

Oral History Committee

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KENT AND ELLIOT SEYMOUR

An Interview Conducted By

William A. Hamilton

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KENT AND ELLIOTT SEYMORE

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Kent and Elliot Seymour

Born July 10, 1902 in Mill Valley (Hahnemann Hospital, San Francisco).

Interviewed April 1975 in the home of Elliot Seymour, 175 Upper Via Casitas, Greenbrae.

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KENT OSBORNE SEYMOUR
ELLIOT WESLEY SEYMOUR

William Hamilton

My name is Bill Hamilton, and I have the pleasure of interviewing, on behalf of the Mill Valley Oral History group, two of Marin County's outstanding citizens. We all started grammar school together, then went on to high school and the university. One was my partner for sixteen years, and the other has been my lawyer for more years than I care to remember.

Let's start by asking you to state your name, your age, where you were born, and so on. Will you start, Kent?

Kent Seymour

My name is Kent Osborne Seymour. I was born in Mill Valley in the year 1902, on July 10. However, I was actually delivered in the old Hahnemann Hospital in San Francisco -- which burned in the fire and earthquake four years later.

Mr. Hamilton

I have to ask these questions in parts, since I'm interviewing the Seymour twins, Kent and Elliot. Elliot is the junior; Kent is ten minutes older and has certain inherent rights.

Kent Seymour

I must correct that. I am fifteen minutes older!

Mr. Hamilton

Okay! Elliot, will you tell us your name and so on?

Elliot Seymour

I'm Elliot Wesley Seymour. My first name is my mother's maiden name. My middle name of Wesley was given

to me for John Wesley, founder of the Methodist religion in England -- at least so I have been told by my family. So I can say I have a religious background, although I've never been associated with the Methodist religion -- though it's a fine church.

Kent Seymour

You might mention, Brother, that Grandpa Elliot, mother's father, had a brother who was a minister of the Methodist faith and had a church in Dutch Flat, in California's Mother Lode country.

Mr. Hamilton

I know you're descended from a prominent Sacramento family, but will you two give us the details: your mother, your father, and so on?

Elliot Seymour

Our father, Kent Jarvis Chase Seymour, was born in Sacramento on November 15, 1868. He was the youngest of three brothers. His mother and father came to California in about 1860 or shortly thereafter. All three sons were born in Sacramento. My father moved to San Francisco when he was about seventeen years of age.

Mr. Hamilton

Do you want to add anything to that, Kent?

Kent Seymour

It's my recollection that when he moved to San Francisco it was to work for the man who became his father-in-law.

Elliot Seymour

Yes, but before that he was messenger for a bank.

Mr. Hamilton

Was your mother a Sacramento girl?

Elliot Seymour

She was born in San Francisco, but her parents lived in Sacramento for a while. She was born December 17, 1871. Her maiden name was Mary French Elliot, and that's where I got my name.

Mr. Hamilton

When were your parents married?

Elliot Seymour

They were married on New Year's Day, January 1, 1892, in Alameda.

Mr. Hamilton

And when did they come to Marin County?

Elliot Seymour

They came to Mill Valley in the summer of 1901, on a vacation from San Francisco, where they lived. At that time they had two daughters. The eldest is Ruth (now Mrs. W. H. Close), and the other is Elizabeth (now Elizabeth Crosley).

Mr. Hamilton

Where does she live?

Elliot Seymour

She resides in Kingsport, Tennessee, and has for some number of years. Her husband, Stewart, was an officer of the U.S. Navy at the time of their marriage. They were married in the old family home at 87 Oakdale Avenue in Mill Valley. This was February 21, 1921. Some months before, Stewart had been injured in an explosion aboard his ship. A piece of glass from a boiler tube lodged in his right eye, and he lost the sight of it. He was still on convalescent leave when he and Beth went on their honeymoon.

Mr. Hamilton

Will you tell us a little about your education?

Elliot Seymour

We entered grammar school at the beginning of the school year in 1908. The Tamalpais Park School had just been completed, and because of the location of our home on Oakdale Avenue we were delegated to attend that school. It had only four grades at that time. We were transferred to the old Summit School for fifth grade. We were only there about ten days when they established a fifth grade at the Tamalpais Park School, and we were sent back there. That's my recollection.

Kent Seymour

They established two more grades, fifth and sixth. We did go to Summit School for the last two years, for seventh and eighth grades.

Elliot Seymour

We graduated from Summit School in June of 1916 and entered Tamalpais High School in August of that year. We attended there for four years, were graduated in June of 1920, and entered the University of California in September.

We both joined the Chi Phi fraternity, Lambda Chapter -- which, by the way, was founded one hundred years ago next month. Lambda Chapter, that is. Chi Phi fraternity was founded in December of 1824.

Mr. Hamilton

You wound up ultimately with different professions, but did you both pursue an academic course at the university?

Elliot Seymour

I had decided I wanted to be a Civil Engineer, and I took Engineering for two and a half years. Then I decided it wasn't to my liking, and I switched to Economics. I graduated in Economics in 1924.

Strange as it may seem, the first job I ever took was as a rodman for a surveying crew for the Southern Pacific Railroad. The Southern Pacific was constructing a second track over the Sierras, and we were working on one of the tunnels. I obtained the job through Mr. Walcott Durbrow, who was a well-known Mill Valley resident and lawyer. He was Chief Counsel for Southern Pacific at that time. He was a very close friend of my mother's and father's and remained so until his demise. He lived a long life.

Mr. Hamilton

Where did you go to law school?

Elliot Seymour

I was working in San Francisco for the F. W. Wentworth Company on Second Street, between Market and Mission. The sales manager was a young fellow who had gone through

San Francisco Law School. We became good friends, and he gave me the inspiration to go back and start studying law. It was actually brought about by the fact that I became ill in 1927 and had to stop working for seven or eight months. After talking with my uncle, Albert H. Elliot (my mother's brother who was a practicing attorney in San Francisco and had been since some time in the early nineties), I started studying law at night at the San Francisco Law School. It's still a well-known law school in San Francisco and still a night school. We had many teachers who were prominent members of the bar, some who were judges or later became judges. It had, and still has, a very high reputation.

I started school in February 1928 and finished in 1931. I was admitted to practice about June 5, 1931, and I've been in practice in my own right since that time.

Mr. Hamilton

How well I know it -- you're my lawyer!

Kent, will you pick up your end of it?

Kent Seymour

Elliot has already given you a record of our attendance until we went to college. At the end of one year I was taken sick with rheumatism and had to stay out of college for a year, so I didn't graduate until 1925.

My work was in the College of Letters and Science, from which I graduated, but all my work therein was done in compliance with the College of Commerce. That was the business end, in which I was interested at that time. I might say that I might have graduated from the College of Commerce except for the lack of certain language courses. I'd had sufficient language courses in high school to take me through the College of Letters and Science. Since I hated languages, I remained in L&S but took all my courses in the College of Commerce.

Elliot Seymour

I might correct my previous statement. I was graduated from the College of Letters and Science, but with an Economics major and a Mathematics minor.

Mr. Hamilton

Kent, what did you do when you got out of college?

Kent Seymour

After graduation I started seeking an occupation in business. My folks sent me to see George Elliott Hunt, who was an old-time neighbor of ours in Mill Valley in the early days and who had made quite a record in the insurance business in San Francisco. He in turn sent me to his friend Arthur Hall, who was then the resident manager for Northern California for the Travelers Insurance Company. I became a floor broker with them from September 1925 through 1929, a period of four years. I then joined the firm of Chapman and Company, which was owned by close friends of mine. I was associated with them until 1945, when they sold their company.

I did not wish to go along with the new company, so I took a position offered to me as Casualty Promotion Manager for Northern California for Cravens Dargan and Company. However, at the end of one year I decided to go into business for myself again, as a broker, and I joined with my old friend Horace Cagwin, whom I had really started in the insurance business some years previous. We had offices in San Francisco until 1947, when we opened a branch office in Mill Valley.

At that time Bill Hamilton, who is interrogating me right now, had just retired from the Marine Corps, and we persuaded him to open a real estate office with us. This was in July of 1947, and it became the firm of Cagwin, Seymour, and Hamilton -- three good boys who had grown up together in Marin County. It was a long and lasting friendship and business association.

About twelve years ago I opened a branch office for our firm in Kentfield and later took over that office as my own business. Bill and Horace kept the Mill Valley office and took in another partner by the name of Wallace Hickman. We were in business until January 1, 1974, when the firm was sold.

Elliot Seymour

I should make one comment. In January or February of 1927 I had decided to leave F. W. Wentworth Company and had given notice to them that I was going into the insurance brokerage business with my brother, Kent Seymour, who then had an office with the Travelers Insurance Company.

Kent Seymour

We were going to operate under the firm of Seymour & Seymour.

Elliot Seymour

We already had our stationery printed and everything arranged when I was taken ill. It was during this period that I became interested in the law and started to school. I liked it so well I decided to go on and complete my law school education. Consequently, Seymour & Seymour didn't get together in business.

Kent Seymour

We never got off the ground. All the stationery we'd had printed became scratch pads.

Mr. Hamilton

You've both done well, and I'm sure if it had been Seymour & Seymour, Insurance Brokers, you would have done equally well.

I'd like to go back briefly to your time in college. You used to have theatrical performances...

Kent Seymour

The Big C Circus!

Mr. Hamilton

As I recall, you two fellows were quick-change artists. One would be on stage, the other would dodge behind a screen. The one on stage would go behind it, and five seconds later he'd come out in an entirely different costume. I think that threw a great many people!

Elliot, do you want to tell us about your club affiliations?

Elliot Seymour

We were both members of Winged Helmet, an honorary society for sophomores at the University of California. I received the Big C for service as crew manager.

Kent Seymour

I was a member of the Big C Society for my three years as assistant football manager. This was during the time of Coach Andy Smith and the California Wonder Team. I like to recall that many members of that team are my personal friends today. Then I was a member of the honor

society for the College of Commerce, Alpha Kappa Psi, and I'm a life member today.

Elliot

After we left college we both joined the Masonic Lodge in Mill Valley. This was in 1937, as I recall, and we've been members ever since. We're also members of Islam Temple of the Shrine. I was a member of the Olympic Club for about twenty years, starting in 1933. I resigned when my wife and I moved to Marin County. I'm a member of the San Francisco Press Club and the Merchants Exchange Club.

Mr. Hamilton

Don't forget to mention your service as a politico.

Elliot Seymour

Yes -- through my good friend, Mr. William A. Hamilton, I became chairman of the Marin County Republican Central Committee in about '38 or '39.

Kent Seymour

Having a family history in the Masonic Order it was somewhat natural for us to become interested. I had the good fortune to serve on one of the appointive honorary stations in the Grand Lodge of California during 1950, which was the centennial year of Masonry in California. I later became the inspector for the 51st Masonic District, which encompassed Marin County and for which my father had been inspector some twenty years previously. After my retirement from the inspectorship I was appointed to the Masonic Homes Endowment Board, where I served for nine years. This was a very happy association all the way through, and I have made many friends whom I cherish.

Mr. Hamilton

Will you give us some memories of Mill Valley over the years, as it was and as it has changed? You both have long, long memories of the town.

Elliot Seymour

Some people don't believe you can remember things when you're as young as we were at the time, but I remember well (and I'm sure my brother does) the 1906 earthquake, which occurred between 5:00 and 5:30 in the

morning on April 18, 1906. (This happens to be an anniversary date.) I can remember we were just short of our fourth birthday, having been born July 10, 1902. I can distinctly remember our parents picking us up and taking us outside, down the stairs, and out into the backyard until the trembling of the earthquake was over. I can then remember sitting on the front porch of our home at 87 Oakdale Avenue and watching the flames and smoke as San Francisco burned.

Kent Seymour

I remember Dad took us over to San Francisco some months later to see what the devastation was. I guess it didn't impress us at that time, because I don't remember it exactly. I do recall that for a week or more we lived on the lower floor of the house because we were afraid of a recurrence. Mattresses were brought down and put on the dining room and living room floors, and the whole family lived there until we were satisfied it was safe to go upstairs.

The only damage done to our house, as I remember, was quite a bit of cracking of plaster which had to be replaced in later years. And the chimney on the outside of the house collapsed and fell to the ground.

Elliot Seymour

Also, a bottle of castor oil on a shelf in the bathroom fell off and broke.

Kent Seymour

If it did, I'm sure you and I were very happy!

Mr. Hamilton

Do you have any memories of downtown Mill Valley?

Kent Seymour

In the first place, when we were born there were only about a thousand residents. Today, of course, it's around 14,000.

The main change is the streets. The streets at that time were all very narrow; they've been widened somewhat in later years. They were not paved in those days. When we walked from our house downtown -- which was down a couple of hills and then several blocks into

town -- we didn't have sidewalks as we know them today. They were boardwalks, with a handrail. Two two-by-twelve planks were laid alongside each other, and that's the way you got around. In the wintertime you couldn't get out into the streets on foot; they were several inches deep in mud. When you look at it today, it's an entirely different picture -- paved sidewalks and paved streets. We thought it was great when we finally got paved sidewalks.

Just two blocks down from our house was Buena Vista Avenue. This became our skating rink, and we played baseball and a few other things there because Buena Vista was paved and Oakdale wasn't.

Elliot Seymour

In the cold weather and frosty season in the early spring, those wooden sidewalks were covered with frost. You had to be very careful in walking on the sidewalks; it was dangerous.

Kent Seymour

I remember the old railroad station, which I'm sure you have a picture of in your historical records. You remember the one I'm talking about, with the station-master's residence above? It was an old Victorian type of building, right where the present bus station is.

One wall inside the old station had pegs on it. This was just under the roof. In those days people left for work at five and six in the morning, in order to get over to San Francisco when the offices opened at 7:00 or 7:30 or 8:00 o'clock. We had no streetlights, so each father or parent who went to work carried a hand lantern down to the station to light his way (either a candle or a coal-oil burner) because most of them left home in the dark, particularly in the winter. Each person hung his lantern on a peg which was assigned to him on the wall of the station. When he came back at night, there was his lamp; he lit it and walked home. I doubt that this could happen today. If you left a lamp there today, it wouldn't be there twelve hours later.

Elliot Seymour

As a matter of fact, in those days people went away for the summer and never locked their doors.

Kent Seymour

That's true. We never locked our house when we went up to the Russian River.

Mr. Hamilton

Would you want to talk about the Russian River for a second?

Elliot Seymour

We might go back to one other incident prior to that, in the year 1907. I'm reminded of that because there is a prediction that we might have a shortage of water this year in Marin County. There was a shortage of water in the summer of 1907. Water was turned on for an hour in the morning. People could fill their cooking utensils with water -- and that was about it. For this reason, my mother and father arranged for us to spend the summer in Inverness, at a home that was owned by some old friends of theirs. That was our first summer away from Mill Valley.

Kent Seymour

Actually, Brother, we didn't go up there until September, when the schools opened. We didn't go up for the summer that particular year. When the schools opened, around the first of September, the water was so short that they had to close the schools for more than thirty days. Families were asked, if it were possible, to get out of Mill Valley for a period of time, until they could make arrangements to get more water to ease the situation. So families that could do it moved out temporarily. We were able to obtain this place from some old friends in Inverness. Inverness had sufficient water at the time, so we spent thirty days there.

Mr. Hamilton

Did you go by the narrow gauge railroad to the old Point Reyes Station?

Kent Seymour

I'm sure that's how we must have gotten there, Bill. We didn't own an automobile in those days, I can assure you. I can't remember whether there was a stage or not. Of course Walcott Durbrow might have arranged for us to go up on the old narrow gauge railroad. He was Chief

Counsel of the Southern Pacific, and in those days he was able to get a private car attached. We did go up to Inverness at one time to spend a wonderful day on the beach as his guests. He took a lot of his friends and neighbors, and we had a great day. It was a great day for my brother and me because we were allowed to ride up with the engineer.

Mr. Hamilton

The narrow guage went on north to what point?

Kent Seymour

It went through Occidental, Monte Rio, and to Duncans Mills. It had the same terminal as the broad-gauge, which went down the Russian River the other way.

Mr. Hamilton

Tell us about Guernewood Park.

Elliot Seymour

Our family first went to Guernewood Park in 1909, for two months, and we went up every summer through 1920. It was rather a large camp, and we had the same site every year. During that period we built three treehouses on the old redwood stumps. My mother and father were able to accommodate some forty people over a weekend. A lot of Mill Valley children of our age spent their summers with us. There were a good many Marin County families (from Mill Valley, in particular) who had camps at that time and lived up there in the summer months. I can think of the McConnell family, our next-door neighbors; the Helmores, who were our next-door neighbors to the west; the Burton family, and the Barber family. I believe the Wyckoffs had a camp up there for a while.

Kent Seymour

The Burtons who had a cottage up there were related to my father on his mother's side, the Osborne family.

Mother and Dad did a lot of their entertaining up there in the summertime, with people like Fred Burden, the famous hockey star. He played in the Canadian League, with Toronto or one of the big ice hockey teams. "The Maple Leaf Forever" --- I can hear him sing it yet.

(Inserted into the interview by Mr. Hamilton)

As the interviewer, I negligently left out this incident:

In 1913, Mr. Walcott Durbrow, attorney for the Southern Pacific Railroad, and Mrs. Florence Reynolds, the postmistress of Mill Valley, were both invited up to the Seymour camp in Guernewood Park. They took the narrow guage railroad to Monte Rio and walked the five miles on the broad guage tracks to Guernewood Park.

Enroute, as they were walking across a 300-foot trestle, a freight train came along unexpectedly. They tried to seek safety on one of the old-fashioned water-barrel platforms, but there wasn't room for both of them. Mr. Durbrow, a cripple, very gallantly hung by his hands as the train rumbled past. Somehow Mrs. Reynolds managed to pull him back up after the train passed.

That night before the Seymour campfire they had a thrilling story to tell.

Mr. Durbrow, as a boy, had ridden a bicycle down a long flight of steps and had broken both knees.

(The interview continues)

Elliot Seymour

I think it might be well to state, Bill, that we can both remember when the steam trains came into Mill Valley. I can remember on Sundays, when the hikers came over, they had double-headers that would come into Mill Valley on Sunday morning -- and also more than one section to a train. They'd have a train headed by two steam engines, then in half an hour or an hour, maybe a second or a third section would come in, to bring hikers to Mill Valley. It became an electric railroad around 1906 or 1907, I think.

Kent Seymour

Thinking of the old steam trains, they used to hold a big May Day fete at Kentfield, where the College of Marin is now situated. It was known as the Tamalpais Center in those days. I can remember going up there all

the way by steam train to that affair. We were in grammar school, and we had to go out and dance the maypole dance around one of the maypoles. As boys, I'm not sure we were very happy about it.

Mr. Hamilton

I'm sure you weren't!

To get from Mill Valley to San Rafael in the old days, how did you go?

Kent Seymour

You had to go down to Almonte, the junction just past the high school, and change trains there. You got off and waited until a train came from Sausalito going north. You could transfer at that point; you didn't have to go all the way to Sausalito -- at least at certain times of the day. At certain times you had to go all the way to Sausalito in order to make the change.

Mr. Hamilton

If you went by carriage, how would you go from Mill Valley?

Elliot Seymour

The stages to San Rafael used to go over Corte Madera grade, over the old Alto Hill, on what is now Camino Alto.

Kent Seymour

There were some stages that ran over to Stinson Beach and Bolinas.

Mr. Hamilton

Kent, would you say something about your service on the Board of Trustees at College of Marin?

Kent Seymour

I have been interested (as my whole family has) in public education. I served for one term on the elementary school board in Mill Valley, from 1948 to 1951. In 1959 my partner, Mr. William A. Hamilton, decided to go to Europe for a year, and he saw to it that I was encompassed to take his place on the College of Marin board as a trustee.

Mr. Hamilton

I recommended you. That was my sole contribution.

Kent Seymour

I served there for seven years. Going further back, I might also state that my father served on the first Board of Trustees at Marin Junior College from 1926, shortly after the college was founded, until 1940.

Mr. Hamilton

This doesn't happen very often. Mr. Seymour, Sr., his son, Kent (his eldest son by fifteen minutes) and his second son, Elliot, were all members of the Marin Junior College Board of Trustees. Personally I think they should name one of the buildings after the Seymour family.

Kent Seymour

We'll skip that!

As I said, my father served until 1940, when my brother was appointed in his position, because of my father's disability. When Elliot had to retire at the end of two years, when he entered the U.S. Navy in World War II, they asked me if I would be interested in taking the position, and I declined it. I said I didn't think the public would go for passing it from father to son to brother! I didn't become a member of the board until Mr. Hamilton persuaded me in 1959.

Elliot Seymour

I think it would be very relevant to state here that our mother was a member and secretary for seventeen years of the Board of Trustees of the Tamalpais Union High School District.

Mr. Hamilton

May I correct that to say "a very dominant member"?

Elliot Seymour

Shall we say "influential"?

Kent Seymour

Mother was dominant wherever she was, let's face it.

Elliot Seymour

Prior to that she had served for twelve years on the elementary school board in Mill Valley, and she had a great deal to do with the founding of Marin Junior College.

I think it would be important to add that she was a member of the Eastern Star and was Grand Matron for the state of California in 1950. She continued active in many public affairs, almost to the time of her demise in 1951.

Mr. Hamilton

I remember her very well. She was a wonderful woman, with a lot of brains and a tremendous amount of drive.

Let's change the subject just a minute. Would you tell us something, Elliot, about your service in World War II?

Elliot Seymour

I was commissioned in the Navy in July or August of 1942 and was sent to communications school in Los Angeles. I completed that assignment November 14, 1942 and was married the next day.

Mr. Hamilton

Who did you marry?

Elliot Seymour

Virginia Kerber.

Mr. Hamilton

The same gracious lady who welcomed us here today.

Elliot Seymour

Ten days after we were married, I was shipped overseas. I ended up in Noumea, in the South Pacific, which was the headquarters of COMCENPAC.¹ I served there for about a month and was then transferred to Suva, Fiji, arriving there about January 10, 1943. In April 1944

¹ Commander, Central Pacific.

I was transferred to San Francisco. I was here for about a month and a half. After the Navy had given me some leave (I hadn't seen my wife for more than fifteen months, except for the ten days after we were married), I had orders to go to Newport, North Carolina, as Port Director -- when the Port Chicago explosion occurred. My orders were cancelled, and I was reassigned to a board of investigation to assist there. I served at Port Chicago and at Mare Island, assigned to the investigation, making reports of all personal injury and death cases -- for servicemen, merchant marines, and other residents of the area. I then was returned to San Francisco and assigned to Pier 40, as it was called. I was retired in October 1945.

Mr. Hamilton

Kent, will you tell us the name of your wife and your three wonderful kids?

Kent Seymour

I was married March 7, 1931, to Helen Rosalie Close, who was born in Mill Valley. Although she was a local girl, we did not meet until I had graduated from the University of California and was in business. We've had a long, happy life; we just celebrated our 44th wedding anniversary.

We have three lovely children. The eldest is Jane Elliot Seymour, who was born in 1932. A son, Kent Stephen Seymour, was born in 1934, and a daughter, Susan Christine Seymour, was born in 1940.

Jane married H. Frederick Franklin and has three children: a daughter, Christine; a son, Stephen; and a younger son named John.

Kent is married to Donna Gaston, whose family comes from Michigan. They have two wonderful children: a son, Kent Gaston Seymour, and a daughter, Laura Seymour.

All three children graduated from Stanford, and Susan holds a Ph.D. degree from Harvard University. She now teaches at Pitzer College in Southern California.

The two older children reside in Marin County, which is very fortunate for Mrs. Seymour and me, as we are near our grandchildren and see them a great deal.