

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Ray Strong
An interview conducted by

Abby Wasserman

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California artist Ray Strong was born January 3, 1905 in Corvallis, Oregon, and was a resident of Mill Valley from 1948 to 1965. He married Elizabeth Rumsey Brown and they had two children, Timothy and Barbara. This 2006 oral history interview follows an earlier 1978 interview conducted by Donald Oman. Both interviews touch on Ray's experiences in and around various art colonies, as well as his his meetings with luminaries like Frank Lloyd Wright, Ansel Adams and Marin County's Vera Schultz.

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Oral History of Ray Strong
March 20, 2006, Three Rivers, CA

Editor's Note: Ray Strong's son, Tim Strong, asks readers to keep in mind that this interview was conducted in the last few months of his father's life. Ray Strong passed away July 3, 2006 at the age of 101.

Well Ray, I've come to talk with you about art in Mill Valley in the 1940s and 1950s, and the reason I'm interested is because the old O'Hanlon place, it's an art center now, where Ann and Dick O'Hanlon lived.

It's an art center?

It's an art center, we call it O'Hanlon Center for the Arts.

You do?

Yes.

It's the same Maybeck building.

It's in the same building, but no, that's the Outdoor Art Club you're thinking of. I'm thinking of the one on Throckmorton right below your old house, that place is an art center now.

You always expected to go, the recreation for the University of California, that didn't go through.

They didn't leave it to be University of California.

It's given to the City?

No, it was given to the organization that Ann started, Ann started an organization called Sight and Insight, which was about teaching perception and creativity. The importance of perception...

The only thing I remember about her is she had a big gong, she'd whack it, Agnes Oman went down there and they were doing Sight and Insight, sort of a spiritual sort of thing, she'd whang that thing tap the whole Chinese landscape painters by implication.

And we still have that gong.

You do?

Yes.

Terrific. Now what's this for, is it going to be a recording for the historical?

It's going to be a recording for the Mill Valley History Room and also for the O'Hanlon Center because when we come to do the exhibition of art by artists like you in the 40s and 50s who were living in Mill Valley, then people will loan work and will show them in Dick O'Hanlon's old sculpture studio, which is now a beautiful gallery. And then the library will also do some work on histories of various artists who lived in Mill Valley at that time.

Who's the director of that now, you?

I'm the President of the Board now and I've been doing that, it's my third year, so I have, it was my idea to do this exhibition of artists in the 40s and 50s so that we could show you and Bart Perry and Dick Graveson and Ann and Dick O'Hanlon...

Are you going to put this on?

Yes.

When?

Either the end of this year or the beginning of next year.

Ought to be fun.

Yeah, might be in December or November of this year if we can get it together.

A lot of fun.

So you are the first person to interview and to me...

I'm honored.

Well I'm so glad to be here. So let's talk about art in Mill Valley, your art in Mill Valley, but also the artists you knew. So let's start with what made you and Betty decide to move to Mill Valley, why was that a good place for you to live at that time?

It was a very simple thing. I worked for about four or five years Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, and every time I'd go across the ferry, at that time the bridge hadn't been built, I'd always see Mt. Tamalpais and we lived in what was called a backyard in Cubbs Avenue in Berkeley and we'd go up to Inverness back and forth, I said let's go see and what we can find, see if we can, instead of living in Berkeley I'd like to be closer to the landscapes, so we came over and looked on through but the prices on the houses down on the flat by where the school is and the tennis courts, out of our things, but about the same time a couple weeks later, I was over getting some things (art supplies) at Flax on Montgomery Street and who was there but O'Hanlon's wife, she said Ray, I hear you been over trying to find a place, you know what? I said what's what? She said the Graveson's have had illness, they need a couple thousand dollars, for less than \$2,000, \$1,800, you could buy the whole Lovell Avenue, an acre or more, and I said I'll take a look but I'd make out a check right now because I had some money from doing those six backgrounds for the university in '38 you see. So, that same day, that's why we... My dad came down, not my brother, he needed a little work of some drawers in the kitchen but my father came down and stayed at the Chestnut house and we lived, Betty and I, in the lower level of the Chestnut house and back and forth every day, dad had a regular outfit surveyors used and he dug out the foundation, watched the bulldozers and he loved carpentry work and the closest association, because he helped my brother (Edward Strong, former UC Chancellor) build his house in Berkeley, he could do plumbing and the whole damn thing. Wonderful man, yeah.

You said the Chestnut's house, is that Tom Chestnut where your father stayed, at the Chestnuts?

No, the two kids, both of them played the French horn, they were down at their own little place right below, we stayed in the lower level, I remember Tim had a case of septic and Dr. Wolf came over and put him on a homeopathic thing and quickly got rid of it, so we met Dr. Wolf, and Betty played quartet with her. (Rudolf Wolf, a Jewish refugee from Germany, practiced medicine at E.Blithedale and Millwood.)

With Joan?

And Carol Fowler, the Housewives Quartet. They were good days.

So you came and you already had friends there in Mill Valley, you knew the Gravesons, you knew the Chestnuts.

They were down here. Here we are, the memories of the artists. Well Lucienne Bloch, the painter, the Elmas bought one of her Redwoods in the Fog, a great big, gorgeous thing, and I met her and at about that time early on, the ladies International Garment Workers (labor group) had a troop of mostly Jewish girls and they had a gong, something about get rid of this sects and the ginks and the company thing and form your union and they came up in the living room, and we all sang that song, they all knew it by heart, and she was very much left wing, her father as I remember was an open member of the Communist Party, I don't think Lucienne was, and I certainly only was in for about three months and then dropped it because I was the Education Director of the Consumer Cooperative Movement for Northern California and you couldn't mix them, but Bopps [this is his wife Betty] attended a cell and she also when we were in Berkeley, and even though in a Communist cell over there. She read the whole darn books on the Trotsky Trial and she was very left wing, Betts was very much so because her father was very active, a leftist from Stanford. Great

days, and she was right there at the meetings, and we had recently met your father and Caroline, through a fellow who was way up in the self-help movement, and it was a study group at his, I forget his name, and that's where we got acquainted with both Lou and Caroline Wasserman because we were there as participants of the study group. But I have a hunch that what it was, was kind of a recruiting thing for the working class where people would go further left from that orientation, that's just in hindsight but it was an interesting group and we became very close friends, particularly with Caroline, she was head of the IWCA, would often come over to the former Enns(?) Danish Gallery which was an artist's gallery, the Art Students League, and the artists out of a retail store and it was all associated, I did murals and stuff, some of them are posters for the whole National Cooperative movement, I was very active in that, so I think that covers that. Steve Dimitroff, I became acquainted with because he did framing for me like nobody ever else had done before.

What made it special?

I didn't know his work as a painter, I think there's one or two kinds of nocturne sort of things, but he moved up to Anchor Bay and I think he had a house there for a while too. I stopped in there and I was doing a great big vertical thing for the Sunset Magazine and he helped me stretch it, big long canvas.

Well tell me, what made his framing special? You said he framed your pictures like nobody else.

Well the framing was special because as I remember, he was the natural wood held, no glue, but there were linen liners in it set particular for my landscape paintings. I wonder if I have any of those frames left. They were beautifully made, he had a little place you know just down opposite, close to that warehouse where Doc Martin (?).

Right next to the Bank of America, right across from the Mill Valley Market and near the Bank of America.

Yeah.

Well he had worked with, Steve and Lucienne had both done plastering for Diego Rivera when he did his murals in San Francisco, I know.

He (Steve) bought one of my first paintings, a little 8x10, and it was just barbed wire and those little wind-blown plant you know that go along and it's impaled, and the foreground is just dry grass and a sky and just one little, what do you call those...

Cheesecloth?

Huh?

A kind of a cloth? Something that was impaled on the fence?

Yeah.

Was it a piece of cloth or was it something...

No, it's a little plant.

Oh a plant.

They're all over the whole western dry landscapes.

Like a tumbleweed?

A which?

A tumbleweed?

It's the same thing as a tumbleweed, yeah. It is a tumbleweed.

And Steve Dimitroff bought that?

Yeah. I saw it later up at Anchor Bay, he had it at his little place where he did framing up there. I remember also on the post going down the hill, were one-gallon empty jug after another of parties which they had given over a period of time.

Okay, let's continue down the list. How about Bart Perry, what do you remember about Bart?

Bart Perry. Well Bart Perry, like myself, for income, we both worked on building, as carpenters, but as a painter, I'm trying to remember what Bart Perry did, but I think he had tried to go modern and was painting kind of hard-edged semi flat cubist things. I thought he was just trying to go with what was 15 years later from New York, a bunch of painters, most of them went quite modern, semi-abstract, but I liked him as a fellow carpenter and we became quite good friends and I think Bart loaned me his great Steinway grand piano, for a long time it was in our living room and he was going to go to an island off Spain, Morocco or some place, and I never, outside of picking him up, I lost contact with him. I guess he's now since long gone. Gosh, but I liked him and I liked what he did.

He did some landscapes because my parents bought one.

I don't remember his landscapes, were they any, quite good?

He loved to do trees, he did one landscape, it looks like Mill Valley, a house partially showing but mostly...

I think they were quite good.

Yeah, they were nice. Bright saturated colors.

Yeah, quite disciplined. (Looks at list) I think Graveson's next. I'm ashamed to say that I don't have any recollection at all of a single painting of Graveson. I just can't, what were they like?

We had one which I still have.

Yeah, I saw one, Caroline had one of a bunch (of people) around a Thanksgiving (table), a very nice figurative scene, kind of Winslow Homer thing but done with, that was a good job, the figures were alive and the theme was fun, that was a nice painting.

And I've never seen anything more about him, what can you tell me about Dick Graveson, do you know anything about him, where he was from?

No.

What kind of a person he was?

They were responsible for us moving to Mill Valley, as I told you.

So if you knew him, where had you met him? Where did you first meet Dick Graveson? Do you remember, was it in Berkeley?

I didn't meet him until after we started the building. In fact O'Hanlon and I didn't meet until the building, he came up one day with his camera and took a picture of dad and myself, I have that someplace, of Mike Cutten with a big old part of the flooring of my house at the building, so that's how I met O'Hanlon because he was very pleased that I was going to be a neighbor up the hill. There was a question about O'Hanlon as an activist or something in here someplace, oh any projects...

Oh yes, they did have friends come down and help build Dick's sculpture studio, I have a photograph of that.

Well there was an incident, I participated with O'Hanlon's doing his great big barn studio and Perry ran out and said come on down they're pouring concrete, nine-foot wall, and we got to get, otherwise it's going to collapse, so I went down and we put 2x4s to preserve that nine-foot wall before they put any more concrete in it. And that was my meeting with Dick O'Hanlon. We saved the wall. There's a question here, did artists, musicians and writers socialize in Mill Valley. Well, I

don't remember except one meeting put on by your mother and father in which some very left wing Negro people were there, and it was a big, long table a block or so off of Reed, there were big groups. But anyhow, a big, long table and it definitely was a social meeting in some way honoring these Negro leftists, that's about the only time that I have an association of numbers of people and it was in honor of one or two of these activists, in the union movement I guess. I suppose that they did socialize but outside of that one big table, I think it was put on by Caroline as the hostess, that's the only time. I don't remember musicians and writers.

Betty and Joan Wolf and Carol Fowler played in a quartet, can you remember anything about the musicals?

The Housewives Quartet, very active. (Joan) Wolf, the wife played the second fiddle I think it was, no the second fiddle was Carol, I think, no the cello was the wife of a baseball player, I can't remember her name. They not only became so well known, sometimes they'd go all the way down to Stanford and play quartet, they became quite famous. They were called the quartet named after a concrete highway, El Camino Quartet.

Oh they changed it. (From Housewives Quartet)

Yes. I went along, they played at Stanford with the Ross Quartet, an octet, packed house in the theater at Stanford, put that down. It's about Betty. The next one is how did Ray respond to the McCarthy witch hunts? Artists in Mill Valley become activist against McCarthy? Not in any organized form that I can remember, but I do remember that the John Birch Society raised a holy stink when the man who left his wife and married Bonaro, his secretary, Harry Overstreet, came to town and there was quite a furor downtown, it wasn't a riot but there was a big virtuous mix-up if you remember at the time, but Overstreet spoke just the same. And Bonaro was a good, she's a very handsome female, leftist. I admired her.

I didn't realize Harry Overstreet left Bonaro for his secretary or was Bonaro the secretary?

Yes. I think originally he talks to the universities across the country and I just vaguely kind of think that in some way, his secretary, she went along on some of those trips and I don't know whether it, the recorder to get it down and make production or what, but I knew his first because she had a house above the big place where all the football games are played, she was on that little street, we'd all get on the roof and watch the football games, she was a very motherly, nice person, I liked her and I didn't like the shift of him going for a younger wife. I originally I painted that little thing of the square dance in the Adirondacks, that time they were associated with a university kind of countryside place where they had vacations, and she bought that.

Was that Bonaro who bought that?

Yes.

Bonaro bought that.

I suppose McCarthy was as close as he ever got to a real fascist sort of thing, as far as I knew it never did take hold to any extent. I don't know the history of McCarthy putting in liberals, he knocked out several of them from very-well paying jobs because of his rantings but outside of that, I don't know what McCarthy accomplished. He stunk to high heaven as far as I'm concerned. Number 10 is what was Ray's attitude toward selling his art?

I asked you that because you always sold your art for very little money, and I know that money doesn't matter so much to you, but you must have had to sell in order to help support the family, so that's why I asked what were your feelings about selling your art.

I think in the car is a list of paintings, \$25, \$35, as high as \$75, I'll dig it out for you just to show you how people responded at those prices for what was in the painting.

Yes, I'd love to see it.

The only gallery, a fellow on Sutter Street, he upped the price a little on them and sold a few, somehow I had my carpenter's union card, I really supported Betty and the kids building my house, not on my paintings, but as a union paying carpenter. Chestnut, who's very active, sponsored my becoming a union member, him and his son.

Was the sponsor for your becoming a union member Tom Chestnut who was about your age, or was it his father?

Father.

The father?

Yeah. Tom, outside his playing the French horn, his wife also and Betty for a while, went in as a violinist and there was a guy was imitating the great Italian fellow from New York.

An Italian horn player you mean? A French horn player? Who were they imitating in New York, who was the guy in New York?

Oh, let's see if I can remember.

Was he a musician?

Yeah.

It doesn't matter. Let me ask a question which is not on your list. Do you remember Sam Newsom and did you ever see his paintings?

I remember Sam very well. Number one, O'Hanlon was doing his big barn studio, he did a great big thing, drawing of a big rock, he said "let rocks – something", what was that phrase, let rocks something, "Let rocks speak", anyhow it was a celebration of the enormity of the big studio that O'Hanlon was building, it was kind of tongue in the cheek. He had his own little house, oh it was a tremendous collection of little dwarf plants that he grew, he had been to Japan and did a book on the bonsais.

Did you know he was a painter?

Yes but I can't remember a single painting of his, that's the damndest thing.

He had a studio on the O'Hanlon property for a little while in the old brick building at the bottom of the driveway, and he painted, I would almost call them naïve visionary kinds of paintings with very bright colors and very naïve technique, but very imaginative, and he also painted completely different work, which was Japanese style brushwork.

Ah, I do remember now, he made a trip to New Hampshire and one theme—brooks. It was very Oriental line drawings and black and white of a little stream and a rock here. They were very handsome. He had written a book, I don't know how many years he was over in Japan, but it was a couple years. He's long since gone, yeah.

But his daughter lives in Mill Valley in the old house.

Oh really?

Yes.

She's still alive?

His daughter, she's young, she's in her 50s, and she and her husband live in the Newsom's house. Her name is Sylvia, but her nickname is Chipps.

How nice. I met for the first time, George Wheelwright there.

Tell me about that, can you remember meeting George for the first time?

Well I met him there the first time, we immediately, since close friends, it was only a matter of a week or so that he had the minister (Gordon Foster) and his wife (Marjorie) and Betty and myself and a couple others down for a wonderful beef dinner at the Wheelwright place on the ranch and of course he had those bulls flown over by airplane, he really upped the grade of these Herefords, he really had an eye for doing top on the raising of cattle, but I think he deeded the land

or maybe even the whole darn ranch to the Buddhists, his wife (Hope Wheelright) was very much Buddhist in her philosophy as I remember. He didn't try to convert me at all but I always admired thinking themselves home in the universe (?).

You remember Dory Bassett? Dory and Chuck Bassett? He was an architect, they lived on Lovell and Cornelia.

Chuck Bassett. I don't remember him at all. He was an architect? Was he associated with the fellow who designed the library? His name's in here.

Don Emmons.

Yeah, I met him briefly but just very briefly. Bassett, no I don't. Pirkle Jones, when he wanted to leave his Sunset, his house in the Sunset, came over and was looking for land, he got in touch with me and I took him up and showed him that place where he built his house for himself and his wife.

It's an amazing place, beautiful.

Oh yes. The walk down to it itself is poetry.

Yes, poetry.

Ruth Marion Baruch, is that his wife?

Yes.

She was a photographer with a social conscience. Yes. I saw her photographs there, I met her there. Number 6, how did Ray and Betty decide to leave Mill Valley for Santa Barbara? The very simple reason, we had gone on a trip to Europe in a place called Frejas (?) in the south of France on our way to Morocco where I was going to make drawings and spend a number of months there, because I'd heard from Bart Perry how wonderful a place it was, but a dam broke, my car was destroyed, and we didn't have any desire to go any further and be a tourist painter, so we came

home. The only reason we left Mill Valley for Santa Barbara is when we got back, I was unemployed and people in San Rafael said there's a man looking for you, and I said what was his name? Oh, (?) and he's got a big grant and he wants you to do some dioramas of the birds of Santa Barbara, you better get in touch with him because he's very anxious because he's well endowed and he wants you to paint them. So that's why we left.

You left to go live in Santa Barbara to paint the murals, how long did it take you?

I thought I could do them in a year and I bid them under contract, \$1,000 each. The third year, the head of the Mural Society of America came in one day, in front of one of the big murals that ocean marsh, with the birds and stuff, great big volcanic stuff, and the woman from the Mural Society said what are they paying you for these Ray? And I said well I contracted \$1,000 apiece for them, and she says well they're worth a lot more than that, only \$1,000 apiece, I said well - , the next day the director, the woman director at the time, came in with another check for \$9,000, which doubled the price because they knew what they were getting, so that's a nice story.

Very nice. Well you had done the dioramas, you had done a diorama over at the California Academy of Sciences in their African hall I believe.

Well the reason I got the job was earlier I had done a mural of the Greater Kudu and Cecil Tose did the taxidermy, he thought it was his master thing, 16 feet high, and that's the times where the paleontology background and stuff, somehow Vanderhoof from the University of California was adviser on that, or was it the six that I did for 1939 World's Fair? He was also in charge of the paleontology geology for that, anyhow, they had these murals to do and he was then the Director of Santa Barbara, so as I say I got the contract and set my price, doubled what I got \$500 for the Kudu, they added \$250 because they were so pleased with it, I guess that's about the size of it. What else we got here? How's Santa Barbara compare with Mill Valley as a place for artists to live and work?

As far as I'm concerned, there's no comparison. Mill Valley, (?) Canyon, Muir Beach, north of the Golden Gate for the seascape, Pt. Reyes National Seashore, and feminine rolling hills of western Marin, my God, if I ever amounted to anything as a artist in California, Mill Valley was (the place) to live and be accessible. Santa Barbara is a tourist town, plenty of artists, they've had some great ones in there, but I would very quickly in Santa Barbara leave town, head over the hills and get to the back country. To do the dioramas, I'd go out and live in the landscapes and build scale models first and then go right directly, I did the whole San Andreas fault line for the ones for the migrating crane, better than going to any art school in the world to go directly to nature and paint them for the birds. (Reading) Thanks so much, thanks so much for coming, Abby.

Let me ask you about your classes with children in Mill Valley, tell me a little bit about what you did with kids like me when you took children out to paint.

Well you know who my star student was? Well it was a little girl named Abby Wasserman and we were down about a half a mile or so, it was spring, and the willows, believe it or not, they were just beginning to burst the little green things at the top, but as I came up and you were about to lay it in, and I said yeah! lay it in with that cadmium red light, I said there's fire in that willow. You remember?

I remember, we were down near Muir Beach, we were in the valley between Muir Beach and Muir Woods.

Yeah. That was my children's class and you were the apple of my eye, then later there was a weekend group that would come on Saturdays, there was a man who did the layouts and topography in San Francisco and there was a couple others, some of the upper crust lady artists who had background in that group.

Let's see, Charlotte Freeman (of Mill Valley) was in your group, Charlotte Freeman was one of your group.

Yes, she was among the best.

She was a good painter. I remember seeing one of hers that I was very impressed with.

She came in and took a room at Muir Beach when I was over there helping take dirt out from under her house so they can have an extra apartment, and she lived for a while, a month, and painted from there on the coast, she was a good friend and a very good painter. She's also gone by now probably, yes?

You know, I think Charlotte may still be alive. I think she lives on the East Coast. I haven't heard that she passed away.

Yeah. I met Steve and Lucienne Dimitroff the first time up at her house, we were guests one night.

It's interesting to me how you met these various people because it seems there was a large circle of people in the arts and also politically active and this is where most of your friends came from, that group, like an extended family almost. You met the Dimitroffs through Charlotte and Norman, you met O'Hanlon when he came up while you were building you know. Because Mill Valley can be a place where people are just living in their own little world.

The thing that really made both myself and Betty kind of an enlarged family, Ross Valley Fair, there was a woman, Livermore, whose son I think was in the state government, and somewhere, oh there was \$8,000 granted to the Ross Valley Annual Fair and somehow because of my teaching landscape at the College of Marin, she got in touch with me and said through Mary Summers, Mary Summers was doing the impossible roads and development, anti-development to keep a big, major highway throwing cracker box houses all over West Marin and somehow, they had

me do an exhibit called Man and Nature in Marin and for that purpose, to tell the story, I went to Pirklel Jones and saw Ansel Adams and Pirkle enlarged the photographs and Ansel did a seashore, the oaks and grasslands, the marshlands, and did large things for the Ross Valley, and my friend, a student of Ansel's from Berkeley, had a thing called Words of the Earth, and the photographs of the brooks and the high sierras and all beautifully framed, and that was part of that exhibit.

That was Cedric Wright.

I think in a way it was instrumental because the botany teacher at San Francisco State, part of an airplane, and under the funds, I funded it and photographed everything from the air and that was a terrific exhibit. I think the following year they had the Focus on Marin, which I was a father of too, and that was taken a commuter, a San Francisco school teacher, and other professions, photographing their operations and that made a follow-up exhibit. They both should have been made into coffee table books, I don't think they were, no.

You were talking about Words of the Earth and that is a book of photographs by Cedric Wright, is that the artist you were talking, the photographer you were talking about? Cedric Wright?

I was so excited about that when the Board of Supervisors sent me to get Frank Lloyd Wright to design a museum of ecology for the college.

A museum of ecology for the college?

That was a very wonderful trip, I mean arrived in Kansas City [side one ended].

...Larry Bright once more.

The trip was funded with a couple hundred dollars to fly me plus this student who had seen my floor plan for the Story of Ecology Science in the Service of Man for the Palo Alto Museum and he managed to sell the Board of Trustees of the museum to see if he couldn't get Frank Lloyd

Wright because I suggested well if you're going to do the museum for the college, let's get the best architect in the country, so that's where we had landed in Kansas City and the war had broken out in Korea. So when we arrived and we had a little floor plan of the different kinds of exhibits for the evolutionary story, Mr. Wright's comment was well sure, I'd be very happy to design it but you won't be able to get the funds to do it because the war has broken out and unless there's going to be funds, why I won't do any designing for it, so that ended that.

But he told you, you should be an architect?

Well the conversation, of course, I was introduced to him by a little secretary that, I slept that night down where the little grade school was where he had gone to school when he was a boy, and when I came up and was introduced to him, I was introduced as Ray Strong, and the conversation was oh Strong light, and he says what do you do and I said I try to paint landscapes and then he said well do you know what my name means and I said no. He says it means "Maker", why don't you become an architect and do the real thing, and I said well that's all right except I like the changes in season and I just want to be a good landscape painter, he just threw his hands up as much to say well that's that, but he said make yourself at home, my students, a lot of them pay \$1,500 a year but you be my guest while you're here and below that big carrot, which was a big thing in which it went up several stories high and the story of that, of course, I found from the students was he designed and built in a mile high from Chicago in which he rooted it so darn deep it could go a mile high with the use of steel and elevators, well that's that part of the story. I went out, the harvest was August of wheat, and I would stack it on, I would help pick the chickens for the Sunday meal, every Sunday there was a big do, the guy that designed that Falling Water, his great piece of architecture, showed up and I remember they asked me to make some remarks and I said oh no, let's have the fellow with

the Falling Waters take my time, so I saw his student and he said you are a horse's ass, why didn't you say something, Ray? I said to hell no, I wasn't going to make a fool of myself.

Tell me some of the things you remember about life in Mill Valley, any kind of little stories about daily life in Mill Valley when you were living there. Where did you shop, where did you buy your food, how did you spend your time, did you go to the library, little things like that, where did you buy your gasoline?

We bought from the Associated Store because I was on the committee of a forward pass from Santa Barbara, the editor of the Mill Valley whatever it was called (Record), wanted to get rid of all the telephone poles in town and put all the utilities underground as one of his little Don Quixote jobs that he was on. So when I was on that committee, the Associated Station was freshly built or being built and the matter came up to the committee and I spoke up at the committee and I said well build the darn thing and let's completely enclose the metal something and put some bricks down to earth around it, they did, they got them to do it, but because of other jobs that came up, I got Pirkle to take and be appointed for my place, so he took over a member of that architectural committee. There was particular fellow, I can't remember his name, he went clean up to the state on matters, don't remember his name. Betty did all her shopping at the, it was called Green Frog I think at that time, it was just next to the park where the City Hall was.

That place is now the Mill Valley Market?

Yeah.

Yeah, the Canepa's place.

Was it really called the Green Frog?

Possibly, I have to check.

I think it was. Right behind it, there were frogs in the little Mill Valley stream, right behind it. I used to go down there and have my lunch, talk to the frogs. They croaked a little.

How about the library, did you use the Mill Valley Library?

Very little, there were all those steps to go to it. Betty would pick up a book or two now and then but when they moved to the other location designed by Emmons and Associates, I thought that was the most wonderful thing to happen to Marin County, its location and the design. I hoped some day they might give me a second go there. I had one little show of small sketches down in the basement, but the library itself had built a larger gallery on the lower level and I would love sometime if before I die they would say come on back Ray and put up a Marin County bunch of your paintings if you can get your hands on them, I would love to come back again. Did you know the chain from the ferry boats and Mt. Tamalpais was kind of, Louis Pursinger, the head of the first violinist, San Francisco Symphony, more than one weekend would come over just to climb the mountain and that was true with numbers of visiting musicians and artists, Mill Valley was the starting point to climb the mountain. I never got to a single one of the operas up on top, the maiden supposed to be inside of the mountain.

Did you go to the Mountain Play?

I never made the Mountain Play, have you gone to it, was it quite a play?

Quite wonderful, yeah.

Tamalpa, is the maiden in there?

Well I never went, I can't remember one about Tamalpa, the maiden, but I have seen other productions there, they do one every year. Now it's always a musical but when I was a girl it was a play, sometimes an Irish play, sometimes an English play, or an American play, they changed off every year now.

I'm ashamed to say I never even hiked down to see what the seating was like.

That's too bad. When you hiked in Mill Valley, when you went out to paint, would you go by yourself or would you go with a friend to do plein air painting?

That's a good question. Except for the Saturday group where there's two or three people, a couple came over, as I said earlier, the fellow who did typography for the newspapers of San Francisco, there's one or two of the woman painters, including the Jean Buffkin (?), she was quite talented and Charlotte Freeman, that's about it, mostly by myself.

Would you go out for the entire day with a lunch, how did you do it? What time would you leave in the morning and go? Or would you take photographs and bring them back to the studio?

Both. All of Mill Valley, except for not so much in the morning, but the afternoon light, a woman called Garvey, her husband's a boat builder, they just sent me, a big 37 boat, he just finished, she has one, I painted a big rock with oaks and stuff on top right above Muir Woods, best painting I think I ever did of Marin County. Most of the time I'd go up for the weekend to the, Betty's father built a cabin up on Mt. Vision and I'd not only stay overnight but often I'd get up before dawn and out painting almost always by myself.

You were saying about the light in Mill Valley, what are the characteristics of Mill Valley, what is the light like? What color is the light? When is the light most beautiful in Mill Valley?

Well that's an easy answer—afternoon late. The reason's very simple—I was on commission for the Outdoor Art Club for \$750, that's a helluva good price at that stage of my life. I painted it from the parking lot of Safeway store and the high school, but the afternoon, the shadows revealed the form, the bulk and the thrust of the mountain, the afternoon light shadows. But the foreground, I went over behind the police building on the point of the marsh and there in behind is a rock outcrop and it has a great big build-up of rocks, repeating the Stinson thrust of the mountain

and the fall and I made that the foreground. That's a painting that's now hung in the Outdoor Art Club, I'm very proud of that job. I did it but I like the fact that I created the foreground to talk to the mountain.

Yes, it is a beautiful painting.

Yes, it is. I don't do many of that really guts qualify.

I don't know if I agree with you. I think some of your Santa Barbara, your mountains paintings, they're so strong, so powerful, the ones of the mountains in the Santa Barbara area, are also wonderful. There's a more feminine quality of Marin County but a more masculine quality in the Santa Barbara Mountains, don't you think?

Yeah.

Do you want to talk a little bit about the femininity of the Marin landscape, I know you feel it very strongly.

Combination of hospital and old peoples' where I'm fed and Barbara brings me up here to the North Fork which is heaven on earth, but there was a painting which described it once, I did it for the eighth grade over at San Francisco College. A bunch of little kids were in front and senior citizens and students, people who were all modernists attended it.

Yes.

I worked on it. I said to the little kids in front, you know this is really, these hills, I'm really painting my wife, it's her breasts and her body, buttocks and all, it's a portrait of my wife, she's feminine hills. And one little girl said yeah but you did all that broken color in the sky, why did you break that up? I said well the idea was I was painting the Pt. Reyes cool fog vibration of a cooler value against the heat of the afternoon, and I wanted to do that. She said well it doesn't work does it, and I said no you're right, I grabbed a big brush and made it simple like the rest of the painting.

There is one artist, well I didn't ask you about Mama Gravander . Do you remember Mama Gravander?

Very well. Every 16th of December, artists and writers in town, came up to Mama Gravander's, it was a celebration. She managed every year to get a 16 or older, about that age girl, very simple feminine young woman's dress. It was a celebration of some kind of a, (Swedish Santa Lucia) celebration of the birth of the new year actually, the new year of this celebration is December 16 is the beginning of spring, and she put that on and she had little biscuits and stuff, some of it was quite crisp, everybody came to it, she was always dressed up in kind of a Swedish outfit I think it was, it was kind of homespun, very handsome, she was a very impressive sculpturally built lady.

Do you remember her husband? Her husband was a weaver also.

I don't remember a single thing about him. Maybe it's because I kind of liked the idea she was the virgin, I don't know why but I don't remember him at all.

That she was the virgin, she was what?

I said I liked to imagine her as a virgin, kind of a statuesque woman, I didn't connect her at all being sexual. She was above that, a goddess no less. She carried herself that way. Did you get to know her quite well?

When I was a little girl, yes, she was very impressive.

What do you remember about Gordon and Marjorie Foster?

I do remember Gordon and Marjorie Foster.

And Gordon as a friend, I know Gordon was a close friend of yours.

Who is?

Gordon, the minister. The minister at the Community Church, Gordon Foster.

Did she become a minister?

No.

Oh, Foster, the minister, oh I knew him, yes. Oh Gordon, yeah I gave him a picture I painted when he was quite ill and he thanked me with tears in his eyes, I visited him to see it afterwards, I gave him two, and it was of El Capitan and he said “You know when that came to the hospital, I said God I know him well.” He means he caught the symbolism of it. Yes, I loved Gordon. I remember his baptism service when little kids were brought, pure poetry, his gesture, what he said, it was very simple of the responsibility of the parenthood and the child, right there. Beautiful.

He was a great man.

He was a great man. Betty thought so, I did too, yeah. She (Marjorie Foster) at one period, she came to my night classes, somehow as she was there, she had a little photograph of the heart of a city destroyed from Rotterdam, in fact I think she even had a little replica. The next day I took a big bunch of nice, ready clay and put it in her mailbox. She thanked me, I don’t know what she did with it, but why don’t you do your own sculpture.

How did you help other people practice their own creativity, do something in the arts that maybe they hadn’t thought they could do? I remember you as a person who would encourage other people.

Yeah. Well you know cheerful, optimist Ray, strong light Ray, the simplest thing in the world, I met somebody, I would say “I want to see what you do.” And generally they would oblige and come by with their sketch books or a painting or two, just the artist of the fusion of putting what’s in your mind where all paintings are seen as finished things before you make a single stroke, the fusion just takes place like that, it’s just a natural.

What makes you such an optimist and a lover of life, why do you have this incredible spirit in your heart and in your mind?

I was asked that at the University of California, Santa Barbara, a whole bunch of students, I had shown a bunch of my slides and the question of the MC said well what is it, it's very simple, better than skim milk, top cream and rolled oats, that's it. That's a breakfast. People accept it as a fact. My mother believes in raising the kids, I mean on the farm, three cows, one of them's Guernsey, the other was a Jersey-Guernsey, and did we have top cream.

You were raised on top cream, you weren't raised on skim milk?

No, no. It's a very wonderful thing because when I was in the Adirondacks painting, we made a trip one day to visiting farms around, we got to one farm, a little girl, she's all kind of dark-haired and boney, I offered to give her, it was a sketch of mine, I had little sketches along with me and I offered it to her and her mother said well before you accept it, you have to get your father's approval to accept it, she took off, and came back grinning and said yes, and I said to Betty in the car with me, do you know a skim milk child, for the dollars and cents of selling his fat stuff for money, he deprived his own kid of cream for feeding, look here, it's kind of a minor tragedy, for the love of money he done that, that child. Betty said yes that's an observation but aren't you kind of reading things into it? Oh no, there it is. She said I guess you're right.

Tell me, how did Betty help you with your own life in art? What was the role that your wife played in your being able to live as an artist?

Well I think I've already told you about the painting of the voluptuous hills and painting it in front of that whole group at San Francisco State, and I made the statement that when I painted those particular rolling hills and all the feminine forms, it was really painting the deep gratitude for not only being my wife in marriage, but the mother of my children also that that particular painting, I explained it as a portrait of Elizabeth Rumsey Sager Norton Brown Strong, give them the whole geological background, she's very much a part of why I became a good contemporary California

painter. She always wanted to see what I'd done when I was out and back, often had the reading material, the New Yorker along and when we'd have lunch, she'd watch all that was taking place, and then never hurt me at all, always very much in support, many time being right along together, all the way.

You married very young and then you were a long time before you had your first child, so you had a lot of time to be young together I think, is that true?

Yeah, we went to New York together, right after our marriage in 1928, that was when New York was very livable. The first place we lived was 79th Street, you'd see the big park, the Hudson River, snow would come down and make a whole poem out of five flights up, I'd paint out of the front window, she'd cook from a little three-burner, she had pork roast, it was always heaven, for supper sometimes, we'd make love in a little inclined ceiling, she got permission to take the old extinct piano, make firewood because the fireplace up there, put on her Mukluks and practice her violin while I was working for a pastry man selling pastry in New York, \$25 a week. So a great life together. All the way. We used the usual, birth control, you never saw such a beautiful thing in your life, you get in the bathtub, this terrific nude gorgeous figure and she's laughing as I took care we didn't have an unwanted child because we couldn't afford one. But when I got the backgrounds at the World's Fair in 1938, about the first week or so I was working on them, \$750 a background, I said for the first time we got the money, what about this idea of, how old are you now, she said well I just passed 30, 31, I said well you're telling me, I read about it, if you're going to have a baby, it's harder for your pelvis to get the child out to wait any longer, do you want to have a child? That night we put the condoms aside and we had our first child. Then we waited six years and had the second one. I don't know why so long to wait because we had pictures taken too soon. (Barbara, Ray's daughter, comes in.) That's my sister-in-law, Ed's wife, there.

Funny you come right now, I'm just learning about your birth.

[Barbara] All the details I imagine.

That's the make with the rake, she turns it into a Chinese landscape or a Japanese.

Ray, how about Ida Geary, do you have memories of Ida Geary during those years?

Do I have memories of which?

Ida Geary, I'll write it for you. Ida Geary. She was a plant person, she made art from plants.

I don't know who Geary is but I have very strong, who is Ida Geary?

Well she lives in Mill Valley but perhaps you didn't know her. She's about a little younger than you are but up there, but Cedric Wright was in Berkeley, was he?

Yeah. He had an old Maybeck house just this side of the blind school, he had it down in the basement, an old woodworking outfit.

[Barbara] He was never in Mill Valley, was he?

No but he was...

He came over when Tim's only a few months old, Ansel Adams was a close friend of his and I wanted a photograph and he said well I'll do it for you if you'll give me a painting in exchange, which I did, so he took Tim sitting in the little rocking chair, beautiful photograph, we became very close friends because he had a cabin up at Lake Tahoe, south of Tahoe, and Ed and Gertrude (Strong) are often giving whole vacations up there and weekends, and they were great friends, and Cedric and myself became great friends. (And Wheelwright was his wife, she was quite talented also.) He did this whole book called Words of the Earth, I showed it to Frank Lloyd's Wright's wife, hoping to get a publisher for it, somehow I never got that but I left it there with her, I don't

know if it was ever published but there was a great photograph of meadows and the range of life.
Mostly intimate stuff.

It was published.

It was published?

Yeah, I have a copy of it.

I'll have to get myself a copy.

Yeah, Barbara, it's probably on the internet, Words of the Earth.

[Barbara] I thought maybe we had it.

You might.

[Barbara] It might still be in Santa Barbara.

I think you've done a good job on me. Do I get a copy eventually?

Of course. Of course.

This description of all the isms of the world, a classic. (Refers to Louis Wasserman's book, Modern Political Philosophies.)

Good book.

Great book.

It's in print again, that's good. Tell me, what do you remember about, people like, let's see there was one person I think we didn't talk about, let me just check, no I guess we've, how about Bruce and Jean Coleman, do you remember them?

Say it again.

Bruce and Jean Coleman and John Ludlow, John and Melda Ludlow.

[couldn't understand]

Okay.

Was that the team that did the book for children or not?

No. Oh, this is good, Clement and Edith Heard, that's the book people.

They were in a little cabin that the O'Hanlons had about the Gravesons in the woods. Yeah, oh yes. He used wood as part of his line drawings on kind of an Oriental, Chinese landscape sort of stuff, very good. And she wrote a whole, some books for children with illustrations by Clement. Now Bruce and Jean Coleman, Ludlow, I can't remember either.

The Ludlows, John Ludlow was a music teacher, piano teacher, and they lived in Cascade Drive.

Hmmm.

And Bruce and Jean lived right off of Cornelia up above Lovell, you know where Cornelia snakes around.

I don't think I knew, in my mind, personally to be any help. Probably Betty knew them. It's what made Mill Valley in the 40s and 50s a good place to live. Practically part of the mountain.

It was also not expensive to live there, was it?

No. It was intimate. The little stream that flowed right down off the mountain right behind the grocery store. It was good because it was inexpensive. I think mostly the artists pretty much kept to themselves, I don't remember getting together much. We supported each other's work by seeing it whenever it was exhibited. The main exhibit was Strawbridges', I saw a show there more than once up above his books.

Oh you mean upstairs from the place where, in Strawbridges?

I never had a show there but I saw other shows there.

What do you remember about the train, the freight train that came into Mill Valley all the way to the Depot?

You know, I've seen photographs of it, I've seen photographs of part of the place where they added an extra locomotive to get to the top, I can see it, I never walked it but I knew where it was, you could see it, that horizontal place, and the person that helped me build my house was my dad, not my brother, number five. My father came down, we stayed at the Chestnuts together. I didn't participate with the O'Hanlons with any projects except that one concrete support of that wall. This isn't associated but that was largely quartets with Betty in our living room. I think mostly in Mill Valley, artists pretty much kept to themselves except when they had some show downtown in one place or another.

Who were some of the people who bought your paintings in Mill Valley?

The Wheelwrights, number one. Then there's a sister (Francesca Livermore, Hope Wheelwright's sister), number two, that lived up on a little house someplace close to the high school. Most important, your mother and Lou. The rail fence on the back route out in Nicasio when it was just a dirt road.

I love it, yeah. Ray, you also would loan paintings so that people could decide if they wanted to buy it, is that right?

What's this?

You would lend paintings so that my parents could look at it for a while to see if they wanted to buy it?

I was the originator, when the Art Students League in San Francisco, of a rental gallery. A person could rent from one to three months, they would take it for three months, the full amount of the rental was applied if the person decided they wanted to have to be living with it, to buy it. I think historically I was, Betty ran this out of the, not so much at home but out of the Art Students League in San Francisco. I don't think we rented very many, anyhow we inaugurated the idea of living with

it. I was told by somebody high up in San Francisco, the Legion of Honor or someplace, she said it was the finest way to market paintings by association that he had ever heard of. I don't know how its life was elsewhere in the state.

It was wonderful to live with your paintings. There was one they did not buy but I still remember it hanging in the living room. It was a pool, a river pool, and there was a little beach, very small beach and some low cliffs, and this beautiful blue-green water, I still remember that one, with a little orange in the water.

Sounds like it might have been up in a little cove at Tomales Bay.

I think it was a square painting.

Oh was it, I don't remember that one.

Can you think of anything that I forgot to ask, something I didn't ask that I should have asked you?

If you ever want to have some paintings for a show, she (Ray's sister-in-law) had a fine collection up at Napa.

John Adams gave me his mother's phone number. Yeah.

This is yours. (Hands Interviewer something – forgot what.)

Oh yes, okay. Thank you, Ray.

Thank you. Lovely. Just lovely, fine, thank you.

I have a present for you. I brought you a gift. (Gives him Tosca's Paris Adventure, a child's picture book.)

Look at that. I got up to the first platform with Barb. Oh [laughter]. It's wonderful, oh look at that. It's a cat [laughter]. Did you pick it up over there?

No, it's my book. I showed you these drawings when we were at the MALT Show.

Oh I remember, look at there. I got to get something together for the MALT for this year, maybe the Pt. Reyes seashore. Oh these are, there's Betty and the fiddle. (Refers to one of the book's illustrations.)

Yes.

Bass fiddle.

(To Barb) I'm giving Ray my book that was just published.

Lovely gift, thank you. Oh my, very contemporary. Lovely gift, thank you. Wow. They dance with brilliant stars. Oooh, wow, vanishing point.

Yeah, one of my few vanishing points. [end]