Oral History Committee
Mill Valley Library Association

Mill Valley Public Library
Mill Valley, California

WILLIAM PROVINES

An Interview Conducted By

Carl Mosher

W I L L I A M P R O V I N E S

Index

Mr. William Provines

Born July 4, 1908 in Willits, California.

Resident of Mill Valley since August 1916.

Interviewed August 1973 at the Mill Valley Public Library.

WILLIAM PROVINES

Carl Mosher

This is Carl Mosher, talking to William (Bill) Provines on August 8, 1973. We're talking in the public library, on a kind of foggy, chilly morning -- as it often is this time of year.

Bill, where were you born? And what year?

William Provines

In Willits, Mendocino County, California, on July 4, 1908.

Mr. Mosher

July Fourth, eh? And how long did you live up there?

Mr. Provines

We moved to Mill Valley August 1, 1916. I was just a little over eight years old.

Mr. Mosher

What did your dad do in Willits?

Mr. Provines

He was a locomotive engineer for the Northwestern Pacific. On the Eureka Passenger, he was running the southern division between Sausalito and Willits. The northern division took the train from Willits to Eureka.

We lived in Willits because of his occupation as a locomotive engineer. But when the four children began to grow up, he decided it would be more advantageous to live in a place like Marin County, where we'd have advantages that we wouldn't have way up there in the country, so we came to Mill Valley.

He looked at Sausalito first, but Mill Valley seemed to be the best family town. It was also close enough to Sausalito that it took him only fifteen minutes or so by train to get down to the shops at Pine Street, get his engine, and couple onto the train at Sausalito for the run up to Willits.

Mr. Mosher

Do you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Provines

I have three sisters, all living -- Eloise, Ellen, and Ruth.

Mr. Mosher

And you've lived in Mill Valley ever since 1916?

Mr. Provines

Yes, fifty-seven years.

Mr. Mosher

You were a second-grader when you came here?

Mr. Provines

No, I went into the fourth grade. I was a little ahead for my age. When I was six years old I went to a private teacher in Willits. After one year with a private teacher, I went into the third grade at the Willits grammar school in 1915. So when I came to Mill Valley I went into the fourth grade. I ran into difficulty, though. Going so fast at that stage I had trouble with arithmetic, so I was held back for six months and had to take low fourth over again.

The interesting thing is that my fourth-grade teacher was Ruth Johnson. Later on she married Alan Whittaker, an army officer, and lived in the Philippines. Alan was later retired, as a first lieutenant, on account of his hearing. He was in the Coast Artillery, and I guess the heavy guns were too much for his ears. After he retired they came back to Mill Valley. In about 1932 I happened to hear Alan on the 160-meter ham phone band and went over to his house to see who he was. Who came to the door but my 1917 teacher, Ruth Johnson, now Ruth Whittaker! She recognized me right off. Alan and Ruth and I became very close friends -- and later on my wife, too.

There were only two schools in Mill Valley in 1917. Summit School had grades one through eight. Students in grades one through four who lived in -- I guess it was the southeastern part of Mill Valley -- went to Park School. We were sort of on the borderline, being on Buena Vista Avenue. My sisters were ahead of me in school, but so that the four of us wouldn't be separated, Mr. Cuddebach let us all go to Summit School. 1/

Mr. Mosher

He was the superintendent of schools here, I take it?

Mr. Provines

Yes, John Cuddebach was superintendent at that time.

Mr. Mosher

So you started at Summit School in 1916? And Ruth Johnson was your teacher?

Mr. Provines

She was my fourth-grade teacher. Ida Plummer was the first teacher I had. She taught for many years in Mill Valley. At that time Ruth Johnson was fourth grade. I had Miss Perks, Miss Waterman, Chrissie Owen, and finally Miss Abraham. Miss Abraham was the eighth-grade teacher who wept at every graduation. She was an institution in Mill Valley, a very, very fine person. Every class was the best class she ever had.

Mr. Mosher

Do you recall how many were in your class in 1916?

Mr. Provines

Each class had the high and the low grades. We had a high and a low third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, or eighth grade -- six months (a semester) apart. I'd say we had around fifty students to a class.

Mr. Mosher

Do any particular names come to mind of classmates who were close friends of yours?

1/Mr. Cuddebach was principal. James B. Davidson was Marin County Superintendent of Schools. WP.

Mr. Provines My closest friend was Charles Smith.3/ Hans Petermeier./ And Eve Arden was six months behind me. Her name was Eunice Quedens.

Mr. Mosher

You're referring to the actress Eve Arden?

Mr. Provines

Yes. She later played "Our Miss Brooks" on television. At the time we came to Mill Valley in 1916, they lived diagonally across the street from us. Her mother and aunt had a sort of teachers' boardinghouse. The house stood where Mt. Carmel School is now.1/ They sold the house around 1920 or so to Mr. Huntoon, who was head of the Bank of Mill Valley -- where the Bank of America is now.2/ When Mrs. Huntoon passed away, the property was sold to the Catholic church. Part of the school property is the old Huntoon property.

Mr. Mosher

I wonder whether you have any interesting memories of Eve Arden. She was a neighbor and probably knew your sisters.

Mr. Provines

Well, I recall that next door to us Hertha Meyer had a tent platform in her backyard. There were two children younger than Eunice who lived a couple of houses down the street from us. Their name was Mantell -- George and Elizabeth. I guess it was when Eunie was about eight or nine years old, she would have George and Elizabeth on this tent platform in Miss Meyer's yard, going through various scenes that Eunie would make up and direct. We used to be greatly amused. So she was showing signs of acting talent at a very early age. In fact, I have a picture at home -- I think it was taken around September 1919 -- and Eunie is in that picture. Of course she was the prettiest girl in the class.

Mr. Mosher

Was she in any dramatic affairs at school?

1/ 17 Buena Vista.

2/ 60 Throckmorton.

3/ [WP's addenda.]

Mr. Provines

Oh yes. When she went to Tamalpais High School she was very active in dramatics. She and some of the other girls (Beatrice McNamee and the Gardner twins and others I can't recall immediately) used to put on skits for student body meetings in the gymnasium. Eunie had the lead in the senior play in 1926; it was "Dulcy." I think Jack Bagshaw was the leading man.

My friend Charlie Smith is also in that 1919 picture. That was taken just about the time Charlie and I became very good friends. Charlie was playing the part of a crotchety old man in the senior play, and he had to smoke a cigar, which in those days was quite an accomplishment. Charlie had never touched tobacco in any form, didn't know how to hold a cigar, or anything. I was a little bit more knowledgeable in those things, so Charlie and I used to get a box of "Between the Acts" small cigars. We called them little bonfires. I'd light the cigar and show Charlie how to hold it, how to put it in his mouth and blow out the smoke, and how to knock the ashes off. Charlie learned how to smoke a cigar for the senior play, but I don't think he has ever touched tobacco in any form since then. He and I were together just a year ago in July.

Mr. Mosher

Where does he live now?

Mr. Provines

In San Francisco. Charlie is the senior engineer at radio station KSFO. I think he's retiring next year. He's very active in old jazz. Charlie came to Mill Valley in 1919, I believe. He lived on Blithedale Avenue.

Charlie and I became very good friends. We both were interested in trains. Of course, my dad being an engineer on the NWP, I grew up around railroads and had it in the blood. When Charlie and I were small boys we used to go over into the woods, where Miller Grove is now, and play on the mountain cars that were on a side-track in there. He was away for a couple of years, working on the Stewart Ranch up in Nicasio. He graduated from the one-room school up there. His mother, Susie Smith, was the Commercial English teacher and school store operator at Tamalpais High School.

Charlie started to play the trombone in about 1922.

He took lessons from Mr. Culverd down at Almonte, back of where the swimming pool is now. The house is still there. Along about 1924 or '25, Charlie got in with a group that formed an orchestra. They called themselves the Tamarin Orchestra. There was Freddie Nagel, Don Urquardt, who was in the post office, and Cecil and Walt Kindred -- they were also sons of an engineer on the Northwestern Pacific. Walt Cuthbertson was the piano player. Let's see, I think Don played the drums, Walt played the piano, the Kindred boys played the saxophones. Freddie Nagel played the saxophone, but he also learned the clarinet.

Mr. Mosher

Was he later a well-known band leader? The name sounds familiar.

Mr. Provines

Yes, that's where the switch comes in. It was a peculiar thing. Charlie Smith graduated from Tamalpais High School and went to College of Pacific, where he studied music. He became a high school music teacher. Freddie Nagel went up to College of Marin with me. (I went to College of Marin before I went over to Cal.) After he graduated from College of Marin, Freddie Nagel went over to University of Nevada and studied electrical engineering. After he got out of university he got a job playing on the Matson ships between here and Australia with his music group, an orchestra he organized in Nevada. He used to play in night clubs to get money while he was going to the University of Nevada.

Mr. Mosher

That would be in the late twenties?

Mr. Provines

Yes, that's right. On New Year's Eve the Tamarin Orchestra would play, say, for a party at the old tavern on Mt. Tamalpais. They had different bookings, different dances they'd play for.

Mr. Mosher

Was Freddie Nagel a Mill Valley resident?

Mr. Provines

Yes, his mother taught Physical Education at Tamalpais High School.

But coming back to the contrast: Freddie Nagel studied electrical engineering at the University of Nevada, graduated, and had this orchestra that played on the Matson ships between San Francisco and Australia. Charlie Smith graduated from what was at that time College of Pacific (now University of Pacific) and taught music in the Fort Bragg High School.

Let me interrupt my story again to say that Charlie and I got our ham radio licenses at the same time in 1933. We used to keep a schedule on Saturday mornings, talking to each other in Morse code. The remarkable thing is that, when our calls were issued, my call was W6JBZ and Charlie's was W6JDG. In Morse code, the only difference between Charlie's call and mine was that his call had one less "dit" in the last two letters. Our calls were only two dits apart.

My call was dit-da-da, da-dit-dit-dit-dit, dit-da-da-da, da-dit-dit-dit, da-da-dit-dit.

Charlie's was dit-da-da, da-dit-dit-dit-dit, dit-da-da-da, da-dit-dit, da-da-dit.

Anyhow, Charlie taught at Fort Bragg High School for a while, then he went to Greenville and taught in the high school there. We still kept our radio schedule while he was in Greenville. Charlie had time on his hands, being a school teacher, so he studied and got his commercial license. He used to fill in during the summer in radio stations when the operators were on vacation. He'd go down to, say, Monterey or Stockton or someplace.

Charlie liked trains, and he used to fill in with a lot of stuff that was really entertaining. He'd put in a lot of train sound effects and things like that. I think it was around 1940 when he stopped teaching music in high school and went to work for KSFO. He used to make a lot of the platters for overseas broadcasts during World War Two.

So -- Charlie studied music and ended up as a radio engineer. Freddie Nagel studied electrical engineering in college and became a musician.

Freddie also organized a band of his own. One of my sisters and her fiance' went dancing at one of the big

San Francisco hotels in about 1940 -- and whose orchestra was playing? Freddie Nagel's. My wife and I were married June 7, 1941, and went up north on our honeymoon. The first night, where did we stay but Willits, my old home town. I turned the radio on in the hotel and tuned in KSL, Salt Lake City. What did we hear? Freddie Nagel's orchestra playing on the Washington Bandstand!

That was the last time I heard of Freddie Nagel, except through Charlie. Last July Charlie and I got together one evening. We went to dinner in Chinatown and then went out to Walt Cuthbertson's house. He's been a dentist for years. He has a beautiful place in St. Francis Woods.

Mr. Mosher

Let's go back to Summit School for a minute. Can you think of anybody else who was a student in those days?

Mr. Provines

Of course there were the Bagshaws. One of the Bagshaws became District Attorney.[1] One of the boys became quite an artist. I believe he used to work for Reader's Digest.[2]

Mr. Mosher

What about Sam Bagshaw?

Mr. Provines

Sam was a little bit ahead of me.

Mr. Mosher

Does he still live in Mill Valley?

Mr. Provines

Oh yes. In fact, I saw him within the last week or two.

Then there was Melvin Roth. His father, Fred Roth, ran the taxi, which at that time was a Ford touring car.

---

[1] Albert E. Bagshaw.

[2] Sydney Bagshaw.

Melvin went to sea, I believe, for Matson. Then of course there were a whole bunch of Thoneys. I don't remember just how many Thoneys there were. Mr. Thoney, Charles Thoney, was Fire Chief of Mill Valley when we came here in 1916. His son Vollie[1] is the best authority you can get on the Tamalpais Railroad. He worked there for years. He knew those engines and all the equipment inside and out. He not only worked on it as a mechanic, but he also was an engineer.

One more thing about Summit School: It was an old rectangular building, two or three stories high, grey in color, and it had a belfry. One of the feats on Hallowe'en was for somebody to slip into Summit School and ring the school bell.

Mr. Mosher

Was the bell used to summon you to school in the morning? That had a certain drama, didn't it?

Mr. Provines

Yes, you woke up in the morning, you got ready for school, and maybe on your way to school you'd hear this old "glang glang." It was a very distinctive tone. You knew it was the school bell. I think in later years the ringing of the bell was abandoned because the belfry got a little too shaky.

That bell, with its easy "glang glang," was in contrast to the fire bell at the firehouse. There were two ropes on that, and it went "glang-glang-glang-glang" real fast. You could easily tell the difference between the two. I don't know what became of the school bell, but the old fire bell is on a framework down by the City Hall.

Mr. Mosher

What year did you graduate from Summit School?

Mr. Provines

Ours was the first class to graduate from Old Mill School, in December of 1921. I think there were thirteen of us in that class.

---

[1] Vollmar Thoney.

Mr. Mosher

Will you explain the relationship between Summit School and Old Mill?

Mr. Provines

I guess Summit School was outmoded by 1921. The belfry getting so old you couldn't ring the school bell was just a sign of the times. So Old Mill School was built at the foot of Summit Avenue, between Throckmorton and Lovell. A number of houses had to be moved to make room for the school. You can still see some of those houses just up Throckmorton from the library -- the Nye house for one. Jimmie Nye and John Nye, his older brother, and his sister Betty Nye -- they're all long-time Mill Valley residents.

There was a sulphur spring on the property. It was on the northeast side, I guess you'd call it, the Lovell Avenue side. There was a sort of well-like framework around it at one time, and hot sulpur water came out of it.

Mr. Mosher

That was there when the Old Mill School was being built?

Mr. Provines

Yes, it was there. I lost track of it in time, because eventually it got covered up. Recently I took a walk past there, trying to recreate where that old spring was. I decided it is buried under the tennis court.

Old Mill School was supposed to be open for the fall semester in 1921, but there was a work stoppage -- not a strike but a lockout -- and the school wasn't finished until just about a month before the end of the fall semester. We moved from Summit School down to Old Mill School and were the first graduating class. As I say, I think there were thirteen of us. The whole school cost $60,000 or $90,000, which is quite a contrast to today's costs. It has been remodeled and a lot of work done on it since then. It has been extended and practically rebuilt.

I started at Tam High in January 1922, the year we had the big snowstorm up on the mountain. Around the

28th of January in 1922 they had two feet of snow on the top of Tamalpais. In fact, the snow came all the way down into Mill Valley. That's the only time I ever saw the mountain and the hills and downtown Mill Valley white. I had just started high school, and many of the children cut classes to go up in the snow. It stayed on the ground two or three days.

I think it was a Sunday morning that the snow actually came down. They rigged up a sort of makeshift plow on the mountain trains and used a couple of engines to get enough power to take people up the mountain. At the top they'd pile snow into the coaches and bring it down to the town square and have snow fights down by the town flagpole. That was the biggest snow we had.

Mr. Mosher

It's a rarity for it to stay on the ground more than a few minutes.

When did you graduate from Tam High?

Mr. Provines

I graduated in '25.

Mr. Mosher

And then you went to Cal?

Mr. Provines

I went first to College of Marin. In fact, I think I was about the ninth person to enroll in the college when it was founded. There were about 85 of us in the original enrollment. Mr. Olney was the head of the school. There was Mr. Olney, Miss Roumiguiere -- I can't remember all the names offhand.

It was just at that time that I started to work on the Tamalpais railroad.[1] I had just turned eighteen and was working after school and on Saturdays in Prichard's[2] store downtown -- it was where El Marin Florist is now. Charlie Stocker, a retired Northwestern Pacific engineer

---

[1] Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway.

[2] 108 Throckmorton Avenue.

who was about seventy years old, asked my dad if I would like to work for the railroad as a fireman. My dad said, "Well, ask him." I was delighted for the chance.

I told Mr. Prichard next day that I had a chance to go firing on the mountain. He said, "Okay, just get me a replacement." I got my friend Steve Davidson to take my place. He was a fine boy, and the Prichards loved him. I think Steve became a captain in the army and was killed in a plane crash.

Anyway, I went to College of Marin[1] two years and then went over to Cal.[1] I graduated from Cal in 1932 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Economics.

Mr. Mosher

And then you went into the insurance business?

Mr. Provines

I "backed" into the insurance business -- from which I am now retired.

When I was at Cal I avoided every insurance course I could. In the fraternity I was in, we had fellows studying insurance, but I studied foreign trade and shipping. In 1932, if you applied anyplace for a job, they'd say, "We're not taking inexperienced people; we're laying off experienced people." So there you were. Finally I was offered a job by Mr. Rich, one of the assistant managers of the Royal Globe Insurance Companies. I went to work for them and stayed for thirty-nine years. I was very happy with them and am now very pleasantly retired from them. The thing is, when I was in school I didn't see things that way!

Of course the Tamalpais railroad was the best job I ever had in my life. It was so much fun that the pay seemed sort of incidental.

Mr. Mosher

Bill, we have a wonderful picture here, taken

---

[1]University of California, Berkeley

from the top of the mountain around the turn of the century. It shows the railway winding up the mountain and, in the distance, Mill Valley as of that period.

Mr. Provines

Judging from the landmarks (and lack of landmarks), this picture must have been taken around 1899 or 1900. The first passenger train ran on August 22, 1896. The picture shows the train coming up the Double Bowknot. Here you see the station on Miller Avenue. It was down by Sunnyside at that time. You can see the old Summit School with the belfry on top, and over here is the old Catholic church with its steep gabled roof.

You can see this sort of sparse area down here, now East Blithedale Avenue. That was known as Jag Town, and there were few structures down there. From what I gather, this was more or less the disreputable part of Mill Valley in those days. You can see one building down there. That building is still standing, by the way. When we came here in 1916 it still had the V¢ sign for beer on the wall.[1] Apparently it had been a saloon; in 1916 it was unoccupied. The building is right across from Lawson-Dyer Drugstore, on the corner of East Blithedale and Dell Street -- right across from the J. Ray real estate office.

Mr. Mosher

The astonishing thing about this picture, to me, is the absence of trees, the great amount of open space, and the fact that East Blithedale looks like farming country.

Mr. Provines

One thing dates this picture: The powerhouse is not down at Alto. Electric trains started running to Mill Valley August 20, 1903. (In fact, Charlie Stocker brought the first electric train into Mill Valley.) They had a powerhouse down here at Alto where they converted the AC into 550 volts DC for the third rail. That powerhouse isn't in this picture, so it was taken before 1903.

You see this old sailing ship in the bay off

---

[1] Five-cent coins carried the mark "V" in early days.

Sausalito? In the first years we were in Mill Valley it was very common to see sailing ships between Sausalito and Belvedere. There was a fishery over on Belvedere Island, and the Alaska packers' ships used to tie up -- a lot of times heeled over at low tide. This is a remarkably good picture.

Mr. Mosher

It's a good view of the Bowknot and the "crookedest railroad in the world."

Mr. Provines

That is the feature of the picture -- the Double Bowknot. This spot was known as the Mesa. It's at about 1,100 feet elevation, four miles from the station in Mill Valley. This means the train had gone up about a thousand feet in four miles. The Muir Woods branch ran off right down here.

Mr. Mosher

That was where they used the gravity cars?

Mr. Provines

Yes, two and a half miles. The gravity cars used to run from the top of the mountain into Mill Valley at one time, but there were about nine grade crossings -- and with automobiles growing so numerous it wasn't safe to run a gravity car down into Mill Valley for that last mile from Lee Street, particularly across Throckmorton Avenue. You had two hand brakes on a gravity car, and you couldn't stop them like an automobile. So it just got too dangerous. They used to run them down from the top of the mountain as far as the Double Bowknot and put them on the siding. (You can see the sidetrack here in the picture.) Then of course they'd run gravity cars down into Muir Woods, since there was no obstruction.

Mr. Mosher

You worked as a fireman for several years?

Mr. Provines

I worked as a fireman, brakeman, gravity man -- wherever they needed me. The mountain railroad was a wonderful place for college boys, and of course there

were a lot of Mill Valley residents who filled in for extra help. It was a particularly good part-time job for students -- when the tourist season was at its peak, college boys were out of school. Cal and Stanford used to close in May, and the boys were available to fill in with the regular personnel and be conductors or brakemen or gravity men or firemen.

Bill Thomas was superintendent of the railroad when I went to work there. His brother Ernest was killed in a wreck with Engine No. 2 in 1900.

Mr. Mosher

What happened?

Mr. Provines

In an ordinary locomotive they have what they call keelies. That's a tube that the engineer controls. It will run a little film of grease into the flange. If you hear these flanges whistle on curves, it's actually a danger sign, because that whistling sound of a wheel on a curve is friction. If you don't cut the friction down, the flange can climb over the rails, and then you have a derailment. Apparently they started using these oil keelies on the railroad. In the book about the railroad,[1] it says that apparently one of the engines the day before had inadvertently deposited some grease on the rail. This grease, on a grade of six or seven percent, was like putting skids under you -- you didn't have a chance.

Ernest Thomas was the engineer; Joe Ferrari was his fireman. I believe there was one passenger, Mrs. Runyon. When the old Heisler No. 2 hit that grease it went into a skid and turned over in a cut. A steam pipe broke, and Ernest was scalded to death. When I went to work in '26 they told me there was still coal down in the canyon that had been dumped when the engine turned over.

Bill Thomas was the man who made the first oil-burning locomotive. He also perfected the oil burners in the ferryboats to the city. Bill Thomas was a very remarkable inventor. He invented a side valve which

---

[1] "The Crookedest Railroad in the World," by T. G. Wurm and A. C. Graves, 1960.—[Corrections and addenda by WP as follows: I was told that coal from the overturned engine could still be found down the mountain; but on page 32 of my copy of the original issue of Crookedest Railroad in the World this engine is in the lower picture on the page and definitely wood piled on the tender.]

became standard in locomotives all over the country. He could have been a big shot in the Harriman lines, but he preferred to work on the North Pacific Coast and later on the Tamalpais railroad and not become the big, high-pressure man which he could have. He was very remarkable.

Mr. Mosher

You speak of Heislers. There were a couple of kinds of locomotives used on the mountain railway. Did you work on both types?

Mr. Provines

No, only on the Shay. I never considered the Heislers a representative Tamalpais locomotive. They had one or two Heislers, I think, at the beginning. No. 2 was one; I think she weighed about twenty tons. Then they had Shays. I think the 498 was a small Shay. The engines in use when I worked there were No. 4, 5, 7, and 8, all Shays. Engine No. 4 weighed about 23 tons, about 46,000 pounds. Nos. 5, 7, and 8 weighed about 37 tons, 74,000 pounds. The last engine they got was a Heisler, No. 9. I believe they purchased her in about 1921. She had a very shallow firebox because of the type of construction on a Heisler. She used to crack the plaster and knock all the dishes off the shelves going up Blithedale Canyon because of the drumming effect in her firebox.

The Shay engines had 28-inch drivers. With three cylinders, that was six exhausts for each cycle. Although the engine had just the contact between the wheel and the rail (it wasn't a cog railroad like Mt. Washington or Pike's Peak), there was a reduction of about three to one between the pinion gear on the shaft and the big master gear on the side of the drivers on the engineer's side. Of course this gave more power. You take a 28-inch wheel, with a three-to-one reduction and six exhausts for each cycle -- that would be eighteen exhausts for every turn of the wheel. You figure 28-inch drivers, and a train going about fifteen miles an hour -- you get about forty five exhausts a second. So one of those Shays going fifteen miles an hour sounded like a rod engine going about 120. It had a very rapid exhaust.

Coming back to the grease on the track: They had

to do away with grease because of the danger, so they installed a system of lubricating the wheels with water. There was a tank on the roof of the cab, just above the fireman's side. The water went into this tank from the fireman's injector. The fireman controlled the water in the boiler. Working on a grade, you had your injector on, putting water in the boiler all the time. Just like the braking system, there was a water hose coupled to the whole train with a system of pipes. You opened up the pipes on the back coaches and closed the pipe on the front coach. The water would flow on the front wheels of the train going up the mountain. We always backed up, so the cars couldn't **break away.**

As soon as you'd start from the station in Mill Valley you'd throw a valve just outside the fireman's side of the cab, by the steps, and that threw a stream of water on each of the eight drivers on the engine -- I guess a stream about an eighth of an inch in diameter. You never moved an engine any place on the railroad without first throwing water on the wheels. That lubricated the wheels on the engine, going up and coming downhill. When you were backing up, you had to have water on the front wheels of the cars.

As I say, as soon as you'd pull out you'd get your atomizer and your oil valve controlled for the proper amount of fire. Then you'd reach back, grab the injector, open it about a quarter of a pull until it primed, then you'd open the injector all the way and start putting water in the boiler. Then you'd reach back and turn one of the valves that ran the water to the front of the train, and you'd put this water on the wheels. You had another valve that controlled the amount of water that went on the wheels.

On the injector you had a lazy cock so you could adjust the amount of water going into the boiler, depending upon how hard you were pulling, how many cars you had, and one thing and another. Going up Blithedale Canyon the grade wasn't so much, so you had the lazy cock in a position where you didn't get so much water. But as soon as you hit the grade up at Lee Street, you increased the fire and adjusted the water accordingly.

Mr. Mosher

Were you burning coal in any of the engines?

Mr. Provines

No, those engines were oil-burners. They were converted to oil around 1902.

Anyhow, the water going on the wheels would lubricate the flanges. If you heard a whistle on the flanges, you'd reach back and give it more water. If you didn't notice it, or if the head brakeman didn't think you were putting enough water on, he'd put his thumb up to his mouth as if he were drinking, to give you the high sign that you needed more water on the wheels.

Mr. Mosher

As I understand it, that was vital. Otherwise you were liable to have derailments, is that right?

Mr. Provines

Even the gravity cars had to have water on the wheels, coming down the mountain. The only one I can remember that didn't have water on the wheels was the old flatbed car used for hauling down garbage.

The gravity cars had, I think, five seats. They could seat thirty people, counting the gravity man, who sat on the right front side with two hand brakes. Under the front seat there was a water tank, just like the tanks they used to use in homes for hot water. I think it held about thirty gallons. There was a standpipe that came off to the side, on the gravity man's side. Those tanks were filled with water at the top of the mountain. Before you left, the gravity man would open the valve to put water on the wheels.

Old Bill Thomas used to make quite a game of this at the top of the mountain. You'd run, say, one to four cars down the mountain in a gravity train, with a gravity man in each car. Bill would get up and give a little talk, then he'd say, "Okay, everybody lean forward." Then he'd say, "Okay, we'll turn on the gravity." The gravity men would get out and turn on the valves to get the water flowing on the wheels of the car. Then they'd start down the mountain.

It wasn't a scenic railway ride; it was a measured trip at about twelve miles an hour. Usually you gave a little talk to the people before you started down. You'd say, "Now, this ride down the mountain is not for a thrill. It's not a scenic railway. It's a scenic railway from the point of view of what you'll see, but it's not for thrills." Our normal speed was five minutes to a mile -- twelve miles an hour. You could tell your speed by experience, or by that "click-click, click-click" of the wheels going over the joints.

There were a couple of places where you had to speed up. Going into Fern Canyon there was a flat spot by the water tank, or at the Old Inn siding on the Muir Woods branch. Before you went into those flat spots you'd say to the people, "Okay, we have a flat spot in the track down here. We have to increase our speed so we can get across the flat spot; otherwise we'll have to push the cars." Coming down, you knew when to release the brakes. Usually when you hit the curve there'd be sort of a lurch, and if a person didn't know why you were suddenly picking up speed and felt that lurch it might scare him a bit.

Mr. Mosher

This is kind of a foggy, dank day, even though it's August. I suppose this was the time of year when the cars were always full of tourists, particularly on weekends.

Mr. Provines

That's a thing tourists can never understand. They say, "If San Francisco's like this in the summer, what's it like at other times of the year?" They come out here in the summer, a poor time of the year if they don't understand our climate. Our hills are brown from late May until December -- green from December to May.

Of course we may have three or four moderately warm days during the summer, but then we'll have a few days of overcast. Perhaps not so much on the other side of the mountain -- San Anselmo, San Rafael, and up that way -- but on the south side of the mountain there'll be this overcast. People would come over on the ferryboat and take the electric train into Mill

Valley. They'd be shivering, and they'd say, "We sure blew it! Here we are, going up to the top of the mountain to get a view. We sure got short-changed, because it's all overcast. The day's spoiled; we're wasting our time." The guide would say, "Don't worry about it. Before you get to the top you're going to see the sun shine."

The people would get on the train, and we'd pull out of Mill Valley. We'd stop at the Double Bowknot and take water, then we'd continue on. After we pulled out of Fern Canyon -- between Fern Canyon and West Point -- the train would come out of the fog and all of a sudden burst out into beautiful blue sky and brilliant sunshine. Even back in the engine you could almost hear the people gasp when they saw it.

Bill Osgood, the guide, or John Patterson, or one of the other fellows would say, "Well, I told you you were going to see the sun shine."

Say they took the 10:40, they'd get up to the top of the mountain about 11:30 and go into the dining room to have lunch. By the time they got through lunch most of the fog would be burned away and then they'd get their view -- except maybe out over the ocean, where the fog would be like a great big mattress, sometimes for weeks at a time. But they could see the city and far to the east and north, up into Sonoma County and Napa, into Lake County and even Mendocino. Then they felt they really had seen the view. It was always a disappointment when they came over to Mill Valley in an overcast, but they got the surprise of their lives when they suddenly came into brilliant sunshine.

Mr. Mosher

Let's talk for a minute about the tracks you can see in this old picture. Apparently comeone tried to build an interurban streetcar system in Marin County.

Mr. Provines

That was one of the early dreams, I guess, in the first part of the century when electric power first came in. All over the country, local interurban electric lines started up. People dreamed of streetcar lines any place where service might be profitable.

This particular dream was a trolley line from Mill Valley to Bolinas. The only part that was ever actually constructed, I believe, was a standard-guage track that started on Throckmorton at the Miller Avenue intersection and went up Throckmorton, around the curve, and stopped at Mill Street just below Old Mill School. The track was supposed to go from Miller Avenue up to the old Stage Road and all the way over to Bolinas. The little section of track from Miller Avenue up to Mill Street was there for years and years. Around 1920, Throckmorton and a lot of other Mill Valley streets were paved or repaved. I don't remember them tearing the tracks up; they may still be underneath the street now. I don't remember that detail.

Mr. Mosher

Things like that happened, as you say, all over the country, when dreamy people had the idea they could exploit the possibility of a railroad.

Mr. Provines

They used to have big white cars that ran between Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, and Petaluma. Santa Rosa had trolley service in the early part of the century. I don't know when they took the streetcars out of Santa Rosa, but I remember seeing them as a child.

Mr. Mosher

That was before the automobile proliferated to the point where it is now.

As I understand it, the coming of the automobile was the thing that killed the mountain railway.

Mr. Provines

Hiking started to drop off about 1923. That's when the automobile started taking over. Up to then, hikers used to pour into Mill Valley every weekend -- and that's a whole story in itself.

The railroad had the exclusive right up to the top of the mountain until 1926, and then Ridgecrest Boulevard was put in. It was a toll road -- fifty cents toll. People would drive from Fairfax, over the top of Alpine Dam to Ridgecrest Boulevard, past Rock Springs, and on to the top of the mountain. People like quickies, you know.

They could pile five or six people into an automobile, and for fifty cents they could run up to the top of the mountain and back -- and they wouldn't have to take a day to do it.

At the time I worked on the railroad, fares to the top of the mountain were reasonable. It cost $1.20 from Mill Valley to the top of the mountain, $1.20 from Mill Valley to Muir Woods, or $2.00 for a round trip to either place. For $3.20 you could go up to the top of the mountain, down to Muir Woods, and back to Mill Valley.

Mr. Mosher

Would they buy their tickets at the Mill Valley depot?

Mr. Provines

Either there or in the city. They had a ticket office in Mill Valley, right where Dr. Rice's optometry shop is now.[1] In some early pictures you can see Pinky DeLasaux[2] standing at the ticket office. The train ran across Throckmorton Avenue from the depot, right next to where Rutherford's Pharmacy is now.

Mr. Mosher

The tracks ran through an opening where McDonald's Jewelry Store is now, I believe.[3]

Mr. Provines

Yes. In fact, you can still see settled places in Throckmorton where the track was covered. You can walk down to where the bus platform is now, and you can plainly see the contours where the fill has been put in, where the Tamalpais trains used to run.

The track went behind the Masonic Hall, and then there was a water tank about at the entrance to the Post Office Annex[4] on the Lovell Avenue side. There was a

---

[1] 70 Throckmorton Avenue.

[2] T. J. DeLasaux.

[3] 74 Throckmorton Avenue.

[4] Corner of Lovell and Corte Madera.

side track just east of that, and there they had buried tanks where you got your crude oil. They used to bring 10,000-gallon tank cars from the NWP, and they switched into our track down there. They'd bring up the tank car, take the manhole cover off, put a spout in the bottom of the tank car, and drain the 10,000 gallons of crude oil into the underground tank.

To get it into the engine we had what we called an outboard valve, a pipe that came out of the side of the engine underneath the fireman's side of the cab. We coupled up a pipe with a universal joint on it to operate the little steam engines that pumped the oil out of the underground tank into the engine tender;[1] there was a spout up there. We'd stand up and take the manhole cover off the tank, then lean out and fall onto this pipe framework and walk ourselves back, pulling the oil pipe. Then we'd twist the spout over and put it down into the manhold tender.

There was a separate valve on the fireman's side that you opened when you went out to take oil after you'd coupled the pipe on. When you got the manhole in there, you'd reach over to this pipe frame and turn the valve that controlled the steam going to the engine that pumped the oil out of the underground tank. Of course when steam cools off you get condensation, so you cracked that valve very gently; you let the steam engine move very slowly for several strokes while it pumped the condensation out through the exhaust. If you just pulled that valve wide open -- wham! The condensation water wouldn't compress, and there would go your piston or your cylinder head.

Mr. Mosher

I can see there was a lot of drama on this railroad -- small, but interesting.

Mr. Provines

There was a lot of detail. When you took oil you filled the tank only to within a couple of inches of the top, because the oil had to be heated. When you ran steam into the tank to heat the oil, it expanded. If you had too much oil in there, it would start coming

---

[1] There was also a standby pump, in case of emergency.

out the manhole. You'd get black crude oil all over the engine, and you had a mess.

Those engines wouldn't fire properly unless the oil was at the right temperature, and each engine liked a different temperature. Engine 4 would take its oil at one temperature, Engine 5 at another, and so on -- varying degrees of heat. They were very fussy that way. So that was another thing you had to know. The fireman would test with his index finger and middle finger against the front of the oil tank. He could judge the temperature of the oil that way, and he'd know whether the engine liked its oil cold, medium, or hot.

Mr. Mosher

It sounds like the Model T Ford. Every one of them was different, and you had to understand the temperament of each one.

Mr. Provines

If you didn't have the oil at the right temperature you were in for a miserable day. The worst thing you could do was overheat. The oil would burn, but it burned with sort of a brownish color, and the fire had a rather peculiar odor and no heat. You really had to fight that engine because it wouldn't steam properly, and on that grade you had to have 175 pounds of steam. The only way to cool it off would be to stop for water, say, at the mesa or at Fern Canyon; that would cool it off.

If the oil was too cold you could open the heater valve and blow steam from the boiler, through a special pipe, right into the oil tank. This would heat the oil.

So: While the train was standing at the station they would be putting gear dope in the gears and filling the rod cups with grease and screwing them up; the engineer was oiling the valve gear and the sleeves that the shaft slipped in, getting the engine ready for the road; and the fireman was getting the water up to the proper level, the steam up to the proper pressure so that when you pulled out you had your 175 pounds of steam. You had to keep, oh, maybe three-quarters of a glass of water. You didn't want to carry too much water, because when the throttle was open that water would rise in the glass and you were liable to get steam in the

cylinder and break a piston or cylinder head. But you had to have enough water so that when you hit that grade you would maintain the proper level of water with your fireman's injector. If you couldn't, then you'd have to run the engineer's injector too.

Mr. Mosher

What kind of pay did all of you get?

Mr. Provines

At that time an engineer got $5.00 a day. A conductor got $4.00, a fireman $3.75, a brakeman $3.50, and a gravity man $3.00. If you were lucky enough to get in on a night party, you received an extra day's pay. Those special parties were sponsored by some big institution. Some bank or insurance company would have a special party at the inn at the top of the mountain -- a big dinner with dancing after. The dining room at the tavern seated three hundred people.

During Prohibition, 1926 to '29, they used to take liquor up there in ginger ale bottles. It was labeled Cliquot Club Ginger Ale, but it smelled like wine to me, and some of the reactions proved it. Sometimes coming back down the mountain some of those people would have had too much. You'd have to take a firehose the next day and wash out the cars.

Mr. Mosher

How many different taverns were built up there over the years? There were at least two -- or were there three?

Mr. Provines

I know of two. The original tavern was built shortly after the railroad started and was quite a massive structure. It was sort of a greenish grey shingle, as I recall. There was a big arch over the track. It was built in the days before Prohibition. They had rooms for rent, a dining room, and a bar. It was really like a resort. It was a place where a person could go for a vacation. That tavern burned on June 2, 1923.

As in all history (and I can be mistaken, too!) the story creeps up from time to time that this original tavern burned in a forest fire, but there never was a forest fire when that tavern burned. The fire started in the tavern itself, and they don't know what started

it. If you'd go back to the old Mill Valley Record or the old San Rafael papers you'd probably see that it was rather mysterious how the fire started. Equally mysterious were two wooden water tanks on the mountainside just above the tavern which somehow were both empty at the time the fire started. Those tanks were always kept filled. The water was pumped from Fern Canyon by an electric pump.

Mr. Mosher

Was there talk of arson?

Mr. Provines

I can't remember. I just recall there was something sort of suspicious. You'd have to go back to the newspaper morgue and get the story. I happened to be caddying at the golf course (I believe it was a Saturday afternoon), and going up to the fifth hole we could see the smoke, see the tavern burning.

Mr. Mosher

Was the hotel profitable, as far as you know?

Mr. Provines

I don't know.

Mr. Mosher

They rebuilt it right away, so that would seem to indicate that it was profitable.

Mr. Provines

Yes, I believe the new tavern was built in 1924. It was sort of a gingerbread building of pink stucco. It was this dining room that held three hundred people. It had a kitchen and a lounge but no hotel accommodations. Alongside the tracks there was a little soda fountain.

Mr. Mosher

Was the tavern owned by the railway?

Mr. Provines

Yes, it was. The new tavern was erected on the foundations of the old one. Down below, I believe, there was space where some of the waiters and cooks could live,

but the only overnight accommodations for passengers were on the west side of the track in what looked like a little storeroom. I believe there were four rooms over there. They were very insignificant-looking accommodations.

Mr. Mosher

You mean the new tavern wasn't primarily for overnight guests?

Mr. Provines

We used to say they were used by bachelors and their wives. I imagine the old tavern had some of those uses, too.

Mr. Mosher

Was there a wagon road into the tavern at that time?

Mr. Provines

No.

Mr. Mosher

You hiked or went up on the train?

Mr. Provines

The original toll road for automobiles was put in in 1926, and of course that started to knock train traffic. In 1928 the Panoramic Highway was put in, with a tollgate at Pantoll for fifty cents, and people could go up to the top from the Mill Valley side in thirty or forty minutes. So that was it; the railroad had competition from both sides. And then of course the Depression really killed the railroad.

Mr. Mosher

As I understand it the railroad really died out with the well-known Mill Valley fire in 1929.

Mr. Provines

No, that was just one of the causes. The Mill Valley fire, the Depression, the automobile roads -- everything came at the same time. I think it was Bill Thomas, superintendent of the railroad, that I heard talking in about 1928, saying it would cost almost $250,000 to refurbish the railroad's rolling stock. Engine 4 had been built in 1903, Engine 5 around 1905, Engine 7 around 1907 or '08.

Engine No. 8 was the latest one, built around 1912. I think they bought her about the time of the 1915 Exposition in San Francisco. So they all needed work.

The day of the big fire, Engine 7 jumped the track at the three-mile post up near Summit Avenue, and the crew had to run for their lives. The engine had all her woodwork burned off -- the cab and the pilot beam and all the woodwork was gone -- and the coach was burned.

Mr. Mosher

What caused her to jump the track?

Mr. Provines

I suppose the heat had expanded the rails. Vollie Thoney could tell you that. I think Vollie may have been the engineer.

Mr. Mosher

Where were you when the fire started?

Mr. Provines

I had quit the Tamalpais railroad about two weeks before. They didn't have work for me every day, and I was planning a long trip and needed money. I was going to make an 8,000-mile train trip on passes that I could get through my dad, who was still an engineer on the NWP. I planned to go north up to and then across Canada, through eastern Canada, and down to New York. I wanted some money, and I couldn't make it on the mountain. So I quit and went to work wiping engines down at the Northwestern Pacific in Sausalito. We worked seven days a week. About every third or fourth day we worked sixteen hours, from eight in the morning until midnight. It was hot, hard, dirty work, and we made 40¼ cents an hour.

The day of the big fire, July 2, 1929, I happened to come out of the roundhouse about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I looked up, and all you could see at Mill Valley was smoke. We didn't know what was happening. Then gradually the reports began to filter in that there was a fire in Mill Valley. I tried to phone home about 4 o'clock, but the lines were all busy.

Mr. Mosher

When did the fire start?

Mr. Provines

I think it started around 1:30 in the afternoon. My dad happened to be at home on a layover day, and he was one of the first ones up there when the fire started. In fact, he saw the first house burn, the Sylvia Bishop house. Then the Nostrand house burned. Up around Summit Avenue the fire came sweeping up the side of the canyon, and they had to drop the hoses and run.

Mr. Mosher

Did you take part in the fire-fighting at all?

Mr. Provines

No, I kept on working at the shops. The family called me about 7 o'clock and said everything was okay. We were living on Buena Vista at the time, where Mt. Carmel is now.1/ Then they called a little bit later and said, "You'd better come home. We've got everything wrapped up in sheets, and we've got to move." I got on the electric train and got into Mill Valley about 9 o'clock. I still had my dirty overalls on, and I was a mess. I think I took a bath and then went across the street to help Mrs. Thacker and Mrs. Southworth pack some stuff to take out.

Mr. Mosher

I'm surprised there was water for a bath.

Mr. Provines

There was water in some parts of town. The tanks went dry up at the top of Summit, but we had water in our area.

Later that evening my dad and I walked out Blithedale Canyon on Corte Madera Avenue. There were embers all along the west side of the street. The fire burned the whole Middle Ridge, from Corte Madera Avenue to Cascade Drive. It went all the way over to Cascade Reservoir. It burned almost down to Lower Alcatraz but didn't get those houses on Lower Alcatraz.

The whole Middle Ridge was nothing but a red mass of fire. You'd be downtown and hear someone say, "There goes my house," and he'd just stand there staring. When you see fifty, seventy-five or more houses going up at once it is quite a spectacle. I think around 105 houses were burned.

1/Where Mt. Carmel Convent is now, 34 Buena Vista Avenue. WP.

The fire burned from July 2 until July 5. My birthday was the 4th of July, and I took the day off but didn't go up and fight the fire. I remember my dad and I walked up around Summit Avenue. The mountain was nothing but grey ashes -- little pieces of charred branches and grey ash all over everything. There were the remains of chimneys and fireplaces. The fire moved so fast that sometimes a house would burn and the garage wouldn't. Or people would take their things out into the yard, and the things in the yard would burn and the house wouldn't. It was a peculiar fire and very fast-moving.

Mr. Mosher

It's a miracle it didn't burn the downtown.

Mr. Provines

The wind changed; that's the only thing that saved the town.

Middle Ridge was devastated. You'd think nothing would ever grow there again. But in just a few years you'd hardly know there had been a fire.

Mr. Mosher

Speaking of saving the downtown, does it look today like it did when you came here, in its major details?

Mr. Provines

No, it's entirely different. We had a big flagpole right in Lytton Square. We didn't have any streetlights, except for those old-fashioned fluted enameled reflectors with lights in them.

The old railroad station was a shingle building, almost Oriental in design. Mr. Melvin, the station agent, and his wife lived upstairs. There was a three-story grey building on the corner of Miller and Throckmorton. Lockwood's Pharmacy was on the bottom floor, painted that Rexall-orange color. On the second floor were the offices of Dr. Spottiswood, a medical doctor, and Dr. Rodney Gilbride, the dentist. On the third floor, Fred Roth, the taxi driver, and his family lived.

Just down Miller was the Modern Bakery. Then there was the Eastland Bakery and Gus Oppenheimer's store.

Of course the Keystone Building was a landmark on Lytton Square. It was redesigned and gussied up in the mid or late thirties. The post office was in there, I think about where the men's shop is now.[1] About where the Red Balloon is[2], Wheeler Martin had the Sunset Grocery. Mr. Shepherd had an ice cream parlor where Rutherford's Pharmacy is now.[3] There was a dry goods store in there later on -- I think it was the Bell Dry Goods Store.

The town was entirely different.

Mr. Mosher

You're talking about the twenties, when you were growing up?

Mr. Provines

I'm talking about 1916, when we came here. The new railroad station was put in around 1925. There was a long wooden platform that ran out from the station. Eight electric cars could load and unload at this long platform, so people were protected by the train-shed roof.

When Mr. Maggard became president of NWP, stations all over the line were renovated. When the old wooden platform in Mill Valley was torn up, the kids found a gold mine! They used to play around there, and they'd find money that over the years had fallen between the cracks of the old wooden platform.

The new station, which was Spanish style, is still standing, now used as the bus station. It had a concrete platform without a covering.

Down on Sunnyside Avenue you can still see a piece of one of the mainline NWP rails at the entrance to the parking lot, on the Miller Avenue side. It's a piece of the old electric train track.

Throckmorton Avenue used to jut out more. Right

---

[1] 82 Throckmorton Avenue.

[2] 90 (?) Throckmorton Avenue.

[3] 68 Throckmorton Avenue.

where Si's liquor store is,[1] the buildings came out considerably farther into the street than they do now. The Mill Valley Hardware and Fuel Company stood where the new Bell Savings and Loan office is going up, where Pat and Joe's Restaurant used to be.[2] ~~At one time they ran a little roominghouse, which has been closed for years. Varney's had a hardware store in there.~~[5]

Over where the Mill Valley Market is now,[3] there was the Tamalpais Grocery. That was run by Cervelli, Palazzi, and Pizetti. Charlie Cervelli's son, Gerald, and I were very good friends. His younger brother was Melvin. They both became butchers and are still active in the business.

The Tamalpais Grocery used to have charge accounts and deliveries, like most of the stores did. The Tamalpais Grocery had a four-wheeled wagon and a two-wheeled cart, and I used to ride around with Gerald when he was making deliveries. The horse's name was Nellie, an old brown horse. We used to go all over Mill Valley.

The only store that didn't deliver and have charge accounts was O. S. Prichard's Cash & Carry Store. I worked for him for nine months, after school and on Saturdays. That was the job I left when I went to work firing on the Tamalpais railroad. He had a cash-and-carry business. He was one of the finest, most honest businessmen you ever saw. His motto was, "Sixteen ounces make a pound, and don't cheat anybody." He gave you very simple, logical instructions. He was a fine, honest man.

Mr. Mosher

Do you recall Suey Kee, the well-known Chinese grocer?

Mr. Provines

Oh yes, Suey Kee was quite elderly at that time. He had a big mole on one cheek, with two or three long, curly hairs growing out of it. He had a little frame store where Sonapa Farms is now.[4] You went down a wooden

---

[1] Redhill Liquors, 67 Throckmorton Avenue.

[2] 71 Throckmorton Avenue.

[3] 12 Corte Madera Avenue.

[4] 41 Throckmorton Avenue.

[5] Varney's was where Redhill Liquors is and rooming house above that location and the present furniture store. WP correction and addenda.

walkway, and there was a Chinese laundry back there. I had a friend who used to go back there and raise cain with those poor old Chinamen. I think he knew some Chinese swear words!

There was also a Sam Kee Laundry in Mill Valley. Then at the northwest corner of Bernard Street and Lovell Avenue there was a Japanese laundry, a two-story white building. I think the Japanese lived on the upper floor, and the laundry was below. On New Year's Eve in 1923 the building caught fire. It was late at night, around 11 or 12 o'clock, and it was a spectacular fire. They had to keep the poor Japanese from running back in, trying to save clothes and things. The building was leveled.

There was another well-known family, the Kanki family. He was a cobbler. I think he was Korean. That was on the east side of Bernard Street, about halfway up. There was sort of a little Oriental settlement in there. There was another Korean who repaired furniture. We used to call him Whiskey George. He had an umbrella staff that he used as a cane. You could hear him coming, tap-scrape-scrape, tap-scrape-scrape, using this old umbrella staff. The kids used to go up to him and say, "You like whiskey, George?" He'd say, "Yiss, yiss." I guess you could call him one of the town characters.

Mr. Mosher

There was another character around town during my early years here. He was an Italian named Pete -- a tall guy with a bushy mustache. I never could understand anything he said. He was one of those foreigners who never quite captured the language. I understood he worked for the railway at one time.

Mr. Provines

Oh yes, Pete Clivio. I believe he got hit by a train and was very badly injured, almost killed. After that I think he used to clean cars for the railroad down here in Mill Valley. Pete was an old-timer here. His daughter still lives on Lovell Avenue. His son, Gene, was a good friend of my engineer friend, Charlie Stocker. In 1926 Gene was about ten years old, I guess, and sometimes Charlie would give him a ride in the cab of the engine. Gene would stand in the doorway looking down, watching the cranks and the universal joints and the shaft going in and out of the sleeve. Charlie would reach down into the box where we kept the sand for sanding

the boiler flues. He'd get a handful and pour it into Gene's hip pocket. This amuses me now, because one of Gene's sons is in the Mill Valley Fire Department. To see this mature young man and realize he's the son of the young fellow who used to stand in the cab of the engine sure turns back the clock!

Mr. Mosher

I imagine the mountain railway played a big part in the life of a kid who was growing up in Mill Valley. Of course it did in yours, because you were a railroad family. But if I had been a kid here, I'm sure I would have tried to hitch a ride on the train.

Mr. Provines

It was a focal point for people who lived here, and it also attracted thousands of people from all over the world. The Tamalpais railroad, being a tourist attraction, was one of the best advertising things Mill Valley ever had. Muir Woods was another.

We used to go over to Muir Woods for picnics. There were no rangers or anybody bothering you over there. You just went over and had your picnic. You kept the place clean and made use of it. You could have cooking fires, even at night. There was no problem. Just like the beach; we used to go out to the beach and make a bonfire. You can't do those things now.

When we first came here in the early twenties they still used to have the big mussel feeds over at Stinson Beach.

Mr. Mosher

Were they run by the town?

Mr. Provines

No, these were private parties. I remember going over there once when the McNamee family was spending some time over there. I got a ride over, and I remember we went to Fairfax, then over the old White's Hill road, and down through Olema. That's certainly a round-about way to go from Mill Valley to Stinson Beach!

We used to go eel fishing out at Slide Ranch. It's Highway 1 now. I remember sitting in the back of a wagon,

going over the windey dirt road to Slide Ranch. Jack Wright was a brakeman, and his son, Patsy, and I would sit in the tailgate of this wagon, dragging sticks in the dust of the road. There weren't even any bridges across the creek -- you'd run right through the water.

It was remarkable the way we'd catch those eels. Richardson's Bay used to be full of clams. We'd see a squirt in that blue mud and jab a clam shovel in there and pull out a big clam. We used the clam necks for bait, both for striped bass and for eels. We'd take a long bamboo pole -- I guess it was about ten or twelve feet long -- put a piece of No. 14 copper wire on it, then attach a hook, put on the clam-neck bait, and shove it down among the rocks. Out would come the eels, a foot and a half or two feet long, just like big, thick snakes. We'd throw them in a damp sack, and when we'd get home, hours after they were caught, they'd still be alive. We'd have to skin them to cook them. They had nice white meat. You never hear about anybody going eel-fishing any more.[1]

Mr. Mosher

As we said earlier, this was obviously a great place for a kid to grow up. You paint an interesting picture. I can hear the school bell, and I can hear the engines puffing up through the canyon with all their various noises. This must have been an ever-present sound identified with Mill Valley.

Mr. Provines

When the train was going up the mountain, you could stand down in Lytton square and hear the sound of the exhaust. The sound was reflected off the sides of the banks, and it increased and decreased as the train went around the curves.

Mill Valley was unique. It was off the beaten track until we got Golden Gate Bridge and this area became more accessible and people could move around more rapidly. When Mill Valley was what we called "the village," almost everybody knew everybody else. We didn't have a police force. When we came here there was only a night watchman, James B. Chase. He was an attorney, but at

---

[1] After this interview was completed, Mr. Provines called to say he had met a trout fisherman who mentioned that he also fished for eels at Slide Ranch.

night he was a watchman. Thorndyke and O'Connor became the first policemen -- I think around 1923. Then McGowan came in, Jim McGowan. He quit his job on the Northwestern Pacific as conductor and became the Police Chief. He was here until just a few years ago, when Dan Terzich came in. In the early days we didn't have any problem. I think the first night Joe Canet came on the job he caught somebody trying to rob the creamery on Corte Madera Avenue, about where Jimmy Quinn's is now.[1]

Mr. Mosher

When did Joe Canet start with the force?

Mr. Provines

I can't pinpoint it. I'd say in the midtwenties sometime.

Mr. Mosher

What was the population then?

Mr. Provines

Around four thousand people. As I say, you knew everybody in town. It was a good, friendly place. You didn't have to lock your doors at night. Male or female could walk the streets any time of day or night. In fact, in the 1920s a lot of my friends and I used to walk all over Mill Valley after dinner, just to enjoy being out in the open. We'd walk down to the high school, we'd walk all around the hills of Mill Valley. Sometimes you'd come into a canyon on a rather cool night, and you'd run into a remarkably warm pocket of air -- interesting things like that. It was just nice to be outside.

Mr. Mosher

It beats TV, doesn't it?

Mr. Provines

I seldom watch TV. But nowadays you'd hesitate to go out at night. If you didn't get mugged, the police might come after you, wondering why you're wandering around in some out-of-the-way place, in the trees or something, enjoying a walk. You can walk in the daytime, but if somebody goes for a walk in the dark of the night,

---

[1] Quinn's Tavern, 6 Corte Madera Avenue.

the police, being alert, naturally wonder about it -- unless they know you and what you're doing out at that time of night. So the whole character of the town has changed.

I heard a lecture, shortly after the Golden Gate Bridge opened, by a fellow who said the whole character of Marin County was going to change because of this new mobility of people from one side of the bay to the other.

In early Mill Valley -- Mill Valley of the early twenties -- there was nothing below Park School, just open fields. Blithedale Avenue, now known as East Blithedale, was a narrow, winding road. It was just like the country. There were still dairies around Mill Valley, just like there are in West Marin today.

Even up to the late twenties, soldiers from the Presidio used to come over here on their annual 100-mile hike. They'd come over on the ferryboat and usually bivouac the first evening west of Blithedale Avenue, around where the Goheen Tract is.[1] They'd bivouac down there in the grassy fields. The next morning they'd be gone, and the place would be all policed up. Around 1923 and 1924 the first few houses were built below Park School.

As far as Miller Avenue goes, there was nothing below Locust Avenue. Over where Egger's is[2] there was a vegetable garden. Below that was nothing but marshland, with heavy marsh grass and winding sloughs.

Mr. Mosher

Do you mean where Tamalpais High School is?

Mr. Provines

No, where Santa's Toys[3] and the Crocker Bank[4] and the Safeway Store[5] is. The railroad track ran right down

---

[1] Developed by George Goheen and now more commonly known as Sycamore Village. The tract is (roughly) bounded by East Blithedale; Camino Alto; Nelson, Matilda, and Hilarita Streets; and by Corte Madera Creek near Miller Avenue.

[2] 401 Miller Avenue.

[3] 419 Miller Avenue.

[4] 525 Miller Avenue.

[5] Intersection of Miller Avenue and Camino Alto.

the middle, and on the east side there was nothing but marshland. On the west side you had Miller Avenue.

On the northwest corner of Miller and Evergreen there was a big pond. Between Evergreen and Reed Street there were nothing but big ponds. I guess they were at one time edges of the bay and had been cut off by Miller Avenue. They'd fill up with rainwater and were highly populated by frogs. You could hear those frogs all the way from Locust Avenue to downtown Mill Valley. We heard them up on Buena Vista Avenue -- croak, croak -- this chorus of frogs. We used to walk down to the high school to basketball games and go past these frog ponds, with all the frogs croaking. We'd pick up a rock and throw it out into the middle of the pond. There would be a "plop," and all of a sudden it would be quiet in that pond. As we walked on up the sidewalk, up Miller Avenue, the chorus would start up again, after that startling plop was forgotten.

Mr. Mosher

Was there a road that went down to Tamalpais High School and then over to Sausalito?

Mr. Provines

Yes, the old road went right in front of the high school, where the gymnasium is now. The road over to Sausalito was entirely different from the present route. For one thing, Waldo Point stuck out. Down by Pine Street, near the railroad shops, you had to go right around a telephone pole. There was a high wooden fence around the railroad-shop side of the road. It was a very narrow, windey road. None of today's busses or trucks could negotiate the curves. When Marinship[1] went in, that whole hill was destroyed and used for bay fill. The whole character of the land has changed.

When Mr. Mason was running the distillery down at Pine Street they used to get molasses off barges that tied up to a pier out in Richardson Bay. They'd pump this molasses over to the distillery. It was after Prohibition, but I guess they were making alcohol for medicinal uses. (Before that time they must have used grain.) You could always tell when you were getting near Pine because there was an overpowering cereal odor.

1/World War II shipyard on the Sausalito waterfront at the north end of Bridgeway.

The stack would be belching big plumes of a sort of yellowish smoke. With a westerly wind it would go out over Richardson Bay. In fact, when the wind blew from the south you could even smell the odor in Mill Valley, and it wasn't considered particularly pleasant.

Mr. Mosher

Tell me, Bill, were there any pranks on the mountain railway? Did the kids sneak rides? Did they do any Hallowe'en pranks or anything to enliven the scene?

Mr. Provines

As I said, when the engines were put away at night there was steam left in the boiler. It was considered quite a feat on Hallowe'en to get up into one of the engines and pull down the whistle cord. Of course that used all the steam and made trouble for the fireman next morning. When he wanted to start the fire, he wouldn't have any steam to work the atomizer to get a fire in the firebox.

I don't know who did it, but one time when we were coming down the mountain, just before we got to the shops, somebody had put a couple of ties across the track and thrown the switch the wrong way. I forget who I was firing for, but I happened to look ahead and here were two ties across the tracks and the switch thrown the wrong way. Instead of going on the main line, they had us shunted off on a sidetrack into the shops. We stopped in plenty of time, got out and took the ties off and threw the switch the right way, and went on our way.

The worst thing that ever happened to me -- you might call it a prank, but it was a very dangerous prank -- was around February of 1928. I was almost killed going down into Muir Woods. I was running a gravity car one Sunday morning. Those gravity cars held thirty passengers, and the gravity man sat on the right front side. You had two hand brakes: One worked the shoes on the front wheels, and one worked the shoes on the back wheels. You had a gong, like the old-fashioned streetcar gong, that you hammered with your heel.

That morning we had a couple of dozen passengers

for Muir Woods. We went out of Mill Valley on the 10:40, got up to the Double Bowknot around 11 o'clock, and all the passengers for Muir Woods got into the gravity car and I started off with them. Vollie Thoney's wife, Dolores, happened to be sitting in the front seat. I started down the track to Muir Woods, twelve miles an hour, click-click, click-click. I told you about that flat spot by the old inn where we'd release the brakes and pick up speed so we could get over it. Before you got to the flat spot there was a sharp curve to the right, a sort of right-angle turn. We approached the curve with the brakes released, picking up speed. I was ringing the gong with my right heel and watching the rails to make sure some hiker hadn't stuck a rock or a branch or something on the track, so my eyes were focused on the rails ahead.

All of a sudden Dolores Thoney yelled, "Look out for the wire." I glanced up and automatically ducked, all in one motion. The wire hit me on the forehead, taking off my hat. There wasn't time to do anything. I had both hands on the brakes, but between the time Dolores yelled and the time I ducked, I wouldn't have had a chance to pull the brake handles back.

I let the car go around the curve and over the flat spot. Then I pulled on the brakes and went back to get my hat. A man sitting in the last seat had been looking back watching the track. After the wire bounced off my forehead it ran up the back of his neck and took off his hat, too. Luckily he wasn't facing forward!

I went back to the curve. There was one coach standing there on the spur. Someone had taken the conductor's valve wire[1] out of the holders that supported it, had stretched it across the track, and tied it to some wooden steps on that side.

Mr. Mosher

Why did they do that?

Mr. Provines

I think it was a prank. I guess they figured a

---

[1] This wire, extending the full length of the car, was connected to the conductor's valve. The brakeman or trainman could pull the wire at any time, and the brakes would automatically go into emergency application.

train would come along, someone would see this wire across the track about four or five feet high, and the train would have to stop. They didn't realize that on this particular occasion the first train into Muir Woods would be an open gravity car with twenty-five or thirty people in it, with no protection and no possible way of stopping.

If Dolores hadn't seen the wire and yelled, I don't know what would have happened. It could have caught me or any of the passengers under the chin. Tied at both ends, it could have had rather devastating results.

When I got back to pick up the two hats, there were some hikers standing by the coach on the spur. They denied any knowledge of how the incident happened. They said they didn't do it, but I wondered why, if they had seen the wire and had heard the car coming -- why they hadn't run up the grade to warn me -- at least given me a fighting chance to put on the brakes. They could have done something about it.

I finished the run down to Muir Woods and then reported back to Bill Thomas, the superintendent. He didn't say much to me, because there was nothing I could have done -- but oh, he was mad! If he could have gotten hold of the people who played that prank, he'd have really done something to them. I don't suppose that was the first time it had happened, but up to that time I had never heard of such a thing.

Mr. Mosher

Obviously it could have been a disaster.

Mr. Provines

It could have been pretty serious. When you have a job to do, you do it a certain way. You look out for normal things, and you're not expecting to see a wire across the track in a place where no wire exists. There were no telephone lines, no power lines. For someone to take a wire out of a coach and find those old steps across the tracks to fasten it to -- well, it's fantastic.

Mr. Mosher

Thanks, Bill. You're given us a marvelous account

of early days in Mill Valley, a lot of new aspects -- the sounds, the smells, the frogs, and everything else. It all goes into a composite picture of a community and a town. I really appreciate it, and I know everyone else will who ever listens to this. Thanks again for taking the time to do it.

Mr. Provines

Thank you!