

**Mill Valley Oral History Program**

*A collaboration between the Mill Valley  
Historical Society and the Mill Valley  
Public Library*

**JOHN BOETTIGER**

**An Oral History Interview  
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2018**

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INTERVIEWER: Debra Schwartz  
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In this oral history, retired academic, writer, Redwoods resident, and member of the Roosevelt family John Boettiger discusses his life, lineage, and love of community. Born in 1939, John lived in the White House of his grandparents President Franklin Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt from the age of three to six. John subsequently grew up on Mercer Island, outside of Seattle. John discusses his family history in great depth and recounts his experiences as a child in the Roosevelt White House. He also describes his relationship with his prestigious grandparents, particularly Eleanor, with whom he traveled in Europe. He attended both Amherst and Columbia University, and went on to become a professor of psychology at Hampshire College. He discusses his four children, all of whom were living in the Pacific Northwest at the time this oral history interview was conducted. John moved to Mill Valley after his wife Leigh McCullough passed away, settling into The Redwoods senior community. John discusses his service on the advisory board of the Living New Deal, an ongoing project to map all the buildings and infrastructure projects created by New Deal agencies, as well as his own ongoing writing projects. Throughout this oral history, John expresses how important community is to him and the sense of belonging he has found both at The Redwoods and in Mill Valley more broadly.

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## Oral History of John Boettiger

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**Oral History of John Boettiger**  
**June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**Editor's note:** This transcript has been reviewed by John Boettiger, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

**0:00:01 Debra Schwartz:** Today is June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018. My name is Debra Schwartz and I'm here on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library. I'm very, very happy to be sitting here today in the sound booth at the Mill Valley Public Library with John Boettiger.

**0:00:22 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:00:22 Debra Schwartz:** John, you're a psychologist?

**0:00:24 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:00:25 Debra Schwartz:** You're a professor. You're a writer. You're a blogger. You're a group leader. And you happen to be the grandson of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

**0:00:36 John Boettiger:** Yes, all of that.

**0:00:37 Debra Schwartz:** All of that and much more, I'm sure. [chuckles] Thank you so much for giving me your time and sharing your story with the Historical Society and the library.

**0:00:49 John Boettiger:** I'm happy to.

**0:00:51 Debra Schwartz:** So, I was looking at your blog this morning, as a matter of fact, preparing for this interview, and you say you write about "justice, hope and history, so inevitably, these are issues of meaning and value, good and evil, sacred and profane, body, mind, heart and soul as one integrated, systematic whole, the evolution of human consciousness through a lifetime and from one generation to another to the seventh generation, and the character and health of our relationships with each other, our roots and family, community and place, and our membership in the natural world of which we are an interactive part and for which we bear unique responsibility."

**0:01:45 John Boettiger:** I haven't changed that language in 25 years.

**0:01:51 Debra Schwartz:** That just looked like the ultimate interview to me, those beautiful words that embody so much, really just everything on so many levels. So I'm really excited to have this time to talk with you, and I doubt we're even going to be able to get even a little bit through all these issues, but I'll be happy for what we can.

**0:02:11 John Boettiger:** Great.

**0:02:12 Debra Schwartz:** Let us start with just a little context information. Let's start with your family history, because this is a history interview.

**0:02:22 John Boettiger:** Sure.

**0:02:23 Debra Schwartz:** I mean, you really have a lot of family history. Of anybody I've interviewed, you really probably have some of the most known family history. Gee whiz, I just watched the Ken Burns documentary.

**0:02:35 John Boettiger:** Oh, yes.

**0:02:36 Debra Schwartz:** Did you watch it?

**0:02:37 John Boettiger:** Of the family? Of course.

**0:02:38 Debra Schwartz:** Let's take it from your perspective. Tell me a little bit about your family and go back as far as you can. It doesn't have to be a lot, but just a little bit to help us understand who preceded you and how you came to be.

**0:02:57 John Boettiger:** Well, I'd have to go back to Claes Martenszen van Rosenvelt, who with his wife, I'm not sure how she pronounced it, Jannetje, Janet essentially, both Dutch, probably burghers — with an "h," not ham chuckles— who emigrated from a town in Zeeland, Holland to New Amsterdam (now New York) in the first half of the 17th century, so in the 1600s. The family has stayed in New York with, of course, a lot of detours for almost its entire history. The Roosevelts', which is what it was anglicized to be, were business people — nothing dramatic that I've discovered in my own research until they entered the world of politics with my great great uncle, Theodore.

**0:04:45:** He was a member of the New York State Assembly and Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He was also governor of New York, but obviously most known — well, really, in two domains: one as a writer — he was a terrific writer on a range of subjects, but most of them relating to his love of the outdoors and hunting — but particularly, of course, as president. Obviously, I didn't know him. My mother was the first child and only daughter of Eleanor and Franklin. She had four brothers who succeeded her in their birth. My mother's name was Anna, Anna Eleanor — a long list of the Anna Eleanors that continues to this day.

**0:06:10 Debra Schwartz:** On your mother's side?

**0:06:11 John Boettiger:** On my mother's side, and they're still being created. That's my mother's side of the family. I mean, I could go on, but my father was a self-taught newspaper man, a self-taught reporter.

**0:06:34 Debra Schwartz:** And his name?

**0:06:35 John Boettiger:** John Boettiger.

**0:06:37 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, you're his namesake.

**0:06:38 John Boettiger:** I am his namesake with the exception of the fact that he didn't overwhelmingly trust himself to be a good father — and it was he that insisted I have a middle name, which naturally was Roosevelt — but I don't know what gave him that persuasion because he was a good father. He wasn't a lot with us, and that I felt as a significant absence in my life. He left when I was three for the Army, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He was in the Army until '44, and during that time my grandfather, the Roosevelt grandfather, called his daughter Anna and said, "Sis," which is what he called my mother, "why don't you and Johnny come and live with me in the White House?" And nothing could have pleased her more. The men in her life — she had three husbands in succession — I think always were somewhat overwhelmed by the Roosevelt family. But she was a gifted, a really gifted person, a little too early in the kind of generational succession to have a profession of her own. But she became in the 1930s — my parents were married in January of '35 — in the '30s my father, who had started as a self-taught journalist, early '30s, wrote an account for the *Chicago Tribune*, a solid Republican newspaper.

**0:09:13:** My father didn't really have a politics. He grew up in the Middle West and never paid much attention to politics. But he wrote a series of stories about the gangland slaying of one of his colleagues, another reporter on the *Tribune*, and it turned into a book called *Jake Lingle*. Jake Lingle was the name of the reporter who was killed, and Colonel McCormick, who was the Czar of the newspaper, said to my father, "John, you've written such an interesting piece. I'd like to offer you whatever job at the *Tribune* you would like." This was 1932. My father said, "Well, truthfully, I would like to follow the campaign for the presidency of this fascinating governor of the State of New York, Franklin Roosevelt." And it was on the campaign train in 1932, during the campaign that my mother and father met, fell in love, and were kissing between cars. Well, had this occurred in a more current environment and had he not been one of the press himself, it could have changed the course of history, because FDR would have faced the first scandal of his career. But he didn't.

**0:11:13:** My father learned to be a Democrat. It wasn't a problem for him. They lived in Washington, of course, for a few years after they were married in January '35. And then he was offered the job of publisher of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which was one of Seattle's two daily papers. It was owned by William Randolph Hearst. So it was typically a conservative paper. To my knowledge, Hearst had never offered editorial freedom to any other publisher of his papers. My father insisted upon editorial freedom and Hearst knew what he was getting, but he cared more about bringing a paper that was in the red into the black. So he agreed and my parents became publisher, in my father's case, my mother an editor, first of what was in those days called the women's pages of the newspaper, and what later became an omnibus social part of the paper. And I grew up

on an island called Mercer Island, which is, of course, still there, but it's become a suburb of Seattle. In those years, it was pretty wild land.

**0:12:53 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, I know those islands. You take a ferry there, that's the only way.

**0:12:56 John Boettiger:** Yes, well —

**0:12:56 Debra Schwartz:** You can get there by water now.

**0:13:01 John Boettiger:** There was a pontoon bridge between Seattle and Mercer Island.

**0:13:06 Debra Schwartz:** Beautiful.

**0:13:06 John Boettiger:** Yes, beautiful.

**0:13:08 Debra Schwartz:** Seattle, I think at that time, was a very different city, of course.

**0:13:16 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:13:16 Debra Schwartz:** But natural beauty. So, you grew up surrounded by the water and trees and ocean spray.

**0:13:24 John Boettiger:** All of that, yes. My father had a little cabin cruiser that he called the News Hawk. [chuckles] And we travelled through Lake Washington and in the Puget Sound. They had a small number — but of dear — friends, and I grew up knowing them. I didn't know the neighbors very well because we were accompanied by Secret Service agents.

**0:14:03 Debra Schwartz:** At all times.

**0:14:03 John Boettiger:** At all times.

**0:14:05 Debra Schwartz:** Yes.

**0:14:09 John Boettiger:** I can remember their names, Hazen and Carmody. Yes, one of them was George, but I don't remember which one. And they would patrol the grounds. So I grew up with a little sense of endangerment because of their presence. I knew they were there to protect us. I didn't know from what or whom, but I felt secure in that family. My mother's first marriage to an otherwise undistinguished stockbroker ended in divorce. But before it did, she had two older children. So I have a half-brother who's no longer living.

**0:15:01 Debra Schwartz:** And his name was?

**0:15:02 John Boettiger:** Curtis Roosevelt. He actually, it was Curtis Dall. That was the name of his father. So my brother's name started as Curtis Dall. When my mother and Curtis Senior divorced, and my parents were married, it became Curtis Boettiger. And when my parents divorced, which is another story, he didn't know where to go with a name. And the only name that he'd grown up with was Roosevelt.

**0:15:51 Debra Schwartz:** How old was he, with the second divorce, your older brother?

**0:15:55 John Boettiger:** He was a young adult, because I remember him, particularly in the pictures in the White House, in a sort of military school uniform. He took the name Curtis Roosevelt at some cost because his uncles, my mother's brothers, felt he wasn't entitled to it.

**0:16:24 Debra Schwartz:** Okay, your mother's name is Anna.

**0:16:28 John Boettiger:** Anna.

**0:16:29 Debra Schwartz:** Right, Anna. And your uncle's names were, from oldest to youngest?

**0:16:33 John Boettiger:** From oldest to youngest: James (Jimmy), who was a marine in the war, Elliot, Franklin Jr., and John.

**0:16:54 Debra Schwartz:** And those boys felt that the name had to be —

**0:16:56 John Boettiger:** Oh, it had to be deeply inscribed, if not tattooed, on him. [chuckles]

**0:17:02 Debra Schwartz:** Not very helpful for a fellow who's not feeling exactly here nor there.

**0:17:08 John Boettiger:** Absolutely. Right. Yes.

**0:17:10 Debra Schwartz:** Ouch. And then your other brother, you have one older?

**0:17:12 John Boettiger:** No. Curtis died a couple of years ago.

**0:17:18 Debra Schwartz:** Sorry.

**0:17:21 John Boettiger:** Living in France.

**0:17:22 Debra Schwartz:** But he did settle with Roosevelt at the end?

**0:17:24 John Boettiger:** He did, yes. And his widow still bears the name. But my mother's first child was one of the Anna Eleanors.

**0:17:38 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, right, yeah.

**0:17:40 John Boettiger:** And in their White House years, in the early and middle '30s, they lived in the White House, and they were known to the public as Sistie and Buzzie.

**0:17:56 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, my goodness. [laughs]

**0:18:00 Debra Schwartz:** Sistie and Buzzie.

**0:18:00 John Boettiger:** Sistie and Buzzie, And I don't think either one of them quite lived that down. I still call my sister, Sis.

**0:18:09 Debra Schwartz:** Yes.

**0:18:10 John Boettiger:** Although her name is Ellie.

**0:18:12 Debra Schwartz:** So you had the two older half siblings?

**0:18:14 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:18:15 Debra Schwartz:** And then there's you?

**0:18:17 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:18:18 Debra Schwartz:** The namesake of your father.

**0:18:19 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:18:20 Debra Schwartz:** And then you have, who else? Who's after you?

**0:18:26 John Boettiger:** Well, four sons. No, sorry. [chuckles] My daughter would perk up her ears. Three sons and a daughter. And they're now adults and wonderful adults.

**0:18:44 Debra Schwartz:** And these are your children?

**0:18:45 John Boettiger:** These are my children.

**0:18:46 Debra Schwartz:** Yeah. But with your mother, the children she had in total?

**0:18:51 John Boettiger:** She had three.

**0:18:52 Debra Schwartz:** Three. Oh, three in total.

**0:18:54 John Boettiger:** Right.

**0:18:54 Debra Schwartz:** Somehow I thought there were more.

**0:18:56 John Boettiger:** No.

**0:18:57 Debra Schwartz:** And then you've had four. So you've done your part to keep the population up.

**0:19:00 John Boettiger:** [chuckles] Right, right.

**0:19:00 Debra Schwartz:** And your children's names are?

**0:19:02 John Boettiger:** My children's names, starting with the eldest, are Adam, whom my wife and I named Adam because we were at that point in the mood to create a new enterprise, a new family. [chuckles]

**0:19:19 Debra Schwartz:** So it's biblical.

**0:19:21 John Boettiger:** Not burdened with parental presence. The one person I knew in my father's family was his brother Bill. So I called Uncle Bill and I said, "Guess what Uncle Bill, we've just had a son and we've named him Adam." And Bill said, "Oh, after your grandfather, Adam and his father, Adam." [laughs]

**0:19:51 John Boettiger:** I had no idea that I had a grandfather and a great grandfather named Adam Boettiger.

**0:19:54 Debra Schwartz:** Darn. [chuckles] You just can't get away from the family name.

**0:19:58 John Boettiger:** Yeah.

**0:20:01 Debra Schwartz:** So you've got Adam.

**0:20:01 John Boettiger:** So Adam, Sara, really named in honor of, or imitation of, my grandfather's mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt.

**0:20:14 Debra Schwartz:** Right, the infamous mother of the president.

**0:20:16 John Boettiger:** That's right.

**0:20:18 Debra Schwartz:** Yes.

**0:20:18 John Boettiger:** I think she got that air of infamy through being a powerful patrician presence not because she was in any sense cruel to her progeny or in general to others. She was a thoughtful and kind person.

**0:20:36 Debra Schwartz:** Yes. It's interesting how that kind of influence, when it's powerful, can be twisted.

**0:20:44 John Boettiger:** Yes, it's true.

**0:20:45 Debra Schwartz:** Okay, so you have Adam and Sara?

**0:20:47 John Boettiger:** Adam and Sara and the third, Joshua. We weren't consciously looking for a name from the Torah and a name from the New Testament but that's what we ended up with.

**0:21:07 Debra Schwartz:** So who in the family is named Joshua? Or is this a first time? [chuckles]

**0:21:11 John Boettiger:** Joshua lives in Ashland, Oregon and is a rabbi.

**0:21:16 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, I googled your name and saw him, and I thought, "It can't possibly be a part of the family." Your son's a rabbi.

**0:21:21 John Boettiger:** Yes! He's a congregational rabbi in Ashland.

**0:21:27 Debra Schwartz:** Mazel tov. [chuckles]

**0:21:30 John Boettiger:** Thank you. He just also finished a master of fine arts in poetry in Oregon. And I think his hope is to gradually move away from the 24/7 demands of a congregational rabbi and become a teacher of poetry and an adviser to Jewish students.

**0:22:01 Debra Schwartz:** Yeah, there's a long tradition of that in the Jewish religion. That shouldn't be too hard.

**0:22:04 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:22:06 Debra Schwartz:** And then your fourth?

**0:22:08 John Boettiger:** My fourth child, the New Testament child, was Paul. Not Paul of Tarsus, but Paul Boettiger. Paul lives in Petaluma, not far from here. He's not married, but he is a designer, an enormously talented designer, of the interiors of homes and furniture. And he also, like Joshua with his MFA in poetry, is in the midst of one of these increasingly common mid-career changes of career. He's also an artist of, I think, great talent in charcoal and in oil. And I encouraged him a year ago, not quite a year ago,

to have a show. He had a show in Sebastopol. He sold six of his pieces. I don't think it's going to change his profession, but I think he sees it as a kind of co-profession.

**0:23:33 Debra Schwartz:** So before we move on to when you grew up and your school and more about your family and what brought you to Mill Valley, let us not forget the co-creator of this lovely family that is your wife.

**0:23:44 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:23:45 Debra Schwartz:** And her name?

**0:23:47 John Boettiger:** Actually, I have to admit. I have had four.

**0:23:51 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, my.

**0:23:53 John Boettiger:** So, Adam and Sara were born of the same mother, my first wife. And Joshua and Paul were born to my second wife, Janet. That's why I said to the third of my ex-wives [chuckles] the other day, she reminded me that I had said, "I'm a better friend than a husband." And she said to herself, "I think I can change that." And I think, sadly, she didn't.

**0:24:43 Debra Schwartz:** Well, let us go back, because you know when you study the Roosevelt family and you learn about the Roosevelt family, always included in the story is the interpersonal dynamics between the push and pull of the public life, the private life, the relationships found and lost, the love, the heartbreak, the challenge, everything. You have such a family history. In particular, I think about your grandmother Eleanor and the lonely childhood that — I didn't know her of course. I remember reading about her in college many years ago and being struck by her childhood, which included loss of her parents and a certain sense of alienation. And then Franklin Roosevelt who had the most unusual, wonderful relationship with his mother, Sara.

**0:25:43 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:25:44 Debra Schwartz:** And then everything in between, the life you lead when you're in the public eye. Your grandparents were glamorous and known everywhere in the world. Your grandfather had four terms, died in his fourth term being in the public eye. Everyone watched your grandmother basically grow up, starting with the presidency and politics, and then become somebody really that she hadn't been when she was young. There's all these evolutions. And it's all fueled by heart, it seems to me — if I can be so arrogant to say — fueled by heart, ambition, and also a sense of duty.

**0:26:30 John Boettiger:** Yes, in both cases. I think the word that my grandmother would be most comfortable in using in expressing her own fundamental commitment was to be useful. It seemed like a plain word, but her determination was to really contribute to improving the quality of the lives of those who were either too poor or who needed assistance. She was a founder of a community, Arthurdale. She was a strong civil rights

supporter. I travelled with her in Europe quite a lot. I remember one incident in which I was at a conference in Berlin —

**0:27:50 Debra Schwartz:** What year was this?

**0:27:50 John Boettiger:** Oh, maybe 1960, when I graduated from college. I was at a conference on the United Nations in Berlin, and I had a call from my grandmother who said, “Johnny, I’m having lunch tomorrow in Brussels with Harry Belafonte and I’d like you to be there.” And I said my name for her, which was Grand-mère. (She learned French before she learned English.) I said, “Grand-mère, I’m in the middle of a conference in Berlin. I don’t have any idea how to get myself out tomorrow.” And she said, “I really want you to be there.” [laughs]

**0:28:47 Debra Schwartz:** I guess you couldn’t really say no to someone like her.

**0:28:50 John Boettiger:** I could not say no. And so I managed to find an ancient DC3 — a relic of World War II — that had been bought by Polish Airlines and was decked out in a kind of Victorian tassel kind of decoration.

**0:29:12 Debra Schwartz:** Gaudy. [chuckles]

**0:29:13 John Boettiger:** And it got me to Brussels. But there was fog and the plane was descending, and all of a sudden I looked out the window and I would see telephone poles flashing by. So suddenly we would turn up. It turned out that the Polish pilot spoke neither English nor French, which were the universal languages of people trying to talk airplanes into landing. You couldn’t do it in those days all by radar, but he did land successfully.

**0:29:51 Debra Schwartz:** You’re like, “What? I’m going to die.”

**0:29:52 John Boettiger:** I did have lunch with my grandmother and Harry Belafonte, which I loved. [chuckles]

**0:30:00 Debra Schwartz:** So, in your life — you were born in 1939, correct?

**0:30:07 John Boettiger:** Mm-hmm.

**0:30:07 Debra Schwartz:** At what point do you become aware that you’re born into really an American royal family in a sense, that the people that you know every day are not like most parents of your childhood friends?

**0:30:28 John Boettiger:** I think it happened gradually. My grandfather came for a few visits to Seattle when he was campaigning, mostly. My grandmother came more frequently. One of my treasured pictures is of my grandmother holding her daughter’s hand, my mother’s hand, when she was giving birth to me.

**0:30:56 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, that's sweet.

**0:30:58 John Boettiger:** It really was.

**0:31:01 Debra Schwartz:** Because back then, often women were alone in a birthing room and under the care of a physician. That kind of familiarity would not necessarily have happened.

**0:31:09 John Boettiger:** My grandmother understood that, and she tried — I don't know if she really was at every birth of every grandchild, but she really believed in it.

**0:31:21 Debra Schwartz:** Do you think that her childhood disappointments, or her loneliness, was a driving force in her desire to attend to the concerns and the ills of others? Or is this just a family trait?

**0:31:37 John Boettiger:** That's an interesting thought. I think that she grew up without a mother who loved her deeply, a mother who called her "Granny" because she acted in her mother's observation like an old person.

**0:32:07 Debra Schwartz:** So she was one of those old souls, very young.

**0:32:09 John Boettiger:** One of those old souls, very young, but her commitment to the poor led to her coming into her own as an independent person in her adult life. I think the people who most influenced her were Louis Howe, who was one of my grandfather's closest colleagues, assistants, and Harry Hopkins, who lived in the White House and undertook various wartime missions for FDR. She listened to them. Initially, when she was a young adult, she had a very squeaky voice, not one that made for easy public service, but they coached her, and she came to speak in public with an eloquence that astonished me.

**0:33:13 Debra Schwartz:** She had almost as a British sort of a voice. Yes.

**0:33:16 John Boettiger:** Yes. Well, she went to school at Allenswood, a British public — that is private — school. And the headmistress of Allenswood, Marie Souvestre, was French and took her on several trips and taught her really well, before Louis Howe and Harry Hopkins, to be her own person. And she grew up, I think even before the White House years, to be an independent human being. Their relationship — what could I say about Franklin and Eleanor's relationship that hasn't already been said? Nothing, but they were close without being intimate. She traveled a lot during the war for the Red Cross. During the years that my mother and I lived in the White House, she was mostly gone so I didn't come to know my grandmother intimately until —

**0:34:36 Debra Schwartz:** How old were you when you were living in the White House as a child? From what age?

**0:34:41 John Boettiger:** From age three to six, all war years, until my grandfather died.

**0:34:49 Debra Schwartz:** And your other siblings with you?

**0:34:52 John Boettiger:** No, my older siblings were away at boarding school most of the time so they weren't there. I was the only child living in the White House during World War II. And it was a mix of a gifted time. I could command the White House theater to be a little Cecil B. DeMille and show cartoons as much as I wished. I could walk or march with the White House guards. I could swim in the White House pool with my grandfather. He would take me up on his lap to read the funny papers in the early morning. It was in all of those senses a gift, but it was also a time of loneliness because I was the only child there.

**0:35:54 Debra Schwartz:** They didn't bring children in? There were no employees with children?

**0:36:00 John Boettiger:** No, no. Well, there may have been, but they didn't live in the White House. The employees that helped to care for me didn't bring their spouses with them, so I had an entire third floor of the White House — I and my caretakers, my nurses, — to myself. I remember a picture, a photograph of myself during those years of me standing, probably five years old, in a fountain that was empty of water, and it seemed to me to express the shadow side of those years in the White House. When my grandfather died, I heard it. I had a simple staphylococcus infection, but in those days, penicillin had just been invented because of the war. And so it was chancy, and oddly enough, when FDR went to Warm Springs — he'd been accompanied to Yalta, the last of his wartime conferences, by my mother. And when he returned, he went to restore himself at his second home in Warm Springs, Georgia, which he established as a recuperative center for those with polio. Everyone expected him to return restored, but I remember being in the naval hospital in Bethesda, Maryland and —

**0:38:06 Debra Schwartz:** You yourself sick? You were sick in the naval hospital?

**0:38:10 John Boettiger:** I'm sick in the naval hospital in Bethesda, my grandfather is supposedly recuperating. My grandmother and my mother did not accompany him to Warm Springs because the family was more worried about me than they were about him. So I heard on the radio beside my bed in the hospital that my grandfather had died and I couldn't — I mean, the talk was of the president, and I couldn't — my name for him was PaPa, and I couldn't quite identify — maybe I wouldn't identify that announcement with him. So it wasn't until later in that day that I learned from my mother that indeed it was my grandfather who had died.

**0:39:05 Debra Schwartz:** So interesting to hear you tell the story because I'm looking at you and your eyes, there really is a family resemblance.

**0:39:12 John Boettiger:** Is there?

**0:39:13 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, there really is.

**0:39:17 John Boettiger:** Well, probably also on the Boettiger side.

**0:39:22 Debra Schwartz:** So you're living now, your grandfather dies, and that will be the last time any president will have four terms. The law changed after that.

**0:39:35 John Boettiger:** His tenure, I think, was responsible for the constitutional amendment that limited a president to two successive terms.

**0:39:44 Debra Schwartz:** Did people think he just basically worked himself to death?

**0:39:48 John Boettiger:** Yes. He was 63 when he died, much younger than I am now, and I think he was as much a casualty of the war as anyone who died at Normandy or elsewhere in the war.

**0:40:09 Debra Schwartz:** Were you able to perceive at that young age the burden of the presidency and the political situation?

**0:40:18 John Boettiger:** No.

**0:40:19 Debra Schwartz:** Did you have any idea at all what had been going on? Did you have family discussions at the dinner table of politics and —

**0:40:23 John Boettiger:** Always, discussions of politics at the dinner table. A Roosevelt dinner table was something of a ruckus affair. I remember at one point, probably it was Thanksgiving — it could have been Christmas — my grandfather was carving a turkey and he was at one end of this long table. I was at the other end and he said, "Johnny, I think I remember you would prefer a drumstick." And I said, "Yes PaPa." And he said, "Okay, here it comes." Now, he had a butler standing right next to him with a silver tray but he flipped it [chuckles], the length of the table. His aim was perfect, I lifted a linen napkin and managed to catch it. [chuckles] That's something of the fun, but also the seriousness, of political discussion around a White House dinner table.

**0:41:44 Debra Schwartz:** Did you feel growing up that it was going to be a requirement of you to participate in a public way? Did you integrate the family ethic of serving through your grandmother's efforts and your grandfather's?

**0:42:02 John Boettiger:** It's a good question. There were two of us in my generation who were identified within the family — God knows how that happened — as potentially holders of public office. I was one, and my cousin Frank, who was FDR III and who's a year older than I, was the second. And we both chose to be academics. So, it never occurred to me really. I mean, I was involved in public affairs, like the United Nations association that I served in with my grandmother, but I was never tempted by public

office. I think I saw too much of the distressed impact of public life on the family life of those in positions of public service, and I know it was very hard for my father. But I think in her own way for all of her accomplishments, it was hard also for my mother and her brothers. So, in any event, I became a psychologist.

**0:43:37 Debra Schwartz:** So where did you end up going to college?

**0:43:41 John Boettiger:** I went to Amherst College, which, in those days, was very unplanned. I think I went to Amherst College because we were invited to lunch by the president of the college.

**0:43:56 Debra Schwartz:** We being? Who's we?

**0:44:01 John Boettiger:** We being my mother, and by then my stepfather. I was pleased that the president of the college would invite us [chuckles] so as you can tell how little that being a Roosevelt had worn off on me. Well, I say that and yet it's only half true. My college years at Amherst were full of a sense that much was expected of me and that I would be looked at by my professors as a Roosevelt and needed to meet an impossible standard. I remember going home early in the first year for Thanksgiving, and my mother was rubbing my back as I was going to sleep, and I said, "Mummy, I really am having a hard time this year, I think I'm going to join the Army."

**0:45:16 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, my. Oops. Just what a mother wants to hear. [chuckles]

**0:45:27 John Boettiger:** She said, gently enough but firmly, "I don't think that's a very good idea. I think if you return to Amherst, you'll do just fine."

**0:45:36 Debra Schwartz:** Do you think she made a call?

**0:45:39 John Boettiger:** I think she made a call. I think she knew what she was talking about, because it's true that when I went home, or when I came back to college, I'd let go of a lot of those expectations that I imagined other people had and became a good student.

**0:46:05 Debra Schwartz:** I'm smiling thinking of your mother rubbing your back for those that don't see you as I do. You're really tall. [chuckles] You're a big boy, I'm sure you were a big boy back then too.

**0:46:13 John Boettiger:** I was already a big boy, yes.

**0:46:15 Debra Schwartz:** So, she's talking to her big boy, and I'm sure you would have made a very fine looking soldier.

**0:46:22 John Boettiger:** I might have. [chuckles]

**0:46:23 Debra Schwartz:** She would have not wanted that. So you went back to Amherst. Tell me a little bit more, because we're going to include, too, I know you have to get going, but we want to include what brought you here to Mill Valley and your experiences here in Mill Valley as well. But your life is so very interesting. And you have such an interesting life on your own accomplishments, in your professional life. So tell me a little bit more about how it went for you, you went to Amherst, you studied —

**0:46:57 John Boettiger:** I went to Amherst and I returned there to teach — a callow, young faculty member. I wasn't yet tenured, but it was a tenured track position, and in the middle of that first year I got wind through a classmate of mine of that the consortium of the four college — Smith College, Mt. Holyoke College, Amherst College, and the University of Massachusetts — was going to add a new college. I think it had as much to do with their not wanting to innovate too much themselves, and I was excited by that prospect. It turned out to be named Hampshire College after Hampshire County, but it was a remarkably innovative college, and I was its first faculty member.

**0:48:10 Debra Schwartz:** How old were you?

**0:48:12 John Boettiger:** I was in my maybe mid to late 20s.

**0:48:17 Debra Schwartz:** So we're talking '39, '49, '59 — this is in the early '60s.

**0:48:21 John Boettiger:** Yeah. It was in the late '50s and the early '60s. Hampshire College opened in 1960. That was a very yeasty time with the creation of all kinds of things that you know.

**0:48:37 Debra Schwartz:** Yeasty, I like that, the way to describe it, a very yeasty time. I know exactly what you're saying.

**0:48:41 John Boettiger:** Yes. And of all of the experiments in higher education that were undertaken during that time, Hampshire is the only one that not only still stands, but it has maintained its experimental character. It's a college in which students have a much greater role in determining the nature of their exploration, their focus, what other colleges would call their major. [chuckles]

**0:49:21 Debra Schwartz:** You had studied psychology, you're a psychology professor by trade?

**0:49:26 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**0:49:27 Debra Schwartz:** Did you practice psychology?

**0:49:28 John Boettiger:** Only marginally. I was really a teaching psychologist. I had a small practice. But predominantly I was a teaching psychologist, and my mentors, who really shaped my life as a psychologist, were Erik and Joan Erikson.

**0:50:00 Debra Schwartz:** Erik Erikson?

**0:50:01 John Boettiger:** Yes. Erik really wrote the book on human development, especially human development as a whole life cycle phenomenon. His students at Harvard used to call his course, “From Womb to Tomb.” [chuckles]

**0:50:21 Debra Schwartz:** At this point in your life, you’re perched in the ’60s at a moment when it’s after World War II and social change — you can hear the drum beats in the distance. You’re in a more progressive environment and you’ve got a lens through which to view the world. You’re obviously a thoughtful person, introspective too, it appears. Did you ever, at that point in your adulthood, turn the lens in on yourself and your family experiences, and view your family history and the impact that your family had had on the nation, with a different eye?

**0:51:00 John Boettiger:** I do, I do. I think that’s been a slow, but continuous part of my life. It’s still there. Whenever I can manage to meet one of my favorite cousins like Frank, I will do so. We stay in touch. My wife and I — this is my last wife [chuckles] — we were fellow psychologists at this brilliant healing community in Norway, north and slightly west of Oslo. Both of us had come as consultants to Norway prior to that time. But we kept coming back to this place, which was called Modum Bad. Modum Bad in Norwegian means the “baths at Modum,” because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a spa.

**0:52:14 Debra Schwartz:** There were a lot of spas, because there was a lot of TB.

**0:52:16 John Boettiger:** True.

**0:52:19 Debra Schwartz:** And other illnesses, right?

**0:52:20 John Boettiger:** Right. But in 1957 it was bought by two psychiatrists who turned it into, I think, the most extraordinary healing community that I’ve ever known. Its centerpiece was a hospital, which one would call a mental hospital, but it bore so little resemblance to the hospitals in which I was trained in this country. No locked wards. We had some limits because of that on the kind of patients we would accept. But we also, in addition to patients who are hospitalized, had little pods, little mini communities on the campus that served as antidotes to burnout for people in particular professions — physicians, nurses, pastors. So it was not simply a mental hospital, even in the wonderful sense in which that hospital was. That’s why I called it a healing community rather than just a hospital. We fitted perfectly because my wife —

**0:54:04 Debra Schwartz:** Her name?

**0:54:05 John Boettiger:** Leigh McCullough. Leigh, when we met, was a member of the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. I was still at Hampshire College and we corresponded for at least a month before we met. By that time, I had gained a little wisdom about how you do adult relationships.

**0:54:40 Debra Schwartz:** With three behind you.

**0:54:43 John Boettiger:** With three behind me, that's right. [chuckles] So we loved going to Norway because her passion was research. She really wanted to understand what makes psychotherapy tick, what makes it succeed and what makes it fail. That was her passion. And so she became the head of the Research Institute, which is still probably one of the leading institutes of research in psychology in the world. Because I made very close Norwegian friends, I continued to read the manuscripts of the doctors, the clinicians, who were responsible in the hospital or in one of those pods. And it's terrific research. What I do is something that Leigh called "English washing." At some point you may publish initially in a Norwegian journal, but in order to really have your work seen, you really need to publish in an internationally known journal in the field. And there, the quality — I mean Norwegians are taught to learn English when they're probably two or three years old, so they're excellent speakers of English. But they don't really have the kind of polish —

**0:56:25 Debra Schwartz:** The nuances.

**0:56:26 John Boettiger:** Leigh called it English washing, and I still do too.

**0:56:31 Debra Schwartz:** Interesting. Because in your family, there's so much of the social ills that your grandmother attended to and your grandfather with the New Deal and the ways that he could help to restore the health of the nation, and you are doing something similar on an individual basis, and with your different viewpoint.

**0:56:48 John Boettiger:** Yes, it's true.

**0:56:51 Debra Schwartz:** Interesting. Now, you've lived in Norway, you've grown up in Hyde Park and the White House and Seattle — in all these places — but we are sitting in the library in Mill Valley.

**0:57:06 John Boettiger:** That's right.

**0:57:07 Debra Schwartz:** How in the world did you come to Mill Valley?

**0:57:10 John Boettiger:** It's both a sad story and with a wonderful ending. Leigh was on a speaking tour, which we were accustomed to make, both together and individually. She was on a speaking tour in the United States and she suddenly developed symptoms in which she could no longer speak.

**0:57:39 Debra Schwartz:** That is something that happens with a particular condition where you lose the ability to speak or use your voice well.

**0:57:46 John Boettiger:** That's right. So she learned. I said, "Get a second opinion." We were on a transatlantic, transcontinental, telephone: "Please get a second opinion because the first opinion is ALS."

**0:58:02 Debra Schwartz:** And I suspect the second opinion too.

**0:58:04 John Boettiger:** It was confirmed by the second opinion. So I just put whatever I could find in a suitcase and came to join her. And I've since gone back to Modum Bad two or three, maybe more, times, and gathered more of my belongings, our belongings. But when Leigh died —

**0:58:35 Debra Schwartz:** How long did she last?

**0:58:36 John Boettiger:** She lasted for three years.

**0:58:38 Debra Schwartz:** Three to five years, I think, is a projected survival rate once you've been diagnosed, so it must've been pretty aggressive.

**0:58:46 John Boettiger:** Yeah, it is a vicious disease. She was hospitalized in Cambridge. We had a home nearby in Dedham, Massachusetts, and when she was near death, two of my sons and I gathered in the living room of that home and confronted the question of where I should go when she dies. And one of my sons, the youngest, Paul, had visited the mother of a friend, maybe the grandmother of a friend, at the Redwoods. I had no idea what The Redwoods was. I did, by that time, know something about living in a community in Norway, but Paul said, "Dad, you've been teaching about community for over 20 years, and you've only just scratched the surface of understanding what you were teaching about." [laughs]

**1:00:01 Debra Schwartz:** Time for your field study, class. [laughs]

**1:00:03 John Boettiger:** Right, right. So they suggested The Redwoods and I asked them —

**1:00:09 Debra Schwartz:** So they took a family vote and —

**1:00:11 John Boettiger:** Right, right. Both of them.

**1:00:16 Debra Schwartz:** Is anybody living in the vicinity?

**1:00:20 John Boettiger:** Well, at that point, I think all of my family, all of my four children, were living as adults in the Pacific Northwest, as they still do. So one of the joys and reasons that I accepted with such alacrity was that I could be close. We had lived in Seattle — in Lake Washington, Mercer Island — when I was a child, and now all of a sudden I could live as a father, grandfather, and now a great grandfather with my children and their children and their children in Mill Valley.

**1:01:03 Debra Schwartz:** Mercer Island only with way better weather. [laughs]

**1:01:07 John Boettiger:** That's right. Exactly.

**1:01:09 Debra Schwartz:** So you came. Did you preview the Redwoods before you came?

**1:01:15 John Boettiger:** No, no.

**1:01:15 Debra Schwartz:** You just jumped.

**1:01:16 John Boettiger:** I asked Paul to take some pictures, but you don't learn a lot from pictures, so I really —

**1:01:23 Debra Schwartz:** So what year did you come? You came as a single man with a suitcase.

**1:01:26 John Boettiger:** I came seven years ago, with maybe a couple of suitcases.

**1:01:31 Debra Schwartz:** And so you were in your early 70s, then?

**1:01:34 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**1:01:34 Debra Schwartz:** You were young.

**1:01:35 John Boettiger:** I was young for the Redwoods, whose average age has climbed over the years. I think it's now in the mid to late 80s.

**1:01:50 Debra Schwartz:** Female dominant too.

**1:01:52 John Boettiger:** And female dominant, yes.

**1:01:55 Debra Schwartz:** So you walked into your new home. Did you feel like you were just entering Amherst for the first year?

**1:02:00 John Boettiger:** No, no. [laughs] I felt like a stranger initially.

**1:02:05 Debra Schwartz:** You were a stranger in a strange land.

**1:02:07 John Boettiger:** A stranger in a strange land.

**1:02:07 Debra Schwartz:** And you were heart sick.

**1:02:08 John Boettiger:** Yeah, I was.

**1:02:10 Debra Schwartz:** And I imagine quite exhausted after the last three years caring for Leigh.

**1:02:15 John Boettiger:** Yes, exactly.

**1:02:15 Debra Schwartz:** Psychologically and physically.

**1:02:18 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**1:02:19 Debra Schwartz:** Maybe you were in need of a little recuperation yourself.

**1:02:23 John Boettiger:** I think that's right. I did go back when Leigh died. Leigh had two children from an earlier marriage, and I stayed in close touch with them as long as I could. But her daughter, who would have been the one to organize a memorial service, was not, for a variety of reasons, able to do so. And I was sorry about that. But here I was living on the West Coast, and if Leigh had had a memorial service it would be around Cambridge where she had spent most of her adult life. So Modum Bad, this wonderful healing community in Norway said, "We would love to have a memorial service for your wife and we'll combine it with a seminar on the character and quality of her work." So it was beautifully done in both dimensions, such a wonderful learning experience. But in a way, it wasn't a burial. It was bringing to a conclusion a period of my life. So when I came West, when I came to Mill Valley, when I came to the Redwoods, it was with relatively a sense of freedom, and I find that in some ways I'm practicing a lot of what I practiced when I was teaching. I don't have a psychological practice anymore, but I do teach courses at The Redwoods, in which The Redwoods is rich. And I have a lot of really good friends, and that's made a huge difference.

**1:04:49 Debra Schwartz:** Here in Mill Valley and in Marin County, the Roosevelt family is very important of course — indirectly — in that that we have Muir Woods because of Teddy Roosevelt.

**1:05:01 John Boettiger:** Yes, and there's a grove at Muir Woods that's named in honor of Franklin Roosevelt.

**1:05:08 Debra Schwartz:** Mm-hmm. And as I recall, if I get my history right, that Teddy lost his beloved mother and wife the same day.

**1:05:18 John Boettiger:** That's right.

**1:05:19 Debra Schwartz:** And heartsick and physically unwell, he went west to work on the cattle ranch, I guess, and regained his health. And because of that experience, he created the Antiquities Act.

**1:05:34 John Boettiger:** Yes, I think that's right.

**1:05:34 Debra Schwartz:** Which would give the beginning of the national park system as we know it. Because as I understand from the Ken Burns show, actually now that I'm thinking about it, Teddy Roosevelt had always had health issues, but being outside and working outside, even after this gutting loss, had strengthened him, so he knew the value of the outdoor and the wilderness.

**1:06:00 John Boettiger:** Absolutely.

**1:06:00 Debra Schwartz:** And it was William Kent, who owned the property where Muir Woods is, who wrote the letter to Teddy Roosevelt, fearful that the old redwood growth would be taken —

**1:06:12 John Boettiger:** Would be taken as commercial property. Really? I didn't know that.

**1:06:17 Debra Schwartz:** They were going to access the water potentially to create a dam and also take the trees down to rebuild after the burned in 1906. It was Teddy Roosevelt who accepted the land as a gift and created the first park for living things ever in the United States.

**1:06:41 John Boettiger:** That's right.

**1:06:42 Debra Schwartz:** From a sense of loss and recovery, and coming to the West into this beautiful, natural world — as I'm interviewing you, I'm looking out to the redwood trees outside the window of the library. So, you have a very important family presence here in Mill Valley.

**1:07:05 John Boettiger:** Well, I came to The Redwoods with a feeling that maybe I could slip in without anybody really taking note of the fact that I was a Roosevelt because my name is John Boettiger. The fact that my middle name started with an R —

**1:07:26 Debra Schwartz:** I always notice always the initial.

**1:07:30 John Boettiger:** It's always the initial. But The Redwoods, the generation of The Redwoods, was the generation that knew the Roosevelts.

**1:07:40 Debra Schwartz:** No riding, no hiding.

**1:07:40 John Boettiger:** Knew better than anybody else.

**1:07:43 Debra Schwartz:** There would be people who may have been reading about the turkey being flung across the table.

**1:07:49 John Boettiger:** Maybe so.

**1:07:50 Debra Schwartz:** Or who knows what else.

**1:07:51 John Boettiger:** I don't know. I think that was a private dinner.

**1:07:53 Debra Schwartz:** We also we have here in our town evidence of the New Deal.

**1:07:58 John Boettiger:** That's true.

**1:08:00 Debra Schwartz:** Shall we talk about the Living New Deal?

**1:08:01 John Boettiger:** Sure. The Living New Deal is a wonderful organization. It was started by two professors of geography at UC Berkeley as an organization that would collect New Deal sites, New Deal buildings, camps of the Civilian Conservation Corps. The website of the Living New Deal, probably called [livingnewdeal.org](http://livingnewdeal.org), is testimony to its success. It's limited itself as it needs to be to the United States, but it has catalogued and illustrated more — first in San Francisco then in New York, and then throughout the country — every building made by the Works Progress Administration, by any of the New Deal agencies. They asked me to join the advisory board of the Living New Deal, which I was happy to do.

**1:09:30 Debra Schwartz:** So they knew you were here?

**1:09:34 John Boettiger:** They did know I was here. Yes. Right. [chuckles]

**1:09:38 Debra Schwartz:** They found you.

**1:09:42 John Boettiger:** I think I was easier to find than I had imagined.

**1:09:50 Debra Schwartz:** Gray Brechin is going to be speaking at the Mill Valley Historical Society's first Wednesday in September and I hope you will come.

**1:09:55 John Boettiger:** Thank you.

**1:09:56 Debra Schwartz:** Here in Mill Valley we have the Cushing Theater, we have Park School, part of Tam High. I know of the reinforcement on Mt. Tam by the CCC of creeks and streams. There's a great influence in Mill Valley of the CCC and the original New Deal, which was your grandfather.

**1:10:18 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**1:10:24 Debra Schwartz:** This is a hypothetical question, of course, but how do you think your grandfather would see the state of affairs socially right now?

**1:10:34 John Boettiger:** Socially or politically?

**1:10:36 Debra Schwartz:** I mean, politically.

**1:10:37 John Boettiger:** He'd be appalled — that goes without saying — by the federal government presided over by Donald Trump. It sounds like maybe too much family [bias], but as a scholar as much as a grandson I regard Franklin Roosevelt as one of three or four most accomplished presidents in our history. He would, were he — and

as you say it's hypothetical — but were he working in the world of politics today, I think he would do his best to strengthen the spine and the quality of thought and commitment of the Democratic Party. I don't know that he would be particularly pleased with the Democrats we've just elected to the Congress, because he was not a middle-of-the-roader. He was a genuine progressive. He modeled his career on his cousin Teddy. Franklin Roosevelt was assistant secretary of the Navy, governor of New York — and it was as if he occupied at least a significant number of the posts before he ran for president that his cousin Theodore had.

**1:12:36 Debra Schwartz:** So he was a trained politician?

**1:12:39 John Boettiger:** Yes, exactly.

**1:12:44 Debra Schwartz:** Do you ever have people come up to you, knowing you are who you are, and start railing about politics? [laughs]

**1:12:53 John Boettiger:** Rarely.

**1:12:54 Debra Schwartz:** Rarely?

**1:12:54 John Boettiger:** Rarely. My friends at The Redwoods know that I am a Roosevelt, so I will pass one who is being wheeled in a wheelchair by a member of the staff and I could hear him in the back telling the member of the staff, "Do you know? That's the grandson of President Franklin Roosevelt." [laughs] So I take it now in course. It doesn't have any of the ambivalence that I felt when I was a freshman in college.

**1:13:35 Debra Schwartz:** Yes. I suppose that coming from a family like yours you have a choice to feel inadequate or you can be just very proud.

**1:13:49 John Boettiger:** Mm-hmm. That's a very thoughtful way of putting it.

**1:13:52 Debra Schwartz:** You talked about your community at The Redwoods, which fascinates me by the way. Before we end this interview, can you tell me a little bit about what it is for you to live in community at The Redwoods? What does that mean practically?

**1:14:08 John Boettiger:** It means practically that although each of us at The Redwoods has a small apartment, and each apartment looks out on a greensward — it could be a view of Mt. Tam, in my case, it's of a beautiful courtyard into which —

**1:14:30 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, you're looking at the inner courtyard?

**1:14:30 John Boettiger:** I'm looking out at the inner courtyard, but it's full of birch and redwoods and maple trees.

**1:14:38 Debra Schwartz:** That courtyard is awfully nice.

**1:14:40 John Boettiger:** It's beautiful. When it rains, which it does too little in Mill Valley, the courtyard is where the egrets come to feed and to get out of the wind. The community is very warm and actually, intellectually, it includes some very impressive people, retired professors from Stanford, from UC Berkeley, people who've come from longer distances than I would imagine, except I came from a relatively long distance myself. [chuckles]

**1:15:34 Debra Schwartz:** Buskerud County, Norway. [laughs] So you feel like you're among a community of individuals with whom you can express your academic interests and have fulfilling conversations?

**1:15:49 John Boettiger:** I do, yes.

**1:15:51 Debra Schwartz:** Are you surprised by that?

**1:15:54 John Boettiger:** Well, I think I was initially surprised by that, that there were a couple of groups whose titles suggested something about their content — one called Searching for Meaning, another called Inter-Spiritual Inquiry — that reflect my interest, not only as a clinical psychologist or developmental psychologist — I was trained in both — but my interest in the relationship between the psyche maybe more narrowly confined, and the spiritual life of those, in my case, who were my colleagues and friends at The Redwoods. Who knows where else I might have ended up, but if I was living by myself in a little apartment somewhere, I would lack all of that richness of companionship that I've enjoyed for seven years now. I'm planning to continue.

**1:17:26 Debra Schwartz:** So you started out in the White House, and you're ending up in The Redwoods. [laughs] Now I'm going to ask you, and this is maybe an unfair question, but how does the food compare?

**1:17:37 John Boettiger:** Actually, it's not a bad question because the food at The Redwoods is probably a more balanced diet deliberately to sustain the health of a relatively elderly population. During my years at the White House, the cook was named Mrs. Nesbitt, and this is published information, so it's no surprise. And Mrs. Nesbitt was a cranky lady who would make whatever she was inclined to make and she would consult with my grandmother or my grandfather, but neither of them had a primary interest in food. My grandfather loved to carve as that story —

**1:18:46 Debra Schwartz:** Carve and throw.

**1:18:47 John Boettiger:** Carve and throw, right. My grandmother really couldn't be less interested. Actually, my grandfather could cook one thing: brussel sprouts.

**1:19:03 Debra Schwartz:** Oh! Yum.

**1:19:05 John Boettiger:** Yeah, and my grandmother could make one thing: scrambled eggs.

**1:19:11 Debra Schwartz:** Not a good mix, the two of them.

**1:19:11 John Boettiger:** No, no, no, not a good mix.

**1:19:15 Debra Schwartz:** Oh my.

**1:19:17 John Boettiger:** But probably better than Mrs. Nesbitt. [laughs]

**1:19:22 Debra Schwartz:** Finally, as we're getting ready to close this up, I have to ask you, you've met so many people in the course of your life, I'm sure, can you give me a few names of people that in particular really left an impact in your life for you, inspired you, somehow put you on course in your life?

**1:19:44 John Boettiger:** There are many, including my teachers at Amherst College, some of them. But I think really predominantly, the two most publicly known and remembered of the Kennedy brothers, John and Bobby — and Robert Frost, whom John Kennedy asked to prepare and read a poem at Kennedy's inauguration. It was a touching moment because Frost, who was elderly by then and couldn't see the manuscript. So this president about to be inaugurated stood and held his hat, big top hat in between Robert Frost's podium and the sun so that Frost could read the poem. So those two. There were other presidents whom I met and didn't, as you would imagine, find as engaging. When President Reagan was in office, I was at that point organizing family reunions, because my grandmother had died some years before, and he invited our whole clan to the White House for lunch. Well, I don't know that it was a mistake for him, but it certainly had a deleterious effect on my behavior. He drew me aside and said, "If your grandfather were still here in this White House as president, he would be doing just what I'm doing."

**1:22:24 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, my.

**1:22:32 John Boettiger:** Really, I was so taken aback that I found politely another person to talk with. But at the luncheon I was still sweating and —

**1:22:51 Debra Schwartz:** Simmering more like.

**1:22:53 John Boettiger:** Simmering but also sweating because my glasses, which I was wearing then lost a lens into the cream of cauliflower soup and you don't clean a lens with a linen napkin from the White House. So I said goodbye to the president and Mrs. Reagan with one lens in and one lens out, and I somehow felt as if that was my small symbol of —

**1:23:30 Debra Schwartz:** Resistance?

**1:23:31 John Boettiger:** Of Reserve. [chuckles]

**1:23:33 Debra Schwartz:** Interesting. Actually, it's an interesting metaphor too.

**1:23:37 John Boettiger:** Yeah. Another man who was very influential in my life, I've served as his research assistant was the extraordinary American historian Henry Steele Commager, who was teaching at Amherst when I was a student. I worked with him. In fact, at a social event, a dinner probably, I sat between Robert Frost and Henry Steele Commager. Commager was a sort of fire plug of a man, who stood about five feet tall, and the thing I remember most about him, actually, is not his influential teaching, but the fact that he used to beat me at ping pong so reliably. He would give me 18 points out of 21 and he would still beat me.

**1:24:44 Debra Schwartz:** Ouch.

**1:24:45 John Boettiger:** He just covered that court.

**1:24:51 Debra Schwartz:** [chuckles] How about a moment at The Redwoods, can you give me a day in your life or a moment that really sums up your experience at The Redwoods? Include people, or things, names, a quality of light, or whatever you want, but give us a little bit of your world in The Redwoods.

**1:25:07 John Boettiger:** Oh.

**1:25:11 Debra Schwartz:** Not necessarily with the lens in the soup, although that would be okay.

**1:25:14 John Boettiger:** Yes, yes. Well, I'll tell you, I have a close friend at The Redwoods who, though her name is Jimmy she is a woman, and she grew up in Texas, in East Texas, Southeast Texas. And she retains so much of the culture in which she grew up and actually told me things about my grandfather that I didn't know. A day at The Redwoods would be sprinkled with the meetings of one group or another, which I've illustrated. There would be a lot of time to write because I'm in the midst of revising a book that I wrote. I wrote a biography of my parents' lives in the 1970s after they both had died. It was favorably reviewed and sold enough to persuade WW Norton that they would like me to do something more. But what I'm doing now, what the one critic who said, "You know something's missing here" — he was a man named Jeffery Wolff who wrote for the New Republic — and he said, "What's missing is the voice of the writer. After all, it's his parents and their family about whom he's writing. He notes his own birth and the moves of the family, but he doesn't really speak the experience of his life from 1939" — when I was born, to let's say 1975, when my mother died. And he was right. So I'm trying to rectify that and I have an audience in New York at WW Norton to see if they're interested in its re-publication.

**1:27:47 Debra Schwartz:** So let's close with that thought. You're a Roosevelt, you're part of this amazing family. You're in the fabric of the world, the DNA. You're very much a part of it. How do you see yourself in the family? It's hard always to see

ourselves, I understand. But you're a very important part of your family on many levels. It's not just what you got from your grandmother, your grandfather, your mother, your father.

**1:28:20 John Boettiger:** That's true.

**1:28:20 Debra Schwartz:** But what they got from you as well.

**1:28:21 John Boettiger:** Yes, I suppose. I don't imagine them as having received a lot from me except love, which is no small matter. I think now, increasingly, I see myself as a member of the community in which I live, and by that I mean not only The Redwoods but the town and the surroundings of Mill Valley — its trails, which you know better than I do. But to hike on the shoulder of Mt. Tam is one of my great joys. So I increasingly feel like an ordinary guy who was blessed with an extraordinary family, and I love that family, those who have gone and those who remain. I'm so delighted that all four of my children live in the Pacific Northwest. But increasingly, I find that I'm living my own life, and the Roosevelt portion of it is interior. Occasionally it emerges in a lecture that I'd be invited to offer, but mostly I live in the community.

**1:30:12 Debra Schwartz:** Your own man in a larger clan?

**1:30:14 John Boettiger:** Yes, just so.

**1:30:16 Debra Schwartz:** Thank you so much for your time today. Thank you so much for sharing these personal stories, these times about your family and your personal life, and the adventures you've been on. I'm very glad you came to Mill Valley when you did, although I'm sorry about the conditions that had happened.

**1:30:34 John Boettiger:** Yes.

**1:30:34 Debra Schwartz:** But I'm grateful for the fact that it brought you here and for your continued involvement in our community and your community. I have one last question for you. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to comment on?

**1:30:55 John Boettiger:** Well, not that it's any more important than anything that we've talked about, but one little piece of my life that probably deserves mention is that I was actually trained at Columbia University as a political scientist before I was trained as a psychologist, and I had only my dissertation to write but I didn't want to sit around Columbia doing it. So, my faculty friends at Columbia said, "Let's see what place we can find for you on the West Coast, which I think you would love and where, we know, you were born." And they found a faculty position at UC Berkeley, a research position at the RAND Corporation, which at that point, was exclusively funded out of Santa Monica by the United States Air Force. When the head of the social science department asked me, "What task should we put you to?" I said, "Well, I would need to finish a dissertation on the subject, generally, of the uses of military force as an instrument of diplomacy, or the

efforts to do so, many of them unsuccessful.” And he said, “Well, guess what? We have a basement full of the raw data of the B-52 pilots who are currently bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail in North Vietnam. We don’t know what to do with them. They’re highly classified. We’ll have to get through even super secret clearance in order to gain access to them. But how’d you like to spend the next few months in the basement of the RAND corporation?” I said, “Okay,” and I wrote two books that were written with Air Force money and that were highly critical of United States policy in Vietnam. Of course, being as classified as they were, they weren’t available to my unclassified colleagues to read. I could probably get them through the Freedom of Information Act, but by now, they’d be old history. I enjoyed it. It was a good year. It persuaded me that I didn’t have a lifetime of research in the future. [chuckles]

**1:33:54 Debra Schwartz:** Living in the bowels of UC Berkeley?

**1:33:54 John Boettiger:** That’s right. [laughs]

**1:33:55 Debra Schwartz:** Not such a bad place to be so long as you could get some air from time to time.

**1:34:01 John Boettiger:** Right.

**1:34:01 Debra Schwartz:** Well, go bears! Okay. I think that’s pretty much it. I keep feeling like there’s one more thing, but maybe we’ll — oh, I know what it is. These classes you offer at The Redwoods, are those open? Are these discussion groups?

**1:34:18 John Boettiger:** Yes, they tend to be discussion groups and their membership is predominantly other residents of The Redwoods, but not exclusively. In fact, I just got a note, an email note from a woman, who was apologizing for herself. She said, “I’m 82 years old, I only know The Redwoods by reputation, favorably. But what you have written, which I’ve seen?” Describing a seminar that I was co-leading, she said, “I like it a lot and I’d love to come, but I’m not an intellectual. What do you think? I haven’t told anybody else about this.”

**1:35:19 Debra Schwartz:** [chuckles] Sweet.

**1:35:19 John Boettiger:** And I wrote her a note saying, “Please come. You would be so welcome.” And I hope she does. I’ll find out on Tuesday of next week.

**1:35:31 Debra Schwartz:** Maybe at some point a particular oral historian that you know might be included in one of the discussions or two?

**1:35:38 John Boettiger:** That would be lovely.

**1:35:39 Debra Schwartz:** Okay, John. Thank you so much. We’ll call this a wrap. And I’ll see you at The Redwoods.

**1:35:46 John Boettiger:** Good. Thank you.