These Italians were so happy to be out of the war.

In the first hospital I was in, which was the field hospital in Lorraine, a German who was the antithesis of the big, blond Nazi, took care of us. He was dark-faced with a five o'clock shadow and he looked like Max Schmeling, the boxer, heavy faced and dark. He was badly wounded and limped around, but was very helpful to us. It was surprising to be taken care of by someone like that.

I was in Aix for three months recovering and did not look forward to going back to the front. While I was there, I read a lot of books. I had stacks of them. Earlier, I had had a great collection of *Armed Forces Editions*, which were early paperbacks. I had them in my duffel bag and when I was hit, I lost them.

Soon after I was wounded, the Battle of the Bulge happened. The Bulge was fought in November or December. The plan was to evacuate us from the hospital in Aix to Algiers as they thought the Germans would come all the way down to the Mediterranean! So it was touch and go for a while.

While we were there in Aix, we did have some fun. The people from Provence would occasionally entertain us with flutes, accordions, and folk dances. Once we went to a U.S.O. touring theater and saw Katherine Cornell in the Barretts of Wimpole Street. It was good. It was

in a wonderful ornate, red plush, antique theater. My wife and I tried to find it forty years later when we were there. I gave up, but she didn't. It turned out to be Le Bijou Cinema. Except for seeing Jack Benny and Frances Langford in Czechoslovakia, that was the only touring company that I saw.

I then had to go back to the war. I went first to Belgium. Then we trained in Holland in the eastern coal mining country of Limburg. Two towns were together, they were Rumper-Brunssum. The people were wonderful, they were so grateful for being rescued. The Germans had taken everything from them so we fed them and they tried to treat us. I remember their home baked break with sugar.

We trained on duck ponds with the "Duck", the amphibious truck. I was not in good enough shape to cross the Rhine in that thing so they let me cross in a jeep when they ran a pontoon bridge across. I came with my company's armor-artificer. The place that we crossed was Dinslaken near Duesberg, which was in the Rhine Province near the Ruhr. We advanced through the Ruhr and we marched right through to Essen where we saw the Krupp Works whose armament ruined us with bombardment. We were trying to pinch off some Germans and we did. There was not much fighting at that stage. I had been in "Love" Company, 315th Infantry Regiment, 79th Division when I got hit. That is the Cross of Lorraine Division which was popular with French civilians, who identified with us because of that symbol. The Free French did, too.

When I returned from the hospital, I was in the same division but no longer in the 7th Army, but in the 9th Army for the Rhine crossing. This is where I lose track of what happened. This must have been in March. The Germans quit in April. We did police duty in the army of occupation moving around often to German army bases and a little bit of anti-guerrilla activity, but not much.

Hitler tried to get his hard-shell people to form so called werewolf units. These guerrilla units performed night attacks, but they had had it by then, as Germany was in ruins and the Russians were there. So I did a lot of guard duty and that kind of thing. One of the painful memories happened while on guard duty at a checkpoint. There were two of us on duty and I remember that it was cold and we had a fire going and the tow of us got so sleepy from the smoke and hear that we fell asleep. I remember, luckily, waking just in time as an American officer approached. The penalty for sleeping on duty was severe. I just hated that post. We were supposed to stop anybody from returned from the East, fleeing the Russians, and, of course, we stopped nobody. I noticed that nobody was going East. We were in Czechoslovakia on V-J Day.

I was lucky as I got to go to the Biarritz-American University in the French-Basque area. I studied two things. One was radio acting, which I did not care for as it was so repetitious. I then took two courses in Latin American history. I was asked to stay at the school, but I foolishly declined as I wanted to return home.

As we were returned home on a point basis, I was not eligible to return home at once, so I joined the army of occupation in Germany. We were guarding all the displaced persons that had been imprisoned by the Germans. They were the slave laborers who were mostly Russians. We

did not take any of the holocaust camps, but the "DPs[1]" were in dire conditions. They were skeletal and in ragged striped uniforms. The Nazis, apparently, put prisoners in striped pajamas. The poor Italian ex-prisoners were in ragged condition, too. Hitler did not forgive them for changing sides.

There must have been ten thousand Russians in one camp. I remember two Finns who passed themselves off as Russians, came to me and spoke in broken English and told me that they had been canal barge captains.

I found that the Russians were breaking into their own warehouse and stealing the food so I had to call a sergeant and officer and finally a Russian liaison officer who told us to shoot them. Well, we Americans don't do that. We were not about to shoot them.

Carol Wilson: Was there much connection between the Russians and the Americans?

Richard Dillon: No, but we did have liaison officers. I was only a Pfc. at that time. I remember it as a boring, unpleasant time. I finally made it home.

I went over to England on a liner and returned on a C-3, which was awful. I was sick the whole way, I remember hanging over the rail. It was terrible. I returned in February and it was a very rough crossing. New York Harbor was terrific. It was my first time I had seen it and the Statue of Liberty. I paid attention to my seniors who told us to throw away all the stuff that we had salvaged and picked up over there so I had already thrown away captured guns. My prized possession was my eiderdown quilt, which helped me survive in combat, but I threw it away too. That and a woman's fox fur wrap, the kind with little legs attached. I had had them to keep warm at the front.

We came ashore and met these hateful Germans who were running the food line in a camp that I think was in New Jersey. I will never forget that, being "greeted" by German prisoners who were surly, arrogant and nasty. Then I had a quick trip home to Camp Beale, later called Beale Air Force Base, in Marysville, for discharge. I took a train to Oakland and a ferryboat to San Francisco and a Greyhound bus to Sausalito.

I arrived home at the end of the week and I was going to spend at least a semester on vacation just reading and loafing, but my mother insisted that I go over to Berkeley to Cal to register on that first Monday home. I did and am still very grateful that I did. I went back to my history major at the junior level. My mother also urged me to file for compensation for being shot, which I thought was no big deal as so many men had been wounded, but it was good as I received a modest compensation. The G.I. Bill was very helpful. I worked, too. I ran the checkroom at the library and I also ushered at U.C. Extension Course lectures and movies. I lived very modestly in a boarding house called Durant Hall, which was across the street from the Durant Hotel.

Carol Wilson: Had you noticed a change in Sausalito when you came home?

[1] Displaced persons—Editor.

Richard Dillon: No, I did not come home to Sausalito really. I went directly to Berkeley. I do know that Marinship changed the whole town. My mother took in shipyard workers.

Carol Wilson: What did you major in at Cal?

Richard Dillon: I was a history major and specialized in Mexican History which I changed eventually to Western American History. I took my Masters degree in Mexican History and wrote my thesis on *The Rise of Álvaro Obregón* who was the general who became president and was then assassinated like Villa and several others. He was an interesting man and part of my thesis was printed. This was one of my early publications, in a sense, as they lifted part of it and translated it into Spanish and published it in Mexico.

I worked a year to get both the general secondary and junior college credential. Normally, you get just one, but I got both as a precaution. At the same time I taught at St. Mary's College High School in Berkeley. I hated that, as it was terrible. It was like being a policeman. The discipline was awful as public school rejects were being "dumped" in Catholic schools. It was not a good experience, but it did cure me of a desire to teach. SO I went back to school for a second bachelor's degree, Bachelor of Library Science.

I graduated in 1950 in June. I got married in June and went to work in July and stayed at it for twenty-nine years at Sutro Library in San Francisco. I was an assistant there called a Junior Librarian. My boss was a wonderful woman named Helen Bruner, who was a fine librarian. When she retired after I had been there for three years, I took over and stayed there until 1979 when I retired early at age 55. I was at the Public Library Building for ten years and then almost twenty years at University of San Francisco. The Sutro Library later moved to San Francisco State.

Carol Wilson: I want to ask you about your writings.

Richard Dillon: In 1934 when I was ten years old, the *San Francisco News* had a contest for kids and I wrote a story of my dog Bob. It was about Bob stealing lunches from workmen like PG&E linemen and telephone linemen who put their bag lunches down to do their work. Bob would bring the lunches home and we would have to figure out who lost his lunch. It was a nice little story about a wonderful dog. Bob was a Llewellin setter.

When I went to Tamalpais High School, I wrote a Herb Caen-like column called "Rumah Hazzit" (i.e. "Rumor Has It") for the *Tam News*. John R. George was a wonderful teacher. He instructed journalism and was the head of the paper. The other great teacher was Louis Wasserman, who taught public speaking. The history professor at U.C. Berkeley that I will always remember is Lawrence Kinnaird. At Cal I had my first real article published. It was "The Costs of the Modoc War" and was in the *California Historical Society Quarterly*. That was in

1948 or 1948. I remember being called in by my professor and asked if I was the author of the article.

When I went to work at the library, I started writing articles and a book or two.

Carol Wilson: Did you do teaching and lecturing also?

Richard Dillon: Yes, I first taught at the University of Hawaii the summer of 1962. I taught at UCLA in 1964. I taught UC Extension. I taught at USF[2] in the evening division when I could do it after work. They had a library credential program in the Education Department so I taught "History of the Book".

Carol Wilson: You have received many awards and I have a whole list of them, which I will add to this oral history. Tell us a bit about the Milley Award.

Richard Dillon: Well, the Milley Award was the latest one that I received and it was given for my long career in writing and teaching. I must admit I was a bit surprised by it. Allester, my wife, received one earlier for her art. My sponsor put my name forward and the committee votes on the recommendations.

Carol Wilson: Would you tell me a bit about your family life?

Richard Dillon: My wife's name is Barbara Allester Dillon and she goes by the name Allester since she started doing her artwork. She became a potter first, but had to give that up because of arthritis and now she does work in fibers. As I said she received a Milley a couple years ago. She is very active in Artisans and other organizations. She was involved in the Mill Valley Fall Arts Festival for many years.

Carol Wilson: And how many children do you have?

Richard Dillon: We have three boys. Brian is the oldest, David is in the middle, and Ross is the youngest. We have five grandchildren.

Carol Wilson: Where are they living today?

Richard Dillon: Ross lives in Novato at Hamilton Field. He lives in one of the noncommissioned officers' quarters at the airbase. Dave lives in a trailer at Greenbrae, there are two mobile home parks there and he lives in the nicer one. Brian is very smart. He was on the Dean's List. He was a Fulbright Scholar and a Phi Beta Kapa. He is an archeologist and he has led expeditions to Central America and Mexico. He is a freelance archeologist and gets a lot of

[2] University of San Francisco—Editor.

work doing environmental impact work. He lives in Los Angeles and his wife is Hawaiian-Chinese. We always loved going to Hawaii and now we have a Hawaiian in the family.

Carol Wilson: And your other son David, what does he do?

Richard Dillon: David is a grave digger and grounds keeper at one of the Jewish Cemeteries. All the grave people are gentiles or non-Jews.

Carol Wilson: And you have grandchildren?

Richard Dillon: Yes, we have five. Brian has Shannon, a girl, who is beautiful and John who is a cub scout. Dave has no children. Ross has Joshua who is in high school now and Naomi who is in junior high and Jonathan who is still in grammar school. It is interesting that Jonathan is showing an interest in art. Allester has taken him to art classes at the wonderful San Rafael Fourth Street galleries and exhibit center.

Carol Wilson: You have lived in Mill Valley for some time now, have you seen many changes?

Richard Dillon: Well, unfortunately, I haven't connected too much with Mill Valley. I commuted always to work. And when I am writing books, I stay here. When writing books, one is kind of cut off. I really don't know much about City Hall and town politics. I helped open the new Library with Sam Hayakawa. We were the speakers at the opening. I recently went to the opening of the newly remodeled Library. It is wonderful. My only contact was with Thelma Percy at the Library.

Another man in Mill Valley was the late Bill Hogan who took me on as a reviewer in the book review section of the *Chronicle*. Bill was a wonderful friend and he wrote the introduction of my first major book, *Embarcadero*. Bill was an old time Mill Valleyite. In 1951 I went to work for Joseph Henry Jackson who was the great Western Book reviewer for the *Chronicle* and after his death Bill Hogan took over and kept me on until recent years.

Ed Addeo and others have a Kite Hill party for our neighborhood every year. There has been a change in our neighborhood with older folks moving to El Dorado County or someplace like that and rich folks coming in.

Carol Wilson: Mill Valley has changed a lot, hasn't it?

Richard Dillon: Yes, in that respect is has. A little cottage next door was sold, torn down, and replaced by a million-dollar house. Our street is all torn up with the enhancing of other properties. All nice people, I am happy to say; but Mill Valley sure has changed. There is too much traffic and the streets are falling apart.

Carol Wilson: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us today?

Richard Dillon: Well, I have enjoyed my life and family life.

Carol Wilson: You certainly have had an interesting life.

Richard Dillon: Well, I guess. The writing life is not very exciting really, but interesting.

Carol Wilson: Well, thanks so much, I really appreciate your doing this interview.