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Mill Valley Historical Society

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Mill Valley, California

JANET UPHAM

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

CAROL WILSON

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## **JANET UPHAM**

An Interview Conducted and Transcribed by Carol Wilson

I am Carol Wilson and today is June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999, and I am at the home of Janet Upham at 225 West Blithedale Avenue where she lives with her husband Ben. Janet is a life long resident of Mill Valley and has been an active member of the Mill Valley Historical Society Board of Directors.

Carol Wilson:

Thanks, Janet, for having me here today and for doing this interview for the Mill Valley Historical Society. Tell me, Janet, where were you born?

Janet Upham:

I was born in San Francisco at Mt. Zion Hospital in 1927.

C.W.

What were the names of your parents?

J.U.

My father was Elmer Michael Shapiro and he was born in Russia in 1891 and his family migrated to this country in 1893 to the bay area...to San Francisco.

C.W.

Did they come directly to San Francisco?

J.U.

I don't know...there are a lot of things there that I don't know. My father had three brothers and a sister. One of his brothers was a San Francisco dentist whom we knew very well. And then my mother was born in San

Francisco...her name was Ethel Margare Willis. My maternal grandfather was born in Texas and my grandmother was born in Ireland and they settled in San Francisco. My grandparents were married in 1888.

C.W.

Did they meet in San Francisco? And do you know how your grandmother got from Ireland to San Francisco?

J.U.

Yes, they did meet in San Francisco. And how my grandmother got to San Francisco from Ireland is another story that we did not know...my grandmother did not talk about it. As a matter of fact, she never told us that she was born in Ireland...we found out after she had died at age ninety-two. She did not talk about her background so we know very little about it.

C.W.

Did she have any relatives here...a sister or a brother?

J.U.

Yes, she had cousins.

C.W.

How did you parents happen to come to Mill Valley?

J.U.

In the early twenties my grandfather Willis bought a couple of properties here in Mill Valley and one of them was right down this street on what was then called Cottage Avenue. It was called Cottage Avenue because of the Blithedale Hotel. The cottages that were around it were part of the hotel. My grandfather bought the property and had the house built in the early 20's at 167 Cottage Avenue.

C.W.  
Was it a summer house?

J.U.  
Yes, it was a tiny little house...it had two bedrooms and this is where my family lived when I was born. My mother had me in San Francisco and brought me home to 167 Cottage Avenue. When I was two, they started building the house down on Lincoln and Bigelow Avenues and we moved there.

C.W.  
Did you live in that house on Bigelow until you married?

J.U.  
Yes, Ben and I were married there.

C.W.  
Did they build that house themselves...or did they have it built?

J.U.  
Yes, Melvin Klyce was the builder.

C.W.  
Melvin Klyce certainly built a lot of houses in Mill Valley. Was he also the architect?

J.U.  
No, the architect was a Mr. Jenkins from Bolinas.

My father loved Mill Valley early on and he and a buddy started the Hikers' Retreat in downtown Mill Valley at about the early 1900's.

C.W.  
What was the Hikers' Retreat?

J.U.  
When the hikers came to hike the mountain, they came on the ferry boat and the train and they were dressed in their city clothes so they went to the Hikers'

Retreat and rented lockers to store their city clothes while they did their hiking. When they returned, they could shower and change from their hiking clothes back into their city clothes. It was on Throckmorton. Barry Spitz wrote it up in his Mill Valley book. He has a picture of it also. It was in 1911.

C.W.

Do you know how your mother and father met?

J.U.

Yes, they met on a blind date at the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915. And they were married in San Francisco in 1917.

C.W.

Was your father in World War I?

J.U.

He was called up and then the war was over just when he was ready to leave so he never had to go which was very fortunate.

C.W.

What did your father do?

J.U.

He went to school, to college and to law school. He never planned to follow law, but wanted the education. And then he went to work for the California Packing Corporation as a very young man. And he worked there as credit manager.

C.W.

What did they pack?

J.U.

Del Monte Foods. My sister and I grew up on Del Monte Fruit Cocktail and canned peaches.

C.W.

Tell me a little bit about Enid, your sister.

J.U.

Enid was born in San Francisco in 1919 and was eight years older than I.

She and my parents used to come over here to Mill Valley before she was of school age and stay in the little Cottage Avenue house for the summer. In the winter they returned to San Francisco to their apartment.

When she started school, they moved here permanently.

C.W.

She went to school here in Mill Valley?

J.U.

Yes, she went to Miss Nye's private school for several years. It was on Blithedale Avenue.

C.W.

And which schools did you attend?

J.U.

I went to Summit School. There was a small private school on Oakdale Avenue called Miss Barrett's that I attended for about two years...Ben went there also.

It became a very stressful situation because Ben and I are both left-handed and Miss Barrett would not tolerate left handed children. It was a bad situation...she would rap you on your knuckles if you picked up a crayon with your left hand. Our mothers both took us out of Miss Barrett's Private School and we went back to Summit School and then Old Mill School. I graduated from Tamalpais Park School and Tamalpais High School and then went to College of Marin. Very Marin!

C.W.

When you went to Summit School or Old Mill, did you come home for lunch?

J.U.

No. Just once in a while. There was a cafeteria downstairs in Summit School and we could have our lunch there.

C.W.

Was there a very big playground there?

J.U.

Yes, there was a big one in the back. There was the boy's yard and the girl's yard...we didn't mix. The boy's seemed to have all the equipment and the girls played jump rope and hopscotch.

C.W.

How did you get to school?

J.U.

Oh, we always walked to school. We did have a car...a big Studebaker and we were driven only if it rained.

C.W.

Do you remember any special teachers at school?

J.U.

Yes, many are very vivid in my mind. Miss Olney was our kindergarten teacher at Summit School. There was Miss Callio, our first grade teacher, and Mrs. Sporletter and Miss Johnson, who later became my Campfire Girl leader and, of course, Mrs. Van Loon was the principal...she was very strict. This was all at Summit School.

C.W.

What grade did Summit School go to?

J.U.



I think it went to fifth grade and then we went to Old Mill School where Betty Mielenz was my first teacher there. She later taught our children also. Her name was Betty Muller when she taught me. Belle Abraham was principal of Old Mill School.

C.W.

Do you remember any classmates?

J.U.

Oh, my oldest and best friend is Carol Budds...she was Carol Connelly then.

She was a year ahead of me, but we were best friends all the years of grammar school. I had two best friends...Carol and Ben, and I married Ben.

C.W.

That's marvelous! Are there any others that you remember?

J.U.

Charlotte Fowler...her father was a Mill Valley doctor. Actually, we have what we call the Summit Bunch and we still get together about once a month for lunch. There are about twelve of us that meet. The group includes Leslie Hack, Harold Mefford, Gene Stocking, and Walter and Marie Fillipi. A few years ago we had a reunion of Summit School students at the Outdoor Art Club and there was a big turnout...over two hundred from all over the United States.

C.W.

What were schools like then? Did you have big classes?

J.U.

Yes. It seems to me that we had about twenty-five kids in the class. We had the funny little desks and ink wells and oily-smelling floors.

C.W.

Did they tear Summit School down because Park School had been built?

J.U.

I think so. I think that Summit School had structural problems...it was very old. It closed in 1939.

C.W.

And then you went to Tamalpais High School?

J.U.

Yes, and I remember we had uniforms...we wore middies and navy blue skirts which we loved. They were great...everyone looked the same. Then during war time we couldn't get the middies. I guess they were all going to the navy, I don't know.

C.W.

Were they actually naval middies?

J.U.

They were white cotton with middy collars.

C.W.

Did the collars button on?

J.U.

Some of middies had white collars and you could button the navy collars with white stripes over them. We had the navy blue ties also...the seniors wore the red ties. When the war came along and we were unable to get the middies, we were allowed to wear white blouses...any kind of white blouse and any kind of sweater with the navy blue skirt.

C.W.

After you graduated from Tam you went to College of Marin...how did you get there?

J.U.

Oh, we car-pooled with friends.

C.W.

Did you work after College of Marin.

J.U.

Yes, I had a summer job at Crocker Bank in San Francisco. I also worked one year for the Army Corp of Engineers in Sausalito. Ben and I were planning to get married so I did not return to College of Marin.

C.W.

What did Ben do?

J.U.

Well, Ben was born here in Mill Valley and his family home on Lovell Avenue burned in the mountain fire of 1929 and so they moved over to the other side of the canyon into a rented old Victorian which burned to the ground a year later. It was over on the Cascade side of the canyon. His family then moved to a house on Bigelow and this is when we started being good buddies. They did not buy again in Mill Valley, but moved to Ross.

C.W.

What did the kids do for fun after school when you were little.

J.U.

We had a wonderful time...we played outside, rode our bicycles, we always had something to do...we hiked, we climbed trees and just were innovative. We had horseback riding lessons in Homestead Valley and tennis lessons at the Mill Valley Tennis Club. We had piano lessons and attended Miss Peterson's dancing classes at the Outdoor Art Club.

C.W.

You had no organized sports and your mother wasn't a "soccer mom" then.

J.U.

No, not my mother.

C.W.

Did you go to the Saturday afternoon matinees at the Sequoia Theater?

J.U.

Yes. That was always and occasion. They had the funny old westerns and the serials and it cost ten cents to go to the movie and we were given a nickel to buy a candy bar at the little candy shop next door.

C.W.

I remember the theater gave out dishes on Saturday night when I went with my parents.

J.U.

And do you remember hearing them drop during the movies?

C.W.

No, but I remember they had a huge wheel that they spun for certain numbers and if you had the number you would win a prize.

J.U.

Yes, I remember that...and we could walk to the movies at night. They were good family movies in those days.

C.W.

Do you remember the town sweet shops?

J.U.

Oh, yes. Esposti's was the place when we went to high school. When we went to Tam we had school buses and after they brought us home, we would all congregate at Esposti's or after the movies we would go there.

C.W.

How about the mountain railroad, do you remember it?

J.U.

Yes, I do. When we lived on Cottage Avenue, it went right behind our house and I can remember seeing it go up the canyon and I can remember hearing it. I was very tiny, but I do remember it. I never rode on it because I was too little, but I remember hearing it.

C.W.

Did the mountain railroad run only on weekends?

J.U.

Well they had the dinky that went up every day. It went up to Lee Street and picked up commuters for a nickel and took them down town.

C.W.

Was the dinky an open car?

J.U.

I don't remember what it looked like.

C.W.

Did your father work in San Francisco?

J.U.

Yes, he always commuted on the train and ferry to San Francisco... Ben's father did, too. It was a much more relaxed time. My father used to walk the decks at night. He loved the outdoors...he loved to garden...he loved to hike...he loved the mountain...he was an outdoor person and after sitting in his office all day, he couldn't wait to get on the ferry boat and just walk and get that fresh air. The ferries were great.

We always shopped in San Francisco for clothes. It was always a big occasion to go to over on the train and ferry and to take the streetcars up town to the

wonderful stores. We even had our orthodontist in the city.

C.W.

What store do you remember in down town Mill Valley?

J.U.

Well, we had the R & M Dress Shop, which was a marvelous little shop. And we had Dove Murphy's Men's Shop which was a great store. And then we had Mayer's Department Store...also the gift shop The Tamal Treasure Chest which was next door to the R & M in the Keystone Building. There were three drug store down town...Rutherford's, Lockwood's and Sullivan's which was next to the movie theater. There was also a hardware store near the theater...Stoke's Hardware Store. Do you remember that? \_\_\_\_\_

C.W.

No, I don't. I remember the dime store that was near the theater.

J.U.

Well, the dime store replaced the hardware store.

C.W.

Well, we had two dime stores.

J.U.

Yes, one of the was owned by Bill Ross's family...that was by the Hub Theater on Throckmorton. Other businesses that I remember were Suey Kee's, the Mill Valley Market, and Charlie Queden's had a grocery store down next to where Well Fargo is today on Miller. Mother used to phone Suey Kee in the morning and they delivered her groceries.

C.W.

Did they have a car to make their deliveries?

J.U.

They had a funny old delivery truck and there was no charge for that. And, of course, we didn't have refrigerators then so we ordered our food more often...we had ice boxes. We would put our ice sign up in the window and the ice man would deliver it.

C.W.

How long would the ice last...a few days?

J.U.

Yes, I guess it would. And, of course, we had the milkman. Things were delivered...it was great.

C.W.

Do you remember any town celebrations or parades? Did we used to have a Fourth of July parade?

J.U.

Not really, I don't remember, but they did hang the American flag around town. I do remember that on the Fourth of July we would pack up and go with friends to McNear's Beach and have a picnic...there would be fireworks...very simple ones, but fireworks.

C.W.

Was that a sandy beach or a pebbly one?

J.U.

It was kind of pebbly, but you could swim. It is very popular today...it's a gorgeous spot now...it doesn't look like old McNears...they had chickens...it was pretty rustic. And there was China Camp where you could go out and get shrimp. We used to do that, too.

C.W.

Do you remember the building of the Golden Gate Bridge?

J.U.

Yes, I do...and the World's Fair. We went there many, many times with my dad. We would drive to the city and take a ferryboat to Treasure Island. It was so much fun. When the bridge was completed, Mill Valley really started to change. It was very evident that things were not going to remain the same...more cars and more traffic.

C.W.

That was just before the war started. Do you remember the war years?

J.U.

Yes, very much so...the shortages. And in high school we started seeing the senior boys going off to war.

C.W.

They wouldn't go off before they graduated, would they?

J.U.

Some of them did. And, we lost a lot of friends in the war. I remember the blackouts. My dad was an air raid warden in the neighborhood. We had one room in our home which was the blackout room and when the alert came, that's where we would all go. I also remember the rationing and the coupon books. And, of course, canned goods were rationed during the war and my dad, being with Del Monte, used to bring home cases of dented cans that they couldn't sell to the stores so the employees would get them... we grew up on lots of canned peaches and canned beans. I never buy them today...we got our fill of them.

C.W.



Did you have a vegetable garden...a "victory" garden?

J.U.

Yes, my father grew vegetable in the back yard. It was a very different time.

With the gasoline rationing, we didn't go places. We, here in Marin County and throughout the United States, did not feel the effects of the war like other countries did, but it was a very frightening time to live through.

When I was in high school, I worked at Crocker Bank in San Francisco during the summers and I was there when the war ended. It was a very exciting time. The bank was downtown and the parades would come up Market Street...it was very exciting.

C.W.

Do you remember Marinship being built?

J.U.

Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, my sister who had graduated from college and was teaching took a couple of years off and went to work at Marinship. She was there for a lot of the launchings.

C.W.

Well, Marinship ran twenty-four hours a day with one shift after another.

J.U.

Yes, and there was quite an influx of students at Tam at that time with all the families moving to Sausalito and Marin City. Marin City was built at that time to provide housing for the workers at Marinship.

C.W.

It was temporary housing that lasted for about forty or fifty years. So the climate of Tamalpais High School must have changed.

J.U.

Yes, the war years were very different around here because we weren't as free with the gas rationing. We were able to still do things...people would save up and we were able to carpool.

C.W.

What did your family do on vacations normally.

J.U.

Well, the spot our family always went to was old Aetna Springs up in the Pope Valley...we went to the wonderful old resort there where they cooked all your meals for you and made your beds...they had these marvelous cottages. They had horseback riding and golf and a beautiful big swimming pool...it was a very relaxing and nice place to go. My mother just loved it as she didn't have to do anything for two weeks. We went there every summer for years and years. My parents did not like traveling...they were not world travelers. But then people did not travel as much in those days.

C.W.

You said that your mother drove...when did you learn to drive?

J.U.

I learned to drive when I was eighteen or nineteen. Ben was in the Maritime service during the war so when he came back to Ross where his family was living he taught me to drive.

C.W.

How many years have you been married?

J.U.

Fifty-one this year. Last year we had our big fifty year anniversary up at the Trinity Alps Resort. Our son came down from Spokane with his family and

our daughter with her family from Bishop, and relatives from New Jersey

There were fifteen of us there for a great week together. So that was our big fiftieth celebration.

C.W.

Do you still go out to Stinson Beach with your friends?

J.U.

Yes, this is the group that we went to Tam High with in the 40's...we are known as the "dirty dozen"...six couples and we all married the people we went with in high school...no one divorced...last year one of the gals died and she was the first one. We rent a big house over at the beach...the same house that we have rented for about sixteen or seventeen years. Ben and I are the only ones still living in Marin County. One couple lives in Healdsburg, one couple lives in Petaluma, one in Ukiah and one in Los Altos Hills.

But we all went to Tam together...we are a unique group.

C.W.

Have you had Tam High reunions?

J.U.

Yes, we had our big fiftieth. Our first big one was our fortieth and it incorporated all the war years and we had about six hundred attend.

C.W.

Back to the war years...do you remember the Japanese families who lived here in Mill Valley and who were moved out just after the war began?

J.U.

Yes, I remember them quite well. That was such a sad situation to see them leave and to lose everything they had. There were the Shibatas...Akiko

Shibata went to school with me. She is living back here in Mill Valley now.

That was a very upsetting time as they were our friends and they went to school with us and we knew them so well.

C.W.

Did you use the town services such as the doctors and dentists?

J.U.

Yes, my orthodontist was in San Francisco and also my uncle was a San Francisco dentist and he took care of our teeth for many years, but our doctors were here in town...as a matter of fact Wilson Goddard was my doctor for many years. He was a marvelous doctor...he delivered both my children. He was a family doctor and he made house calls. There was one point when I was about eight and I was sick in bed for weeks...we didn't know what was wrong and the doctor would stop by every morning to check on me and look for symptoms. He finally determined that it was a tooth. He brought in a dentist and it was found to be an infected tooth making me ill. So once the tooth was removed, I was up and out. Dr. Goddard stayed with it until he diagnosed it...that was the kind of doctor he was.

C.W.

Tell me more about your family. You said that you met Ben when you were a child...did you keep track of him after he had moved to Ross?

J.U.

Yes, because our mothers were friends, too. And I also went to the Ross Assemblies...which were dancing classes. Ben was there and we became acquainted again, and also through high school.

C.W.

He has quite a history here in Mill Valley, too, doesn't he?

J.U.

Yes, his grandparents owned Warner Canyon.

C.W.

What did they do at Warner Canyon...did they have a farm there...and orchard?

J.U.

They put orchards there and they built a summer camp and put up tents. His grandfather was a San Francisco dentist and they would come over here and spend the summer...they had a horse and buggy. And after the 1906 earthquake, they moved here. And then after the war, the canyon was owned by Ben's mother and his aunt and uncle and none of them wanted to develop it or do anything with it so they sold the entire canyon for some ridiculous price like eighteen thousand dollars. The golf course goes right up to the start of Warner Canyon. We still hike back up in the canyon...there is a fire trail there that goes to the top of the ridge which is now open space called Warner Ridge.

C.W.

Was Warner a family name?

J.U.

Well, that was Ben's grandfather's name...Dr. Alexander Warner. All the history of the canyon is in the History Room. There were a couple of hundred acres there. They sold the whole thing to Scott...and there you have Scott Highlands. In the early days Campfire Girl troops and Boy Scout troops used to go there to have picnics.

C.W.

Tell me about your children.

J.U.

Well, Ben and I were married in 1948 and we moved to Belvedere...we had a wonderful apartment on Belvedere Island for three or four years. It was a marvelous apartment that we paid fifty dollars a month for...and it was up ninety-eight stairs. It was a wonderful place to start married life. We moved back to Mill Valley in 1951.

We lived in a nice little flat down on Mountain View Avenue for two years.

Nancy, our daughter, was born in 1952 and when she was three years old we moved to this house on Blithedale Avenue. We have been here since 1955.

The house was not for sale...it was the old Gundlach house and Mrs. Gundlach was ill so the family decided to rent it...so we rented it. After she died we had first option to buy, so we did, and have had no regrets with that decision. It has been a marvelous neighborhood, especially for the kids. In 1957 we had our son, Ben III. Nancy and Benny were raised here in the neighborhood with lots of other children...it was just great.

Nancy went into the Forest Service after graduating from University of California at Davis. She is now working for the Inyo National Forest in Bishop. Her husband John is also in the Forest Service and is in charge of the ancient Bristle Cone Pine Forest. They have two little boys, Daniel and Shawn, who are now nine and eleven years old.

Our son Ben moved to Spokane where he went to college. He married there

and has one child whose name is Franklin.

C.W.

Well, at least they live fairly close...on the West Coast, at least.

Tell me about your hobbies...do you have any special interests?

J.U.

Well, of course, I love the Mill Valley Historical Society. For about twelve years

I was on the Board and did the membership. I am a docent now at the library

History Room. I love my garden...and fishing and hiking and reading. In my

earlier years I loved tennis. Unlike my sister, I don't play bridge.

C.W.

Oh, you should...Enid was a great person and a good bridge player.

J.U.

I know she was...and so was my mother! She, too, was a good bridge player.

C.W.

When did Enid and your mother buy the house next door and move into it?

J.U.

Well, my father died right after Ben and I married in 1948 at a very young

age...he was only 57 years old. And Mother and my sister stayed on in the

house on Lincoln...it was a very big house. It was more house than Ben and I

wanted, but she loved it and stayed on because she loved her garden and it

was still not too big for her to take care of. My sister was teaching at that

time. So down the line this house next door came on the market and I

thought that it would be the perfect house for them, so I called her to come

and take a look at it and she said "let me talk to Ben first". So she talked to

Ben and asked how he would feel about having his mother-in-law next door,

and he said, "I think that I would love it!" And so they looked at it and fell in love with it and bought it. It was an ideal situation as the kids had their grandmother next door and their loving aunt...it was a very happy, happy situation. We have such wonderful memories.

C.W.

How do you feel about Mill Valley today...how has it changed?

J.U.

Oh, I have mixed feelings...I just die when I drive down Miller Avenue or East Blithedale...it is just awful with the traffic. It is okay going down to Mill Valley Market to do my shopping...that is what I love about living here, I can walk to town and go to the bank, the market, to church or to the library...I can walk to those places. It is a nice feeling. I find that if I go shopping at the right time it isn't too bad. But Mill Valley has really changed, I can go downtown and never see anyone I know...it never used to be like that. I can remember when I was a child my mother's friend who lived up on the mountain would ride down to town on her horse to do her shopping...that was Ada Nostrom...she would let her husband who was a real estate man in town take the groceries home and she often would stop by my mother's for a cup of tea on her way home. I remember coming home from school and seeing the horse tied up on the front fence. That was the way it was...simpler times.

C.W.

Have you been to downtown Mill Valley lately on any night of the week...the town is jumping...it is just booming.

J.U.



I know it! Mill Valley used to roll up the sidewalks at seven o'clock. It is a destination for tourists. The weekends are crowded, too. I avoid going downtown on weekends if I can help it. I guess you can call it progress, but I don't know. I am glad that it wasn't that way when our children grew up here because they had a wonderful childhood here with lots of kids and it was safe...they used to play out here on the street as the traffic wasn't what it is today. They see the change in Mill Valley and have moved to smaller communities where it is quieter.

C.W.

Is there anything else that you would like to add...have I missed anything?

J.U.

I think you have done a pretty good job here questioning me.

C.W.

Well, thanks so much, Janet for having me here today. It was interesting.