

Oral History Committee
Mill Valley Historical Society

Mill Valley Public Library
Mill Valley, California

DON OMAN

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

JOAN BERTOLONE

TRANSCRIBED BY

CAROL WILSON

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SUMMARY: Don was born in Seattle, June 7, 1915 and attended schools there through the University of Washington. His parents were Levi C. and Laurie Oman. After school he took a job at Miller Freeman Publications in SF and he rented a small room on Lovell Ave. He married Agnes in 1939 and moved to a cottage at 333 Molino. During the war he was a Navy combat correspondent in the Pacific.

After the war they moved to Larkspur, then back to Mill Valley in 1951 with daughters Laurie and Frances. They bought a house at 338 Lovell and lived there for 42 years. Don quit Miller Freeman and started his own magazine for the meat industry. It thrived and after 20 years he and his wife sold it and retired.

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DON OMAN

An Interview Conducted by Joan Bertolone

Transcribed by Carol Wilson

My name is Joan Bertolone and today is December the 7th 1999, and I am at the home of Don Oman at 236 Ricardo Road here in Mill Valley.

Joan Bertolone:

Thank you, Don, for having me here to interview you for the Mill Valley Historical Society. I am going to start by asking you about your early years. Where and when were you born?

Don Oman:

I was born in Seattle, Washington on June 27, 1915. I went to school in Seattle and to the University of Washington. When I finished at the university, I was hired in Seattle to fill a job in San Francisco and that is how I happened to come to the Bay Area from Washington in 1937. It was during the great depression and no jobs were available in Seattle.

J.B.:

Can you tell me a bit about your parents...their names, the size of your family and a little bit about your life there.

D.O.

My father's name was Levi C. Oman and my mother's name was Laurie Oman. I had two younger brothers. We lived in a modest, middle class neighborhood in the Wallingford district in Seattle. It was about a mile west of the campus of the University of Washington and within walking distance of the Interlake Grade School and the Alexander Hamilton Middle School and the Lincoln High School, which I attended.

J.B.

How did your parents happen to come to Seattle?

D.O.

My father came to Seattle about 1900 with his mother and her seven children...his father had died. One of my father's uncles led a party from the mid-west to Seattle and they established themselves in the Ballard district, a Scandinavian district. They were poor people.

There were tradesmen in the group that came west in the party and they built some housing and settled there.

J.B.

And tell me about your mother?

D.O.

My mother was born in a town in northwest Washington and grew up in Kitsap County in a town called Silverdale. Her father, Charles E. Greaves, had homesteaded forty acres in that community. He cut down the trees and established a small farm there. She grew up on the farm. She was the first girl from her community to go to high school in Bremerton, Washington. She subsequently had training for a year or two at Bellingham Normal School in order to qualify to teach. She did teach school for a short time in a one-room schoolhouse in Kitsap County.

J.B.

When did your mother meet your father?

D.O.

Well, my father got a job at a hardware store in Bremerton not far from the town of Silverdale and a mutual friend invited him to visit my grandfather's farm where a corn-roasting party was being held. He met my mother there. It was some years before they married.

J.B.

What year did you come to Marin County? What brought you here?

D.O.

I came in 1937. While at the University of Washington, I worked on the campus humor magazine called Columns. As a result of my experience on the magazine, I was hired by Miller-Freeman Publications for a job opening they had in their San Francisco office. The vice president of the company was a friend of my father's and I managed to get an interview with him. On the strength of my experience, I was hired on a tentative basis for a three-month trial period. I stayed and worked there until World War II. They were publishers of business magazines in various industrial fields.

J.B.

When you came to San Francisco to work, did you decide to live in Marin County?

D.O.

Yes, I came here with a couple of other fellows with whom I worked and one of their friends. We located a little one-room shack to rent in the five hundred block on Lovell Avenue. The four of us shared the rent of \$25 a month for the little place. It had one room, a deck and an alcove for a kitchen sink and a hot plate or two and a bathroom, which needed a shower. The owners, Tom and Milla Logan, agreed to put in a shower for us. They rigged up a cold water shower that we used all year long.

Our house was next to the Ed Bullard family. Ed had established his company, the Bullard Manufacturing Company, in Sausalito and made hard hats for workers. He had the contract for making the hard hats for the men who worked on the Golden Gate Bridge. The Bullards were a nice family.

J.B.

Well in spite of the difficult living conditions and the long commute, there must have been something about Mill Valley that must have attracted you.

D.O.

Oh, yes. Our next door neighbors, the Bullards, made life very pleasant for us as they had a tennis court and a swimming pool and two attractive young daughters and they let us swim and play tennis. I was struck by the informality of the people of Mill Valley. Our neighbors were very casual and nobody seemed to be pulling rank on anybody else. That was an important factor in the appeal of Mill Valley. And, of course, Mill Valley is a very beautiful place and a wonderful starting spot for hiking on the mountain and enjoying the outdoors.

J.B.

At what point did you meet your wife?

D.O.

Agnes was born and raised in the Seattle area and she attended the University of Washington. Her father was a professor in the English Department there for many years. He was a wonderful guy and a Rhodes Scholar. He arranged a summertime exchange with a University of California professor for summer school teaching in 1937. When her family went back to Seattle, she decided to stay in San Francisco where she got a job at Newbegin's Book Store on Union Square. It was while on a date with a girl from the University of Washington that I met Agnes. My date and I went dancing at the Fairmont Hotel and she recognized Agnes from the university and introduced me to her. That was the beginning of our acquaintance.

We were married in 1939 and rented a little cottage for \$25 a month at 333 Molino Avenue. I commuted to San Francisco on the train and ferry and, occasionally, drove as the Golden Gate Bridge was completed by then. It only took about a half-hour to drive into the City then. We lived there for a year or two and then moved into the City. Then the war came along. I went back to Washington, D.C. and went to work for the Food Production Board for a year before I went into the Navy.

Both of my brothers were in the Navy so when it came time for me to go into the service, I, too, joined the Navy. At first I was put in the Sea Bees and then transferred to the regular navy where I served for a while at a supply depot in Norfolk, Virginia. The Navy assigned me to a group of professional journalists...newspapermen, radiomen, magazine writers...and we were sent to the Pacific. I served aboard the old battle ship New York, which had been queen of the fleet in World War I, and I was aboard her during World War II. I served as an enlisted combat correspondent writing stories about sailors for their hometown newspapers.

J.B.

Where did that take you?

D.O.

The battleship went into Okinawa on V-day minus five and bombarded the area where the landing crafts would be going ashore. We stayed there for about three months which was one of the longest naval engagements at that time in history. Then we went to the Philippines in preparation for the invasion of Japan. The invasion was cancelled after the atomic bomb was dropped. We came back to Pearl Harbor and heard the scuttle-butt that the ship was going back to patrol the China coast for about a year and as I did not want any more of that, I transferred to the submarine service. As the war ended, we were put to work writing "now it can be told" stories about the exploits of the submarines during the war. After a few months of that I got a berth on a submarine and got a ride back to the states. I was discharged and went back to work for the company that I had worked for before the war.

J.B.

What year was that?

D.O.

It was 1945. We were unable to find a place in Mill Valley, and we used our G.I. Bill to buy a little place in Larkspur for \$6,000. We had two daughters...Laurie, the younger of the two, was born in July of 1946 and Frances was born on December 30th, 1943 while I was in the service.

Agnes was one of the founders of the cooperative nursery school in the Larkspur-Corte Madera area. When the nursery school celebrated its fiftieth anniversary a year ago, Agnes was honored at their event. She was also one of the founders of the Mill Valley Chamber Music Society which sponsors a series of concerts every year.

J.B.

What are your daughters doing today?

D.O.

Well, Francie is living in the East Bay and is doing some commercial video work and doing some private counseling service for people who need help organizing their business offices. She has a twenty-nine year old son, Colin.

Laurie lives in San Rafael and she has two children. Zachery, who is twenty-seven, lives in New York and is interested in theatrical matters. Reina, Laurie's daughter, graduated from California State University at Chico and has been working as a sales person for a major office supply firm for the past several years in Sacramento.

J.B.

At what point did you move to Mill Valley after the war?

D.O.

We moved to Mill Valley in 1951. We looked at various places to buy. It was pouring rain when the real estate agent showed us the house on Lovell Avenue and looking at the house from the driveway, I said, "I'll take it!" We fell in love with it instantly. It was an interesting old place...it was built in 1903 by Dr. Proctor and his wife. It had three stories and was a brown shingle Victorian and the location was excellent. It had a smashing view of the mountain and a nice view of Cascade Canyon. The address was 338 Lovell Avenue. We lived there for forty-two years.

J.B.

Did you have some interesting neighbors during those years?

D.O.

Yes, one was Dr. Weiss who lived next door. He built the first tennis courts in Mill Valley where the tennis club is now and eventually his courts were incorporated into the Mill Valley Tennis Club. He had a small swimming pool at his house and when the big fire of 1929 came down

toward Lovell Avenue, he and other neighbors took gunnysacks and blankets and soaked them in the pool, took them to the our roof and put out the embers as they were falling. They saved our house from burning.

Dr. Weiss's home was purchased by Keith Cooke and his wife. When the old Richardson Bay bridge was torn down, Keith hauled some of its old tar-soaked redwood beams to his house and in his workshop sawed off the tar and had beautiful straight grain redwood with which he built a wonderful deck around his pool. It is still there today.

Our house was built in part with hand-fashioned square nails. When we did some repair work, we found some and I saved them. The garage door had old window sash weights with sand in counterweight boxes so that it was possible to open it.

We found some old kerosene lamps in the basement and we were told that in the old days people would take these lamps down to the depot and hang them on hooks on the side of the depot. When they came home at night and it was dark, they would get their lamps, light them and walk on home with light from the lanterns.

We were told that Dr. Proctor had an electric car that he used to drive to town.

The house had a rock wall holding up the driveway which was almost the width of the lot and shortly after we moved in, we got a letter from the city informing us that the wall was leaning badly and to please fix it. We got an engineer who came up with a plan to place steel H-beams vertically on the outside with cables tying back into cubic yards of cement blocks under the surface of the driveway. That worked fine for a few years until it started to lean again. The city told us that it was still leaning and dangerous and either we fix it or they would come up with a bulldozer and take it out and send us the bill.

In the meantime, we had learned from Dr. Weiss that Lovell Avenue had been widened. The work was done in the early 1930's by the W.P.A. which was established by the federal government during the depression to provide work for men. In the process of widening Lovell Avenue a wall was built by the W.P.A. along the street by our property holding up our driveway. It was built on city property and the city had contracted to maintain the wall. It took us about a year of research to get confirmation of this from newspaper articles from Mill Valley and San Rafael newspapers. We even wrote to Washington, D.C. for W.P.A. records. It turned out that Mill Valley city hall had records of just about everything

from downtown to lower Lovell Avenue. Then the records got lost. We got enough evidence and submitted it to the city and the city agreed to go ahead and rebuild it. As they would build it only to a height of ten feet, which was not high enough for the driveway, we agreed that we would pay for the extra four feet that was needed. We also put up the correct type of redwood railing and paved the driveway so the job got done.

J.B.

So tell me about the job you had.

D.O.

Miller-Freeman Publications had a series of trade journals and when I went to work for them in 1937, they had about a dozen employees in their San Francisco office. I read recently that they now have about a thousand employees in their office in San Francisco. I worked on two regional food publications...one was a baking industry magazine and one was called Western Canner and Packer and dealt with processed fruits and vegetables. I became advertising manager for these two publications after the war. Eventually, I got an idea for a regional publication in the meat field. My thought was that I would get the company to publish it and let me manage it in addition to the two others. It was a chance for me to increase my income. After exploring the idea for a year or so, I decided that it was a good idea and thought that I would start it on my own which I did in 1955. I named the magazine Western Meat Industry and it served meat packers and processors in the eleven Western States.

In 1957 we moved our business to Mill Valley. We rented the space that Dr. Rodney Hartman vacated in the Keystone Building at 90 Throckmorton. There were six or seven rooms that went for the same price that we were paying in our two-room San Francisco office, so we rented them and moved our business to Mill Valley. We were about three minutes from home and no longer had to commute to San Francisco.

When I started my publishing business, my wife Agnes offered to help me for a few weeks while I was getting started. She was in charge of magazine circulation and bookkeeping. Twenty years later, we both retired and sold the business to our editor, Michael J. Alaimo, who published the magazine successfully in Mill Valley for about twenty years. In the process the magazine's name was changed to Meat & Poultry and became a national publication. Alaimo retired a few years ago and sold the business to a Kansas City firm which continues to publish it as a leading magazine in its field.

When I first came to Mill Valley, there was a tearoom in part of the same space we had in the Keystone Building.

J.B

I am sure you have a lot of Mill Valley memories that you can tell us.

D.O.

One of my memories is of a Chinese laundry located in the basement of an old Victorian house on Bernard Street and Lovell Avenue. I think it is now painted yellow. It is an interesting old Victorian. Well, when we were baching it, we would take our shirts and clothes there. A whole pillowcase of laundry would cost a dollar.

Across the street from that house there was an empty lot and Dr. Danford, a dentist, built a small office building there for himself on the corner of Bernard and Lovell. He planted a row of liquid amber trees along Lovell Avenue. The liquid ambers are still there and are lovely to see in the fall, but the building is no longer there. It was torn down and an apartment building was built there.

Esposti's was one of the places in town to eat or get ice cream. In about 1957 or 1958 the space was taken over by Sal Aversa and his wife Maria and is now La Ginestra Restaurant.

Today, on Throckmorton next to La Ginestra, there is an empty lot, but it once held Dowd's stables. The Dowd family lived upstairs. They sold and delivered coal in horse and wagon in the old days. I recall talking to Mr. Dowd and he said that his father had started the business and that he had been born in that building. He told me about how they used to take their horses up Throckmorton Avenue to the end of the canyon and turn them loose to feed on the grass on the hillside.

There was a bakery located on Miller Avenue near where the Coffee Roastery is now at the corner of Throckmorton and Miller Avenues. That building on the corner once was Albert's Department Store, subsequently called Mayer's Department Store. It was a dry-goods store where my wife shopped. You used to be able to buy a spool of thread in Mill Valley. You can't do that anymore with all the boutiques in town today. Larry Mayer married one of the Albert daughters and he was in the dry-good business for a while. He decided that he didn't like it so he went back to school and became an attorney. He opened offices in the Keystone Building and was there for quite a while.

We used to buy eggs at a deli where the Mt. Carmel Salvage Shop is located today. I think it was Sonapa Farms, which later moved down the street from the Sequoia Theater. It became a restaurant. It is now Noah Bagel Shop.

There were a couple of beer parlors in town. One was where the Mill Valley Market has its wine department now. There was another on the corner of Bernard and Throckmorton across the street from the Keystone Building. There have been a series of restaurants there in recent years. The Two A.M. Club down in the Locust district on Miller was another bar.

In the fifties an interesting person in town was Maggie Grant. She was the first person to have a bookstore in the Depot. She was married to a State Department diplomat. She was an interesting and well-educated woman. She and her husband eventually retired and moved to Elk, California where they bought an inn that they ran that for a number of years.

J.B.

When you first came to Mill Valley, it was shortly before the Treasure Island World's Fair. Did you attend it?

D.O.

Oh, yes. I remember going to it...it was an exciting place with a lot of bright lights and shows and things of that nature. I remember going to see Benny Goodman and his band when they played there. The dance floor was jammed. When the band really got going, the dancers would all crowd up to the stage and were transfixed listening to the wonderful music.

J.B.

How long did the World's Fair run?

D.O.

I'm not sure...at least a year. One of the other features was Billy Rose's Aquacade, which had swimmers doing water ballet. That was a very popular show. Another was Gypsy Rose Lee, the fan dancer, she was a big attraction there.

There were exhibits from all over the world.

J.B.

When did you move from the Proctor house on Lovell Avenue to here in Strawberry?

D.O.

We moved the Strawberry area about six years ago. The house on Lovell had a lot of stairs...it was all on a hillside and we finally decided that as we got older, we had better look for a one-story house on a level lot and we found this one here. We still have a Mill Valley address and this house fits our needs.

J.B.

I know that among your interests is gardening. Tell me about your chrysanthemums...I hope I can see them before I leave.

D.O.

Well, about fifteen years ago I became interested growing chrysanthemums so I joined the Marin Chrysanthemum Society and began learning how to grow the exhibition chrysanthemums. I have been doing it ever since. I took the test and became an accredited judge in the National Chrysanthemum Society and in recent years have been judging chrysanthemum shows in Marin, over in Walnut Creek and in Sacramento area. It has been a fascinating hobby for me. There are thirteen different classifications of the flower from the little tiny ones up to the huge plate-sized ones.

In more recent years I have been growing some Japanese style bonzai chrysanthemums. They have very small flowers on them. One advantage is that in a single season you can produce a bonzai chrysanthemum where it would take four or five years or more to do so with a tree or bush. It is a good gardening hobby for a retired person. It takes a lot of time. A friend said that I should not call it a hobby, but an art form.

In my garden I have a few fruit trees, and I grow boysenberries and raspberries and strawberries. Also a few vegetables...tomatoes, beans and peas. Homegrown fruits and vegetables always taste better than store bought ones.

Another field of interest that we have is bird watching. We are especially interested in water birds. We have learned to identify nearly all the water birds in that might be found in Northern California.

J.B.

I understand that you like to travel. That would be interesting to hear about.

D.O.

We began travelling back in 1969 when we took our first trip to Europe and we have been fortunate to be able to do quite a bit of travelling. I tallied it up the other day and we have visited forty different foreign countries. We haven't made a trip abroad every year, but almost. In the intervening years, we have been able to return to our favorite places. We have been to Italy a half a dozen times. We have gone to Japan, China and Taiwan, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, and Turkey, Morocco, Peru, Equador, and Costa Rica, for example.

J.B.

Are you still active in your travels?

D.O.

Well, in the last few years my energy has decreased so we switched over to cruises and we have been to the Caribbean, down the Amazon River to the Caribbean. We cruised to Alaska. Last year we took an interesting trip from New York to Montreal. We also took a week's trip up the Columbia River on a small seventy-passenger boat. We are eighty-four years old now and I don't know how many more trips we will be taking. We may have to settle for trips closer to home.

J.B.

I understand that politics is one of your interests.

D.O.

We consider ourselves to be liberal Democrats...we are political news-junkies and we keep track of national politics. We are very much impressed by candidates in the current election and we are following politics pretty closely.

J.B.

It would be interesting to know how you feel about Mill Valley today in comparison to how it was when you first arrived.

D.O.

Well, I remember when I first came here meeting a friend while crossing Miller Avenue at Throckmorton and having a chat in the middle of the intersection. When a car came by it merely went around us. That was okay then, but today you would take your life in your hands if you did that. Mill Valley has a lot more restaurants today; there are many boutiques now. Marin has an affluent society and I think that these stores prosper because of that. We have a lot more tourists coming to town, too.

I should mention that when we first came to Mill Valley, the library was in the old building on Lovell Avenue. When the new library was proposed to be built in Old Mill Park, I opposed putting it there as I was an environmentalist and hated the idea of the park being cut up. I went to one of the hearings and spoke against putting the library in the park because I was afraid of the city using the park for other buildings such as a police station. The city fathers decided that the library was the only building they would put up in the park and that the city would acquire other park spaces, so it worked out. Today we have a wonderful library. For a while I was on the board of the Friends of the Library and my wife spent quite a few years working as a docent in the History Room. We consider the library to be the heart of Mill Valley.

J.B.

I guess we owe you thanks for your help with the library and we thank you also for doing this interview for the Mill Valley Historical Society.