

Mill Valley Public Library
Lucretia Little History Room
Oral History Program

Bob Harmon

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Benja Thompson in 2023

TITLE: Oral History of Bob Harmon
INTERVIEWER: Benja Thompson
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 23 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: May 30, 2023

Mill Valley resident Bob Harmon has been a lifelong advocate and in this oral history, Harmon provides a glimpse into the life and experiences of a dedicated, community-minded individual who has played an active role in various facets of Mill Valley.

Born and raised in Sunshine Gardens, San Francisco, Harmon's journey began there before he settled in Mill Valley, where he has deep familial roots. After attending the University of San Francisco, he embarked on a military career, which would become intertwined with politics during the controversial "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" era. In this interview, Harmon shares his coming out story, when he was photographed in uniform by Richard Avedon for a feature in *The New Yorker* about gays in the military. Harmon's firsthand experience navigating the complexities of being an LGBTQ+ individual in the armed forces provides a unique perspective on the social and political climate of the time. In addition to his military service, Harmon has actively contributed to the Mill Valley community for decades. He served on the boards of the Community Church and the Redwoods Senior Living center, and ran for City Council, demonstrating his passion for promoting a sense of community and advocacy.

In this oral history interview, Harmon describes how he met his husband, Bob Larsen, and their wedding at the Community Church after same-sex marriage became legal in the state of California. Together for four decades, their enduring relationship is a testament to love and resilience in the face of societal challenges and discrimination. Through his activism, community involvement, and personal experiences, Harmon's oral history provides valuable insights into the experiences of an individual deeply committed to social justice, equality, and community-building.

© All materials copyright Mill Valley Public Library. Transcript made available for research purposes only. All rights are reserved to the Mill Valley Library. Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the:

Lucretia Little History Room
Mill Valley Public Library
375 Throckmorton Avenue
Mill Valley, CA 94941

Oral History of Bob Harmon

Index

- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU),
 Marin chapter...p. 2, 4, 9, 10, 21
Avedon, Richard...p. 5-6
Barnard, Jean...p. 10
childhood years...p. 1
Clinton, Bill...p. 5, 7-9
Coles, Matt...p. 2-3
college years...p. 6
coming out...p. 5
Community Church of Mill Valley...p. 10,
 14
Davis, Gray...p. 3
Democratic Central Committee of
 Marin...p. 2-4, 9
“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (policy)...p. 5, 7-8
Emergency Preparedness Committee...p. 3-
 4, 22
Forest Service...p. 1-2
gays in the military...p. 7-9
Larsen, Robert (husband)...p. 1-2, 6, 10, 16
LGBTQ+ community in Marin...p. 21
Lucretia Little History Room...p. 19
Maloney, Doug...p. 3
Marin County Board of Supervisors...p. 3, 9
Marin Gay Pride Parade...p. 17
Marin Independent Journal...p. 4, 5
military career...p. 6-8, 12
Mill Valley City Council...p. 4
Ministry of Light / Spectrum...p. 9, 17
The New Yorker...p. 5-6, 13
Proposition 8...p. 11-12
Redwoods Retirement Center...p. 14
Rose, Annette...p. 2
sailing...p. 2, 13
Seniors for Peace...p. 14
Shilts, Randy...p. 5, 8, 20
Spahr, Janie...p. 9
same-sex marriage...p. 3, 10
San Francisco...p. 1-2, 17, 19
 Sunshine Gardens...p. 1, 18
The Slant...p. 5, 9, 17
Tamalpais High School...p. 1, 10
University of San Francisco...p. 1, 6
Women’s Army Corps (WAC)...p. 1
Woolsey, Lynn...p. 4-7
Wright, Roy and Mildred (uncle and
 aunt)...p. 1, 4, 18

Oral History of Bob Harmon

May 30, 2023

00:00:02:12 Benja Thompson: Today is May 30th, 2023. My name is Benja Thompson and this interview is for the Mill Valley Public Library's Oral History Program. Today, I am speaking with Bob Harmon at the Mill Valley Library. Thank you for joining me and for contributing your oral history to our community.

00:00:21:19 Bob Harmon: Thank you.

00:00:22:26 Benja Thompson: Let's talk a little bit about your history. Can you share a bit about your family and where you grew up?

00:00:28:25 Bob Harmon: Yeah, my family – my father's family was originally from New England and he was born and raised on Staten Island. I did have family in Mill Valley during his lifetime, however. I had an uncle and an aunt. Roy and Mildred Wright, who lived just maybe four or five doors further up Throckmorton at the foot of Cornelia Street. As a matter of fact, my father spent his last year of high school here with Roy and Millie after leaving his parents and graduated from Tam High in the spring of 1941.

00:01:11:29 Benja Thompson: Oh, wow, that means we may have his yearbook photo in our collection.

00:01:16:00 Bob Harmon: I looked at his yearbook, and he wasn't in it, so I don't know how that came out, but I do have a yearbook from that year. Anyway, his best friend here also went to Tam, and they joined the Navy together when we got into the war. After the war, it turned out his friend had a sister from here who was in the Women's Army Corps. So, my father and his friend and other Navy veterans had this kind of communal living in the East Bay after the war with the sister and a number of other women veterans who included my mother as it turned out. They all paired off and married one by one and got a house in the suburbs, mostly in the East Bay. My mother and father settled in a postwar suburban subdivision in south San Francisco, a place called Sunshine Gardens, which, ironically enough, was the foggiest part of that town. So I spent my summers wearing sweatshirts and whatnot. It was a kind of a chilly existence. Anyway, I grew up there in a housing development that had almost uniformly laid out three-bedroom, one bath houses, and almost all of them were young married couples starting their families.

00:02:44:12 Bob Harmon: So, it was kind of a monoculture. I grew up there, went from grammar school through high school there, and then went on to University of San Francisco. And I can go more into my adult career later. I was born in 1952, by the way, so I'm 70 now. What brought me back to Mill Valley was that 40 years ago, in 1983, I was invited by mutual friends, one of them from my high school years, to a camp out at Hodgdon Meadows in Yosemite. This was over 4th of July weekend, almost 40 years ago. It was there that I met my partner and current spouse, Robert Larsen. There was – he was 54 at the time and I was 30 and I was in a career in the Forest Service that was really going nowhere for, well, it was the Reagan years, and it wasn't a good place to be in an environmental agency.

00:03:55:25 Bob Harmon: Plus, the fact that I was going on to 30 and not married or even dating and Forest Service turned out to be a conservative culture. I liked it for the opportunity to have outdoor recreation close in.

00:04:11:17 Benja Thompson: But could you say more about the culture?

00:04:15:05 Bob Harmon: It was just – it was just rural and sort of hidebound, and I was never sure how safe I would be. I was in the federal service but had avoided agencies where I might have had a full background investigation for security clearance. So, I tended to avoid those venues. Anyway, I met Bob Larsen and we hit it off right away. I invited him to come up to my house, which was in Bishop, California at the time to visit. We started this long-distance romance. It turned out that he was just retiring after a career in computer science. Computer programing. His last job was with the Western Pacific Railroad, which had just been bought out by another railroad. So, he was ready to retire.

00:05:05:09 Bob Harmon: He had a sailing boat, a 39-foot sailing boat that he had commissioned and wanted to move aboard and see the world. It was just large enough for us to live comfortably, but small enough for us to handle it ourselves. So, we started on a six-year liveaboard adventure where we snorkeled the Sea of Cortez, stayed in various ports in Central America and toured inland. Saw the Barrier Reef in Belize and wound up on the East Coast. My mother was running our house, but by 1991 she decided she wanted to get on with her life and, so we had to come back because we had a house and rental housing in the city to look after. We tried to keep up the boat, but it was a strain because it was in North Carolina. So eventually we sold it and settled here. I suppose that's where my civil advocacy starts, to move on to the next phase. 1991 was a time when there was more LGBT activism than before in the Bay Area. I had this big idea I was going to bring two ordinances: one anti-discrimination and one domestic partner before the County. The anti-discrimination ordinance I eventually just put aside. There was motion on that at the state legislative level, so I didn't think it was that necessary. However, I did want Marin County to have at least a place where people could register their partnerships. And we had a new supervisor elected, Annette Rose, from this district and was very happy to champion it.

00:07:08:25 Bob Harmon: It was just simply a partner's registry at the time. There were a number of those beginning to pop up in various cities and counties around the Bay Area in California. I was able to, well, I started approaching local civic groups to get their endorsement. One of the first was the Marin chapter of the ACLU. Their endorsement was nice, but they also had an attorney in the San Francisco office named Matt Coles, who handled LGBT advocacy and was able to help me draft the ordinance. It was going to be one of several that were going to be in circulation around the area. It was going to be a chain of them, and eventually it would percolate up to the state legislature, which it did. So, it took me a while to get a lot of the local endorsements. I also went to the Democratic Central Committee of Marin for their endorsement, and I also stayed on as a member, and had a career in Democratic state politics for a while. I also made a point of going around to the local churches. So, and we had hearings before the County Human Rights Commission where this was all thrashed out with the opposition there. They hosted several hearings. And then eventually we had the big one before the Board of Supervisors

in the spring of 1993. The one big challenge was convincing the county council at the time, Doug Maloney, he was something of a skeptic by nature, but Matt Coles was able to make the necessary arguments and so the county council signed on. We had the big hearing, which you probably read in the press clippings before the Board of Supervisors, and it passed.

00:09:14:01 Benja Thompson: What did that feel like when it passed?

00:09:16:13 Bob Harmon: Well, it felt like a very big victory for advocacy. It was just as it turned out, just a registry. But it was a step both locally and in terms of California advocacy. I remember answering a telephone interview with one local right wing talk show radio host, and I told him, actually, what this is, is not a mandate. It's surety. Local employers might want to offer partner terms benefits, I said, and they have to compete for talent. So this is one of the things that they might turn to. But how are they going to verify that this is a settled partnership? At least now they can ask for papers. "Where's your county papers? Show us those and you're on." So in that sense, it worked. And at that point it moved on to other localities and to the state legislature. So that was pretty much it. I did get to be the grand marshal of our one and only pride parade in San Rafael that year. Other than that, that was – most of the support and encouragement I got was from the general Marin community: the churches, the civic officials, and everybody else. There was one follow up to that. When I got into the county Central Committee, I soon enough became a delegate to the annual state conventions, eventually a member of the state executive board. So I was going in and out of convention halls every year. In 1997 at that convention, I think, it was the run up to the gubernatorial election. Among other things, I was a member of the – what was then the Gay and Lesbian caucus at the state party. The lieutenant governor at the time, Gray Davis, who was building up for a run in '98, came to the caucus and gave us a bit of a lecture about how the polls show that the California public wasn't going to go along with same-sex marriage. I buttonholed him in the corridor right after, he was alone and said, "Well, yes, sir. The polls do show the public is being skeptical on marriage. However, those same polls show that they are willing to accept a registered domestic partnership law with all the privileges and rights of marriage. They just don't want to call it that." It didn't seem to have occurred to him, or at least he said "Okay." And we went our way. Eventually, he was elected governor and a few years later, he signed a bill that provided just that. I suppose other people also had the idea. I just like to think that my whole political career may have narrowed down to a few words in a convention corridor. You never know. But as for my civil advocacy in general, it sort of diffused into Democratic Party politics. I worked for Supervisor Rose for a year or so at county as an aide. I was also beginning to advocate more and more for emergency preparedness. This was sort of a subspecialty that I had had when I was an Army officer. I had a 23-year career in the Army Reserves and National Guard. And as a staff major, I found myself doing contingency plans for various installations during my two or four weeks of active duty. And more and more, I found myself writing security plans, and a lot of them had to do with natural hazards, storm, security, that sort of thing.

00:13:27:12 Bob Harmon: So I got very familiar with that kind of advocacy. It was one of the reasons that I did eventually run for City Council in Mill Valley. It was an issue I cared about. I

was a member of what was then the Emergency Preparedness Committee, which was a temporary committee, eventually became its president. And so I could run on that platform.

00:13:56:10 Bob Harmon: It turned out that a lot of the issues in 1997, when I finally ran, had more to do with town planning. Mill Valley was beginning to turn into – it wasn't a town that Uncle Roy and Aunt Millie had where two working people could live in a house on Throckmorton. It was turning more and more boutique-y, and that was one of the things I ran on, along with emergency prep. I met other people that also felt that way, and they encouraged me to run.

00:14:30:12 Bob Harmon: There were, I think, four people running that year, me and three others. And I actually got the endorsement of the *Marin Independent Journal* that year. It was a close election. I was only 300 votes out of the money. I did carry this end of the town. So, I have that to point to. I had done my preparation. In the previous two years I'd attended planning Commission meetings because that's where a lot of the concerns were. People getting their variances, new construction or not. And so I got to be pretty knowledgeable on that. Anyway, I prepped for another two years and ran in 1999. Didn't succeed on that either. But the one thing I had really stressed was the need for a permanent emergency board or commission. I didn't get into the City Council, but apparently the message stuck because the City Council did create a permanent emergency, what is now the Emergency Preparedness Commission. And it's been there ever since. It's kind of important because Mill Valley has been kind of disaster prone. It's had a number of major floods through the 20th century. It's had two epidemics. It had a major fire in 1929, and so it was needed.

00:15:56:19 Benja Thompson: Yeah, absolutely.

00:16:00:29 Bob Harmon: Anyway, that was my place in Mill Valley City Government, was my tour on the Emergency Preparedness Committee. The planning issues. I'd go and speak at planning commission meetings on one issue or another, but that was basically it. It was all advocacy.

00:16:26:27 Bob Harmon: So I continued on a number of local organizations. For instance, I stayed on with the ACLU, wound up on the board of directors of the Marin chapter. And by 1999, I was asked to be president. Which I held for a number of years.

00:16:45:24 Benja Thompson: What was that experience like?

00:16:47:22 Bob Harmon: Well, it was mostly advocacy for civil liberties. Occasionally there would be a flap over somebody trying to censor an art exhibit or that sort of thing, including in Mill Valley. And I was still president on 9/11. So all of a sudden, things got very intense. As a matter of fact, by then, I was able to – I was far enough into Democratic politics, that I was able to talk to Congressman Lynn Woolsey. It was a Sunday picnic in her house in Petaluma the weekend after 9/11. And I was able to walk up to her and say there's going to be some rather repressive legislation coming. And she just nodded. I knew that I didn't have to make the pitch. And she voted against the – some of the wartime legislation that had come up. So, again, it was just a case of a few words and maybe something that didn't need to be said. I'd seen her. I

covered her campaign when she first ran in 1992 for an LGBT newspaper in Marin called *The Slant*. It was one of these freebie handouts at the in the bars and so forth. I got back copies at home. I can provide the history room if they're interested.

00:18:26:23 Benja Thompson: We have. They would be.

00:18:28:06 Bob Harmon: Yeah. All right. I'll flush them out of my – I think they're in my basement. I also have a sort of a story that Lynn Woolsey was involved in. And we're coming now to the – a little out of order. We're coming to the "Don't Ask." I had been pretty circumspect over the years enough that I was able to maintain a career in the Army Reserve components. The Guard and the Reserves. However, in 1993, Bill Clinton had just been elected President among other things, on a promise to integrate the military. If you've ever read Randy Shilts' *Conduct Unbecoming*, you could see how harsh it had been for gay people in the military all those decades up to that point. But we were going to try and change that with his – with possibly Bill Clinton's help. At that point, I did come out to the extent that I was writing op eds for the *IJ* and letters and so forth, identifying myself not only as openly gay, but as a member of the military. Which was, I suppose, a rather brash thing to do. It got enough attention to me personally that I got a call from *The New Yorker* magazine. They were going to have a Richard Avedon photo spread on gays in the military. And was I interested? Well, yes. I suppose that's about as far coming out as you can be, is to appear in a three-page spread in *The New Yorker* magazine by Richard Avedon and all of us in full uniform.

00:20:17:18 Benja Thompson: Yeah. What did it feel like to be very visible in that moment?

00:20:23:29 Bob Harmon: Well, it felt like that was what my military career was going to be. That was – I didn't get called into any conflict. I got past the Gulf War as they just wanted basically off the shelf units and not individuals like me that they couldn't find a place for. So this was going to be my field of honor, I guess. So, this was in March 1993, and we wound up with *The New Yorker* at Richard Avedon's own studio. I think it was in the East Fifties in New York. And he had us lined up and basically put together a montage of us standing shoulder to shoulder. Seven of us, just like his Chicago seven spread from years before. As a matter of fact, he had the Chicago seven pictures spread out on one of his work tables. And if you look at the April 5, 1993 *New Yorker*, there we are, standing in a row. I'm the rather angry looking Army Major towards the left, holding one end of the flag. It was a big U.S. flag. As a matter of fact, he had an assistant hang it up and steam it so that it would be nice and straight. And that was that.

00:21:44:29 Benja Thompson: Had you met the other people in the photograph?

00:21:48:04 Bob Harmon: No, I had heard of them some of them. There was a Marine Sergeant who was in the middle of a big lawsuit against the military, trying to stay in. I think he eventually got a settlement. There was also Lieutenant Zoe Dunning in a Bay Area reserve unit. She actually got promoted to Lieutenant Commander and eventually retired. I never heard about what happened to the others. These were people that were not as high visibility but were definitely out and fighting it. As for me, I never heard anything more about it from the military. Nobody said boo, even though it was in *The New Yorker* and then repeated in *Newsweek* and then in a Richard Avedon coffee table book retrospective. I got passed over for promotion to

Lieutenant Colonel. But that was five years later. And I was left with the impression it was just simply – I was one of a generation of Vietnam era officers who were not needed anymore, especially in the support branches. At that point, I was in the military police. So I retired as a major in 1997. And that was it. What I was going to do, I was going to do. I came, I served, and I went.

00:23:07:10 Benja Thompson: Could you describe your start in the military? What was your decision behind –

00:23:13:13 Bob Harmon: Well, I went to USF in the fall of 1970. I was just turning 18. The Vietnam War was in full – well, at that point, we had invaded Cambodia and the war seemed to be spreading. I figured I had better try and at least get a student deferment. ROTC was there, so I figured that would also help. At least, I thought the Vietnam War was going to go on for another decade and I was going to get dragged into it somehow. We did have a draft at the time, so I got commissioned when I graduated from USF, went to Army school and then went on to various reserve units. So, it was interesting. I got to serve in a number of different units and have different kinds of experiences. So in that regard, I felt like I was doing something in my reserve capacity. I had commanded a truck section of heavy trucks and then a tank platoon and ultimately a basic training company. So, and I think I was pretty confident at it, or at least my efficiency reports were all good. But it wasn't very eventful. Towards the end, when they were having promotion boards, like for major, for a lieutenant colonel, I was told by at least one expert that at that point they were just simply – they'd simply open the promotion folder and look at your official portrait. If you didn't have enough ribbons and stuff on your uniform, you were going in the discard pile then and there. So apparently I didn't have enough thingies on my uniform. So, that was my military career, such that it was. Not eventful at all from start to finish.

00:25:05:02 Benja Thompson: But it sounds like it prepared you very well for the emergency planning.

00:25:09:19 Bob Harmon: Yeah, that was the thing. I eventually sort of had my own subspecialty on various bases of writing their preparedness, which included natural disasters. These were a lot of Eastern installations, had to worry about winter storms and severe weather and that sort of thing. It also helped me in terms of organizational skills, putting together a training plan or moving a unit can involve a lot of the same choreography as running a political campaign. Or at least it's a form of organizational synchronization. I think that is a good skill to have. Oh, and to get back to the story of Richard Avedon and Lynn Woolsey. I'm sorry. This is out of order, but –

00:26:06:01 Benja Thompson: No, it's –

00:26:06:28 Bob Harmon: It's quite a story in itself. Towards the end of June 1993, Bob Larsen and I, my partner, happened to be back east on business with the boat and some other things. I was visiting a friend, high school friend, who lived in Alexandria, Virginia. I had a free day. So, I figured, well, why not go over to Capitol Hill and do a little lobbying on my own? I go to the Campaign for Military Service, which was a joint effort of the – what was then the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign. Its political office was

on P Street. And we go in there and I go see the field director for the Western States for a campaign for military service. I told them I was the highest-ranking officer in the country who was out and still in. "Can I go up on Capitol Hill and lobby on this?" And he said, "Well, hurry, hurry up and basically get finished talking," whatever I was talking about, because he said he was going to New York for the weekend with his boyfriend. This was midday on a Thursday, very late in the gays in the military campaign. I pleaded with him and he finally gives me a list of borderline Senators and said, "See what you can do." So, Bob and I go to the Senate Office building, and in one Senator's office after another, the aides were like, "Where the hell have you people been? You're the first one to show up." And this is towards the end of June. The vote was going to come after 4th of July, and I just sort of felt my stomach sink. But all right. I did my song and dance in various offices and ended up going over the House office building to say hello to Lynn Woolsey.

00:28:03:12 Bob Harmon: I go in or out her office. Introduce us. And I heard her voice in the inner office saying, Bob and Bob are here. She came out, gave us both a big hug, and then said she had to scurry off to the House floor because they were having a vote. However, there was an aide there that could use my help. It turned out Linda, in her first term, had gotten appointed to the Finance Committee and she was introducing – wanted to introduce a bill that would dock the military for any witch hunts. Anti-gay witch hunts. But the aide said she was going to need points of contact to get research on this, but it was a very sympathetic bill. This was the end of business that day. So the next morning I go to the main offices of the campaign, which was just off DuPont Circle, I think on Massachusetts Avenue. Fancy digs. We're sitting in the outer office for about 40 minutes, listening to the Executive Director giving an interview to some reporter. She had been in Save the Whales this, and some other nonprofit and after this, she was going to go on to something else. About 40 minutes on, her deputy comes out of another office and said, "What do you want?" And I told him, "Well, I've got a sympathetic congresswoman with a sympathetic bill. What can you do with it?" And he said, "Well, we're handling it." And he gave me a handshake that had me at the top of the steps going out.

00:29:24:26 Bob Harmon: So, I didn't take no for an answer. I went back down the hill to P Street. I knew that somewhere in every headquarters is an NCO that knows where everything is. And sure enough, we run into Miriam Ben Shalom, who was a major figure in the gays in the military campaign. She had a lawsuit against the Wisconsin National Guard and was one of the stars of our movement. Seemed very practical and down to earth. I told her what we needed. She gets on the phone, calls a couple of people at the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. Gets all the information and Lynn's aide was set for writing this bill. We must have looked terribly relieved because she was asking us what the problem was. And I told her the whole story in two-part harmony about our going up and down the hill and she gave – she did this sort of pantomime dance, like they're all jerks and they can blow it out their whatsit. Then she gave us this sad look. Resigned. You know, I tell people, "Well, children, this is how we lost that battle," because what happened was that Bill Clinton wound up with "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" which supposedly meant that they didn't ask and they didn't tell but in fact, he looked the other way while the military started this witch hunt. About 10,000 people got discharged in the next decade because of – well, it was a betrayal, really.

00:30:59:21 Benja Thompson: Did you know anyone that was affected by that directly?

00:31:02:26 Bob Harmon: No, not really. By then, I was more or less a free agent. I was in the individual reserve, and I could pick my own assignments. And that was that. But it did sour me somewhat on Bill Clinton, I have to say. We were just simply collateral damage. I did try, at the next state party convention, to get a resolution through the Resolutions Committee. At a hospitality suite on Saturday night of the convention, two gay party leaders – T.J. Anthony and Robert Barnes – came up to me and did me the courtesy of telling me, “No, this is not going to fly. New York says to put it aside.” I knew what they were getting at: they didn't want to revisit the issue. And frankly, I didn't want to have a floor fight that I couldn't win. So that was the end of the gays in the military advocacy. There was a new lobby that went to Washington and I followed their progress in the papers: the Serviceman's Legal Defense Network. This time, at least, we had people that were not only determined, but were ex-military themselves. It took them years and years. But eventually, “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” got repealed. It took 20 years, but eventually we got it. And so that was that.

00:32:27:17 Benja Thompson: Do you have an opinion on the state of the military for gay people now?

00:32:33:27 Bob Harmon: I think they are assimilating well enough. We've had people serve; serve with distinction. They're still struggling with transgender issues. But for everybody else, it's – I think it's pretty much settled. They're serving. There's been no problems. The only sexual harassment has been male on female, as far as I can tell. I know because I wrote a whole law review article about that. But gay people seem to be serving in whatever capacities. It's fine because they had skills, and for that matter, they had always served. I know because Randy Shilts wrote a book about it called *Conduct Unbecoming*, going all the way back to Baron Von Steuben at Valley Forge. As a matter of fact, when I knew that he was writing the book, I called up his researcher and mentioned, “Well, there was a Confederate general named Patrick Cleburne.” According to Irish historians, he was also probably gay.

00:33:37:24 Benja Thompson: Oh, wow.

00:33:39:08 Bob Harmon: And so that mention does get in the book as well, in one of the early chapters. I like to think it was my doing, but it may have been – it may have come up anyway. So that was the gays in the military. It's kind of ironic that Baron von Steuben was the one who drilled Washington's army when it was at Valley Forge. They were a rabble when he got to them, and he managed to straighten them up for the next spring campaign. If he hadn't, they would have been defeated. And we'd be speaking English now. But I digress. Let's see...

00:34:22:16 Benja Thompson: I think you had mentioned 1991 as almost like a turning point, culturally.

00:34:29:26 Bob Harmon: It was something of a turning point. We were running up on the 1992 election, which was a pretty decisive liberal victory. Not only Bill Clinton got elected, but we elected two women as senators, Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, and things had been looking up. And 1993 was a big year in which I did the gays in the military and the partners

ordinance and got my start in local politics. I basically segued out of gay advocacy pretty much at that point and more into civil liberties. I was on the ACLU – I was on a Democratic Central Committee through several campaigns, basically helping run a headquarters. I eventually wound up as party vice chairman for some years in Marin. I was also president of the ACLU board for a number of years. Eventually, I became inactive because the organizational culture had changed at the ACLU and had gotten away from a local chapter model and were basically doing high level advocacy. I told people, “Yeah, you should probably get your membership card,” but it's all at a high level now. They're doing some important work at the higher levels of the courts and in state legislatures, but that's pretty much where it's at now. Local advocacy is not so much anymore. That, I'm afraid that Charlottesville in 2017 also sort of made me think twice about civil liberties in an unlimited form. I used to go around Marin giving speeches about it, and off the top of my head, I didn't need notes. But among other things, I'd gone to law school, gotten a law degree, and had some idea about how civil liberties and the branches of government actually do work or are supposed to. But that was up until 2017.

00:36:38:09 Benja Thompson: And then you had also mentioned *The Slant* as the gay newspaper for Marin County. Could you describe sort of the community that may have formed around that or what it was?

00:36:50:03 Bob Harmon: It was basically several of us. We would – I think this was a monthly paper. We would copy and paste. There would be one person that would – well, I would typeset a lot of the stories on paper. There was a copy and paste person that would cut it out and paste it on the paper, physically, so that it could be basically reprinted in that form. That was how things got printed at that time. You could typeset on a computer, but you still had to do paper and paste. I did that for several years, I think until 1994 or 1995. I was writing stories about the gay community and some of its problems, people being harassed, people doing things. A lot of it was upbeat.

00:37:45:09 Benja Thompson: Do you remember how that began? Either your involvement, or the newspaper itself?

00:37:50:02 Bob Harmon: I just sort of drifted into it: the paper was already there. I was willing to help and I'd gotten some prominence in the fight at the Board of Supervisors, so I knew an awful lot about county governments and that sort of thing. So I was basically a reporter on that beat, and I was also friends with other activists. The Reverend Janie Spahr had headed up something called the Ministry of Light, which became Spectrum, and which is now the Spahr Center. She left in 1994 because she had been appointed to a Presbyterian church in upstate New York, which didn't work out. The Senate or whatever, whatever the Presbyterians called it objected and so she wound up just going into general religious advocacy. Somebody else took over at Spectrum. And they got into some trouble with an audit one time. I wrote a story about it, and their board of directors objected to our board of directors about the coverage. I was told I was not going to write any more stories about them unless somebody was monitoring me. At that point, I told them, “Well, I'll see you around.” Because if they weren't going to back me up then that was that. They eventually sort of faded out. I think it was just simply the fact that print was giving way to online stuff. Other local newspapers, like the *Point Reyes Light*, I think, have also

had those experiences. Print advertising just simply wasn't going to pay. So I faded out of that at a time when it was probably going the way of all things anyway. But that was another little crisis of censorship that I would use in later speeches to the ACLU or others. I just say, "Well, ten years ago, that was me." And I've never forgotten.

00:39:51:08 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Yeah.

00:39:52:01 Bob Harmon: I had a choice to make, and I took it. I never regretted, so...I understand that you also would like to talk about my involvement with the Community Church and the Redwoods.

00:40:06:21 Benja Thompson: Absolutely.

00:40:08:06 Bob Harmon: The Community Church of Mill Valley is at the corner of Throckmorton and Olive, just a block or so the other direction from this library. It was founded in 1925 and that building on that corner, which was of the Maybeck School of Design, was built in 1930 as a shop project from Tam High in fact: a copy of the Maybeck Outdoor Art Club that is in downtown Mill Valley. The church, over the years, has become a part of the United Church of Christ, which is a traditionally New England kind of Protestant denomination, very progressive. And the local church over the years has had its moments. It advocated against the detainment of our Japanese-American neighbors in 1942, when that was not a popular stance to take. It was one of the first churches to take lesbian ministers in care as a part of their process for becoming full ministers. The UCC started having LGBT clergy in 1972, so it wasn't a big deal inside the denomination. My partner and I got into it towards the end of the 90s. Two of our neighbors up on Middle Ridge were Jean and Jack Barnard. Jean Barnard had been Mayor of Mill Valley, was a member of that church, endorsed me in my first race, and they both passed away towards the end of that year. We went to the memorial service and were impressed with the church and its minister at the time, Pam Shortridge, and eventually became members. Since then, I've served on their board of directors. I'm currently president of the board and we're coming up on our 100th anniversary of its foundation. So, they're still there. And as a matter of fact, in 2008, when same-sex marriage became legal by a state Supreme Court decision, Bob Larsen and I looked at each other and said, "Well, it's about time, isn't it?" I mean, we had been registered domestic partners, but this was probably a time to do it. The church was thrilled to do it, we got to write our own liturgy, and pick some of the music. I'd wanted "The Wedding March" by [Edvard] Grieg: "Wedding Day at Troldhaugen," which wound up being a nice recessional march and postlude. It was a sunny day in September 2008. A lot of officials in Marin packed the church. I was still well-remembered for my advocacy and my work in politics. So we had several city council members, several retired other office holders and a lot of friends. It was a big day.

00:43:21:00 Benja Thompson: Yeah, that sounds wonderful.

00:43:23:22 Bob Harmon: And we did tell people, "Don't donate to us." We've got two or three toasters and everything else already. Just donate to the "No on Proposition 8" campaign, which we lost, but we were two of, I think, 18,000 married couples that the courts did say would be the exceptions to the ban. We had already gotten married in reliance, and therefore, that was going to be that.

00:43:54:02 Benja Thompson: What did that moment of Prop 8 feel like?

00:43:58:19 Bob Harmon: Well, it was a great big disappointment. It was something like a, well, we lost by several points. It wasn't even close. At the same time, they were passing another proposition that gave rights to poultry. So, after a rather dirty advertising campaign that dragged the children into it and that sort of thing. So it went back to the courts, and we just simply settled down and got on with our lives. We were still married, and that was that. It was kind of important, getting the domestic partners and then marriage. Because at law school, I had learned that even without a will, if you're married under intestate succession, you would get the estate if you're the surviving spouse. It didn't used to be that way. I met lesbian couples in particular over the years that had not only taken out joint powers of attorney on each other for medical and other decisions, but they would put them in their clothing in Ziploc bags so that it would be on their person if they were in the emergency room. Because if you weren't married, you could be barred from the bedside or any medical decisions. There was a lot of that going on during the AIDS epidemic especially, because sometimes family would get in there and then block access to everybody else. And when I was still single, I was hearing a lot of hard luck stories in the bars. "Oh, yes. I had a lover and we were together for a number of years but then he died and the family took the house and the business." Or something like, "Well, yeah, I cared for him in his final months. And the day after the funeral, his sister showed up on my doorstep with a video camera and dollar signs flashing in her eyes." That was how it was then.

00:45:58:03 Benja Thompson: Yeah. That sounds really difficult.

00:46:00:09 Bob Harmon: Yeah, if you're going to hold property in common, if you're going to raise children, it's kind of important that you have a legal household. And, in fact, that's how it is but you can also have somebody there that you can spend your life with.

00:46:19:10 Benja Thompson: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And then was it 2013 that then gay marriage was legalized?

00:46:28:10 Bob Harmon: Yeah, it was a couple of decisions. There was one that sort of invalidated Proposition 8 on a procedural basis. Whether or not I think it was standing, people had standing to sue. And it got, basically Prop 8 got overturned on that. But the big – two decisions was one involving a plaintiff named Edie Windsor. That was what got to the Defense of Marriage Act overturned. And then there was the Obergefell decision a year after that that invalidated any bans at the state level. So in all 50 states, the marriages would be legal from then on. And to this day, they still are, as long as those decisions stand.

00:47:15:05 Benja Thompson: Yeah, that's a good point.

00:47:17:02 Bob Harmon: Yeah. And that's a very big point. But there's been so many people married in reliance on those things and so much family law generated over it. That's another thing I found in law school. It's a lot easier if everybody is on the same page, because there are an awful lot of case laws on whether or not you've got community property or choice of law. If you're divorcing in different states...all of that was written with any married couples in mind. So

that, you know, there used to be a chain of alimony or quasi marriage decisions in California family law. But that got very confusing. It's better if you just put it all on the same sheet.

00:48:04:12 Benja Thompson: And it does feel like culturally, too, there's been so much progress in the last 15 years, 10 years even.

00:48:11:28 Bob Harmon: Well, yeah, People have settled down. People have lived normal lives, have served in the military. They've shown that they can live together and care for one another and raise families and be part of the community. It's just part of the landscape now. It's nothing to be complacent about exactly, but it's there. And the big fights we're seeing now over in other states right now, isn't about people getting married. It's basically kids who are transgender, which means they're going after people who are vulnerable and people with settled family law behind them are not. So in that regard we have made progress. We've come very far in my lifetime. Because I was born and came to adulthood at a time when sodomy was a felony under California law and in most other states where you could get thrown into a snake pit like state hospital if you're even suspected of being gay and subjected to treatment. You could be barred not only from certain jobs, but certain professions. That's all been swept aside. It's taken a very, very long time and a lot of advocacy.

00:49:34:28 Benja Thompson: In that context, like growing up with that being the circumstance, what did it feel like to sort of embrace your identity?

00:49:47:27 Bob Harmon: Well, I just sort of avoided the subject. Growing up, I could basically play innocent on that. I would suppress any crushes I had. You learn not to – you learn to keep your eyes in your head when you were in high school locker rooms, for instance, and forget about pursuing romance. So that meant that I just simply didn't go to the proms or whatever. Same thing in college. So in that sense, I would say that I was deeply closeted.

00:50:22:22 Benja Thompson: And then –

00:50:23:13 Bob Harmon: Of necessity.

00:50:24:11 Benja Thompson: Yeah. And then I wonder what may have given you the courage to be so visibly, like, an advocate and continuing to, you know, fight for others.

00:50:39:06 Bob Harmon: Because I think by the start of the 90s things were beginning to shift. And also I had built up, well, activities that coincided with my identity. At that point I had to basically get them parallel. My involvement with the military, my – the fact that I was now settled down with somebody at least as partners for a number of years already. And that I was starting a career in public life where I was going to have to be honest. I didn't make a big deal out of it. I didn't want to be *the* gay candidate so much as just simply this was part of my portfolio. The fact that I was living with somebody is just something you either act ashamed about or you just simply, “Well, this is where I am at this point.” Because if you start acting ashamed or afraid it's sort of like bleeding in front of a shark. At that point, I just simply wasn't going to pretend.

00:51:47:19 Benja Thompson: Yeah.

00:51:48:24 Bob Harmon: Alright, I did it rather dramatically. I mean, coming out in *The New Yorker* in full uniform is a rather big deal. That's how quickly I came around. And since then, I think our experiences have been pretty good.

00:52:07:08 Benja Thompson: That's good. Yeah. I'm very interested in the boating trip you said that you and Robert Lawson had gone on. Was that your first time sailing? What was that experience like?

00:52:19:06 Bob Harmon: Pretty much, yeah. Yeah, well, that was my first time on a sailboat. He was able to teach me the rudiments of it. He had had a smaller sailboat on the bay and had raced competitively for many years before getting the 39-footer. And I was able to pick up a lot of it quickly. I hadn't sailed. I had a little experience with certain forms of navigation in the army. Also, I could be useful on the boat because our first stop was Baja and it turned out I had the ability to pick up Spanish pretty much off the street. I just carried a pocket dictionary, watch what people said, and I didn't have to learn that much. Just simply basically what nouns and what limited forms of verbs we were going to be using in the markets or whatever. I got pretty good at it after a while. I hadn't done very well with it in junior high school, but on the street, especially if you're talking to port captains or if you were at an army checkpoint somewhere in the jungle, it sharpens your mind. I got pretty fluent in it in a crude way. I think my big discovery was finding out I only had to learn past, present, and present-perfect to get by and just learn whatever terminology – either nautical or farm or whatever – was needed. It worked. So I was important on the boat in that regard. I could navigate us on land through – and we did travel inland a lot. We didn't travel that much after we left the boat although towards 2015, Bob was getting on and wanted to do some traveling while we could. So we started with Rhodes Scholar Tours, first in the United States and then in Europe. He had always wanted to get the boat to Europe, especially to Greece. We were going to sail there in 1991, but we had to look after our places here. It was probably just as well, because one of our stops would have been in Croatia and the war started in that year and among other things, the yacht harbor at Dubrovnik got shot up pretty badly. So we were – probably just as well. But we did get to Greece in 2016 on a tour that involved public ferries. So in that sense, we were on the water. We'd sleep on shore at night, but at least we were on the water going from island to island.

00:55:07:21 Benja Thompson: Yeah, it's almost like a full circle moment.

00:55:10:08 Bob Harmon: Yes.

00:55:10:26 Benja Thompson: Made it to Greece.

00:55:11:28 Bob Harmon: So he got his dream trip, and then we made several more trips to various parts of Greece. We also got two tours in Italy. I picked up Italian in high school and was able to get us through there as well. And so we saw what we could when we could. At this point, we won't be traveling. The pandemic pretty much put a stop to that. We had one last trip to Macedonia and Greece in 2022, and Bob sort of gave out at that point. Well, he's 94 now and he has scoliosis – or not scoliosis, osteoporosis, which means his spine is weak. And so he's got mobility problems. I'm basically caregiving now. But we're married. And I fought hard enough for that. And for better or for worse is what comes with it. You just do. It. And so we're basically

making do. We managed to fix things so he's still in his home. He can still, with assistance, get around the house and is cared for and that's – I think that's something to be satisfied with.

00:56:36:14 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Yeah. Being able to offer care to the ones we love is so important.

00:56:40:15 Bob Harmon: Yeah. Because I've seen a lot of that. Especially my experiences with the Redwoods, another area in my life. The [Community] Church founded the Redwoods, by the way, in 1972. 50 years ago. And at first, the board was made up of church members, some of whom had a mortgage taken out a second mortgage to help support the early part of it. It's now got something like a %25, \$27 million annual budget there. A nonprofit with about 300 residents right across from Tam High on Camino Alto. I'm on the board of directors there because the church still has, by bylaws, two members on what could be a 17 member or so board of directors. So I've been there for a number of years. Right now, I'm the secretary of that board and it's a very good senior center: a lot of senior centers I've looked into have been sort of still life: institutional. Here it's vibrant. The people there are activists, progressive, pretty much interested in activity and life, and they seem to be well cared for. We got through the whole pandemic with no COVID deaths. Given how many deaths and sicknesses there were in the nursing home and senior center industry, I think we were –

00:58:20:08 Benja Thompson: Yeah. That's astounding.

00:58:22:10 Bob Harmon: Yes. Maybe the best, or one of the very best, records in the country. We had no deaths and as far as I know, no serious illnesses. Towards the end, people occasionally would test positive but would just simply have to self-isolate for a couple of weeks and that would be that. We got through it.

00:58:42:06 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Wow. And to the point of it being a vibrant community, I know there's several writing groups, I believe, from looking into Laura Bock and Suzanne Gary specifically.

00:58:55:26 Bob Harmon: Yeah, there's that. There are groups – there are other groups that pursue other hobbies. There's an outdoor garden whose – it's a Robert Scott garden, named for one of the church members who helped set it up. They have public events in the auditorium, often live concerts. For one thing, they got the likes of Pete Seeger to perform for them. It was not announced because it was for them. Or Joan Baez. I gave a number of speeches to their Seniors for Peace in that auditorium over the years. So, I was a presence there even when I was not on the Redwoods board. And the Seniors for Peace, in fact, are out on that corner, Camino Alto and Miller in front of the high school every Friday afternoon, as they have been since the invasion of Iraq back in 2003. So, they were very emphatic on that. As far as I know, they're still doing it.

01:00:05:24 Benja Thompson: Wow. Yeah. Long history, then?

01:00:08:19 Bob Harmon: Very long history. And a very active one. You know, it's a good place for people to be.

01:00:19:00 Benja Thompson: I think I'd seen that you're working on a research, or book project. Is that accurate? I may be mistaken.

01:00:30:04 Bob Harmon: I had researched a book back in the day. It was – well, my mother had, in World War II, had been with the war, had gotten to Manila right after the liberation and wound up as a disc jockey on the Armed Forces Radio. By then, I think she was a sergeant. And one of the things that she did was go out on stories. She spent something like three days at the trial of General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who was on trial as a war criminal. She had a scrapbook full of pictures from her time there, which included pictures of how badly Manila had been ruined during the siege and it was kind of important to MacArthur because he considered Manila his home. As a matter of fact, his home was the penthouse suite of the Manila Hotel. So, a lot of his stuff got damaged and a lot of the people he knew were, well, it was a brutal siege. About as many people were killed in the massacres as died at, well, Nanking and MacArthur wanted somebody to pay for it. Yamashita was the general in command, and this charge was, he should have known or must have known. My mother went to the trial but didn't seem to understand that much of it. All she remembered was this very distinguished general, who was still in full uniform, who was on trial. I got interested in it when I was in law school because I started reading – and this was the start of the invasion of Iraq. And the Bush administration was setting up something called military commissions, which were sort of a very abbreviated form of military court. That was what tried General Yamashita. It meant that they could invent whatever rules of procedure and evidence they wanted to. And that's more or less what a military commission does. It's rather harsh, but it was important case law. The Philippines at the time was U.S. territory. Yamashita was convicted basically on command responsibility, which is, he wasn't convicted of ordering any atrocities or anything like that. He was just simply in command. And you're responsible. That got to the U.S. Supreme Court and became bedrock case law and eventually it became part of international law as well.

01:03:12:26 Bob Harmon: The International Criminal Court at The Hague now has that as part of its founding statute, the idea that if you were a general or a prime minister and atrocities take place on your watch, you're going to be liable for it. So, I researched the book. I actually wrote a law review article about the case, bringing it up to the present and the invasion of Iraq. I was writing a book on it but as it turned out, somebody else also published a book along very much the same lines with a publishing house, the University of Kansas Press, that I was seeking to do. And it was apparent that he had, like I had, read the complete 2100-page trial transcript which is on microfilm at UC Berkeley, among other places. So he had done all the research, and there was no sense of my reinventing the wheel. Besides, it would have been a rather depressing subject. It was really a hideous thing. On par with the rape of Nanking. And other than Nanking and Warsaw, no Allied Capital suffered as badly as Manila. It was just one of these tragedies that take place and in the end, it did have a legal and historical importance beyond the immediate time.

01:04:50:17 Bob Harmon: My mother, in fact, had spent a number of months in Manila, had befriended a family that had survived the occupation and siege, and they were lifetime friends. It was not just the veterans – the women veterans that she was with. She did have friends that were

Philippine citizens, although admittedly, these were well-to-do. The head of the family, in fact, had been the dean of the Conservatory of Music at Santo Tomas University which, during the war, was an internment camp for allied prisoner civilians. And immediately after the war was turned into a field hospital for those civilians and for people like, well, my mother, who had come down with malaria and was bedridden there. Still had effects from it for years afterwards. So Manila was a big part of her life as well.

01:05:53:13 Benja Thompson: And it seems like – I'm interested in your family's history, in the military, both with your own, and with your parents. I was wondering how far back that history goes.

01:06:05:27 Bob Harmon: I didn't find any professional military in our family tree. I did find – okay, my father and mother served in the second World War in the Pacific and came out of it basically with some illnesses and an intense dislike for spam, which is often all the ate. In the first World War, my grandfather served in France, and apparently so did Uncle Roy, although Uncle Roy wouldn't talk about it. I don't know why my grandfather did it because by 1917 he was in his 30s with two kids and had no reason to go, but he went to France, served in an ordinance depot and was in the California State Guard in the second War, which was after the National Guard got federalized. The governor had to set up something to deal with fires and floods and so forth. Before that, let's see. I had two ancestors in the Massachusetts volunteer regiments, 20th Massachusetts and 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery [Regiment]. The first one came back and the second one died of his wounds. Bob Larsen's family, he had a – well, his father was in the First World War in the Navy, he had an ancestor who was in the 19th Michigan volunteers during the Civil War. Captured, ended up as a Confederate prisoner in Libby prison. My father also had papers indicating we had at least one ancestor in Washington's army during the revolution. So, we went back. Yeah, his – my father's family goes back to a Puritan times, Salem. So, it was a long family tree.

01:07:54:29 Benja Thompson: Yeah.

01:07:56:14 Bob Harmon: But that was our experience with the military. Just basically, if there was a war, then sometimes you volunteered.

01:08:22:14 Benja Thompson: Let's see. So, to date, you've performed an admirable amount of community work in your life. Looking back, what would you say you're most proud of?

01:08:32:28 Bob Harmon: Probably the advocacy on marriage equality and on the military. I was really out there on that, and I may have made a little difference. A lot of people did. I was just part of a very long and involved saga. But I did my bit. If my military career was basically doing that advocacy, then that was good. And so, for that matter, was the political and especially on marriage.

01:09:10:16 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Yeah. Certainly. Marriage in Marin specifically or, at least the domestic registry.

01:09:18:04 Bob Harmon: Yeah. Yeah. It's kind of moot now, but for a while there, it was kind of important.

01:09:23:06 Benja Thompson: Yeah.

01:09:23:26 Bob Harmon: People could get registered. People could see it becoming a part of a pattern, statewide.

01:09:34:25 Benja Thompson: And in terms of a steppingstone, the progress, certainly, a significant one.

01:09:40:00 Bob Harmon: Yeah. Bob and I did not get registered in Marin as such. We didn't – it was just a registry. I think the main thing was just getting it done. We did file for a state-registered domestic partnership when that became legal, because that was kind of important. And we got married when we could. So in that sense, there was a progression.

01:10:06:22 Benja Thompson: I think you'd mentioned you were the grand marshal for a Marin gay pride parade?

01:10:16:05 Bob Harmon: Yeah, this was in 1993. I think it was the only parade we had had of that kind, because the one in San Francisco usually just sort of preempts everything else. I remember Bob and I were riding on the back of a '61 Corvette convertible, powder blue. I had a great big rainbow flag to wave, and a big purple sash that said, "Grand Marshal." I still have that.

01:10:43:25 Benja Thompson: Oh, that's very cool.

01:10:45:15 Bob Harmon: So, for that sense, I had my triumph: my parade.

01:10:52:08 Benja Thompson: How did that come about? Like, I guess who approached you with that?

01:10:56:17 Bob Harmon: Well, the organizers of the parade, I guess, because April 1993 was when we got the ordinance passed. And this was in June sometime.

01:11:08:08 Benja Thompson: Just today, actually, I was watching through a VHS that the GLBT Historical Society has of a parade in 1990, which has people from Ministry of Light, it has people from PLAG and from *The Slant*.

01:11:27:12 Bob Harmon: Okay, I wasn't there in Marin then, so I didn't know. But I think the 1993 one was the last. That I'm fairly sure of. We have the parades in the City, and that's pretty much that.

01:11:47:08 Benja Thompson: And how would you say you've seen Mill Valley and Marin County change over the years?

01:11:55:12 Bob Harmon: Well, it's gentrified. It was one of the reasons why I ran for public office, because when I was first here, my father was always coming back over here from South City, visiting Unc and Aunt Millie. And when I was younger, I spent a lot of my childhood playing in Old Mill Park or along the creek here. That was a time when working people could live in a house like that in Mill Valley. It was a time when you could buy things downtown. There was a hardware store or two right downtown, along with a pharmacy and a shoe store and a stationery store and a drugstore. Now it's more and more just fancy stuff: boutiques, art,

apparel, coffee shops. Also, the people have changed. You've got more well-to-do people coming in, buying these houses at higher cost. And a lot of times over the years in places like Sycamore Park, you'd have a lot of situations where people would buy a property, tear down the house – it's called a teardown – and build something bigger on it. So there goes some of the affordability. The – also, the traffic has gotten a lot worse, in part because Mill Valley is basically in a closed canyon. Those parcels that could be built on, have been, pretty much, in incorporated Mill Valley, which was what I was focusing on, used to be in Unc's day that you would have a house, you would have maybe one car – although with a train station down here in Lytton Square, you didn't need it to commute into the city because there would be an electric train there that would take you to the Sausalito ferry dock.

01:14:03:09 Bob Harmon: But now every household has, often has two or three cars, which take up a certain amount of cubic footage on our roads. And the streets are kind of narrow because they were built for an earlier day. And in that regard, yes, it has changed quite a bit since I remember it. And then again, so has Marin. I can remember when Tiburon was sort of still working-class and there was a rail yard in there, which I think is now all condos. And it's just basically more traffic: more of a gap between well-to-do and poor. Even more traffic coming in, in terms of people who serve these households, contractors, and au pairs, and services like dog washing. You know, they have little vans for that. And the people that do all this live somewhere else. So, it just adds to the commute.

01:15:17:16 Benja Thompson: What's something, then, that you hope to see in the future for this region?

01:15:24:11 Bob Harmon: I'm hoping that zoning can be a little more reasonable. There's been – because the whole area is sort of unaffordable now. The house I grew up in, I think cost my parents, I think the price was \$20,000 when they bought it, which was okay, a fair amount of money in those days. But they had veterans' loans that were pretty generous terms. So all those families could afford a fenced yard with green grass and a three bedroom house. For people that have survived the Depression and the War, it must have seemed like heaven. Now, however, that house is probably worth well over \$1 million. \$1.1. It's in a neighborhood that's now served by a BART station. At the time, Sunshine Gardens was just tract houses at the end of town, butting up against the cemeteries in Colma so it was a lot different. And it wasn't integrated because of all the redlining and stuff. That, at least, has changed. But the housing is getting harder and harder to find. Mill Valley, at least, part of the explanation is that there's just no more space. You can put in second units here and there if you've got a big enough yard, but that's about it. We do really need a public transit of some kind. And we sort of abandoned that. Because I can still remember when we had a railroad here although by 1941, they weren't carrying passengers anymore. There were freight trains running through here to Sausalito as late as the 60s but now that's a bicycle path.

01:17:10:27 Bob Harmon: In terms of just, the culture. Well, it's at least trying to keep its identity as Mill Valley, but it's getting harder and harder. I heard that Rita Abrams, for instance, who wrote that song about Mill Valley eventually couldn't afford to be here. Maybe she's back. But there was also Peter Coyote, who was also part of this town: when he talked about Mill Valley it was like Henry Fonda doing Lincoln, but I think he was talking about, moving on traffic

and all that. I don't know where he is now, but it was something that I didn't want to hear at the time.

01:18:05:15 Benja Thompson: Hmm. And I think before we began, you had mentioned you had spent time involved with the Mill Valley Historical Society.

01:18:14:25 Bob Harmon: Yeah, I was a docent here at the library in the History Room. It was just basically looking after the – just basically keeping the History Room open and answering questions. I did some reading in my idle time, and I could – well, for instance, there's a whole bunch of microfilm of the, what was the *Mill Valley Record*, later the *Record Messenger* going back to the start of the 20s. You can read about the culture there and the fact that there was somebody doing abortions on the second floor above the hardware store in that part of downtown. There was also a lot of 100 proof racism in that paper, mostly anti-Asian. Anti-Japanese especially. So in that sense, the culture has improved. Really nasty stuff. Vile.

01:19:09:25 Benja Thompson: Yeah. That's a tough thing to reckon with.

01:19:13:19 Bob Harmon: But that's one thing they probably should be teaching in the schools, is just the history of California in that light. The genocide of the native peoples after 1849. And I do mean genocide. The treatment of the Chinese railway workers and exploitation. What happened with the Japanese-Americans and all of the redlining and official discrimination in housing after World War II was a chance for my parents' generation to build up wealth in the form of house equity. But if you read a book called *The Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein, I think it is, you'll read just how pervasive official discrimination was in the FHA, in the real estate industry, in insurance and mortgages. You know, redlining. And that was why my neighborhood was sort of the monoculture that it was. And to some extent, I gather, Mill Valley in those early years. It was – California has not had a very nice past. And it's worth remembering that as well.

01:20:34:15 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Yeah. It does seem like many of the places that we are, are built on the backs of those who don't have the opportunity that many have.

01:20:48:26 Bob Harmon: Yes, and that's a whole other part of history that you don't read until you get out of school and you start reading it. The labor history in the Bay Area and nationwide, for instance. If you've read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, you get the idea. It was meant as advocacy for the working man. The tainted food sort of derailed it, but that was not what he was trying to get at. There were all the episodes here. Well, Uncle Roy was, in the 20s and 30s, often worked as a seaman and would have seen the kind of troubles that were going on in the docks in San Francisco: the Seamen's Union, the Longshoreman, the general strike of 1934. Just the whole struggle of trying to get a decent wage in those years. You can also read about –well, there was an awful lot of labor strife. As a matter of fact, you could also read about the Preparedness Day bombing in San Francisco. That was a parade that was sort of a drum beating for World War I, 1916, and a bomb went off. And five labor leaders framed by the D.A. for it. Two of them spent years behind bars. This was against the background of labor struggle at the time. Tom Mooney in particular, I think, was an activist with the Molders' Union, and that got him in trouble and eventually the frame up. You can read up on that, too, because it was a big part of life in those years, especially as Mooney wound up on in San Quentin for, I think, 23

years on death row for a while. It took a pardon to get him out of there after it was proven that the case was framed. So badly framed that they never found out who did it.

01:22:52:09 Benja Thompson: I'm wondering about what sort of, like, readings or historical figures, like, really sort of activated you early in your life or, like, have this significant impact?

01:23:08:00 Bob Harmon: All the books I read that at least piqued my interest. One would have been Randy Shilts, the gay historian. One would have been Curt Gentry, who wrote a lot about California history. Bernard DeVoto was another from the mid-twentieth century, a California historian who wrote in a rather candid way about how California was conquered. And he was also, incidentally, one of the curators of Mark Twain's literary estate. A lot of Mark Twain's later works were rather cynical and didn't see the light of day until after he was dead. DeVoto was able to publish a lot of those the essays and a lot of it was antiwar, a lot of it was social protest. So those would have been some figures that, in history, that I would have – you know, I've read an awful lot of history, including of California. I think Kevin Starr is another one that is well known. Multi-volume histories.

01:24:27:04 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Thank you.

01:24:28:05 Bob Harmon: Yeah.

01:24:30:04 Benja Thompson: Are you reading anything currently?

01:24:33:26 Bob Harmon: Off and on. It's just whatever piques my interest. I was writing book reviews for Amazon for a while, advanced reading copies. So I would be reading sometimes important stuff. Major new biographies of people like Woodrow Wilson or John Quincy Adams or the Grimke Sisters who were major abolitionist figures. But these days, publishers are not putting out as many advanced reading copies as they used to. There used to be a lot of that, but I'm not seeing those in my queues anymore. What I read is just simply whatever – well, I read the *New York Review of Books* and see if there's something in there that I think is going to be important and then I'll order it from the Marin Library system. They're very good about that. And I can go online and order them. I especially made use of it during the pandemic.

01:25:37:00 Benja Thompson: Oh, certainly.

01:25:38:11 Bob Harmon: Because I could put the order in and it would come from any library in Marin, and they'd put it out on the outside table during the lockdown. So that was a big help.

01:25:48:23 Benja Thompson: Yeah, I'm glad that was a service that was offered.

01:25:51:28 Bob Harmon: Yeah, it was rather important.

01:26:00:22 Benja Thompson: So, might you have any advice for fellow members of the LGBTQ+ community, or someone interested in getting into civil advocacy, whether it's rights or liberties?

01:26:15:19 Bob Harmon: Well, I'm not sure how I could characterize the LGBTQ community in Marin because I found it as basically people living in all of those canyons and

different neighborhoods are kind of, often on their own track. I would say that if people are interested in community advocacy – it doesn't have to be gay rights necessarily. That's one thing I learned in the law and in the ACLU is that what harms people in other respects may endanger you at some point. If the rule of law doesn't exist, for some, it won't exist for any. So there's plenty they can pick from. Think of it as a palette. Gay rights now has sort of been folded into a larger perspective. You can settle down openly in your own home. You can raise a family. That much is at least settled. Or at least it should be. But the point is, is don't get complacent. Not now. There's a growing gap between rich and poor to the point where capital is basically starting to damage everything else. If an equity firm, for instance, shows up and buys out a nursing home and then proceeds to make a quick profit and leave, then nobody's well served. Same thing is true with the increasing amount of capital that is available to influence political campaigns. So, there's a lot of wealth that's being used in ways that I don't think is a form of healthy investment. As for individuals, it's basically a case of they're just simply finding something where they think they can make a difference, either in a career field or in advocacy.

01:28:19:27 Bob Harmon: And the main thing is just don't get complacent. The last five years or so are – I think case in point, we elected somebody who was awfully careless with the rule of law and our institutions and that sort of thing seems to be more and more an ongoing instability. It's not just one person. It's – something has slipped. I mean, God knows the country I grew up in, starting in the Eisenhower years, had its flaws, but at least things went on a predictable track. Now we don't know what new thing might come up. And people need to basically be more engaged, more active. For one thing, they need to start teaching history again in ways that it hadn't been.

01:29:19:02 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

01:29:23:06 Bob Harmon: The other thing is, of course, the climate. We used to call it the greenhouse effect but it's the same thing. Things are getting worse. I can remember what our weather used to be like. I don't remember clear air or clear weather windstorms like we've been having in the last five years in California. And certainly, I don't remember fire years like the last four or five, waking up to a dark orange sky in 2020 was about as dystopian as it got.

01:29:57:19 Benja Thompson: Yeah.

01:29:58:17 Bob Harmon: Not just that but having to wear N-95 masks because of the toxic air, COVID aside. I don't remember anything like that before. God knows we've had large fires in California over the last 150 years, but not like this. I see it on my own hillside up on Middle Ridge because I'm trying to remove fire hazards around the house, and I can see how the drought has affected the plant and animal life. The pandemic year, 2020, I was outside all the time working on the hillside. That was safe enough but I was noticing changes in animal populations. I was noticing that the flora was damaged. I live on a hillside that had live oaks, beautiful trees, but a number of them have died quite often. Just simply snapped off at the trunk, without warning.

01:31:01:00 Benja Thompson: Yeah. All of the sudden rain after the long drought seems to be leading to a lot of, like, tree fall. That's a whole other danger area as well.

01:31:13:24 Bob Harmon: Yeah, they're damaged. Although my trees, when they snapped off, it was on clear days or clear nights. One moment they'd be in the air and then one moment they'd snap off. A combination of drought and beetles. But there were also disease outbreaks among the local deer, among local canid populations, like coyotes or raccoons or whatever in the last three or four years. Odd things have been happening. Plus, we've had sudden oak death for the last 20-odd years. And it started in Blithedale Canyon, where I live. That killed a lot of them.

01:31:55:17 Benja Thompson: Is the cause for that known?

01:31:58:01 Bob Harmon: It's a fungus of some kind. You'd have to ask the local Marin office of the – UC Berkeley. I think it's in Novato. But right now I'm basically just – I'm still physically able to do landscaping around the house but it's basically just cutting things and putting them in the chipper shredder. I'm not really growing anything, but just simply trying to cope with what's there: trimming up the trees to ten feet like you're supposed to do, mowing a safe hundred feet radius around the house of the grass, getting rid of either parasitic or unneeded shrubbery near the house because the insurance companies are on our case on that.

01:32:52:23 Benja Thompson: Oh, so that might be a good question then. What are good emergency preparedness steps someone can take?

01:33:01:22 Bob Harmon: Well, keep a go bag in case you have to flee suddenly, and this area is subject to sudden fire. If you've got a house, trim around it to what the fire department tells you to do. Try and keep at least three days of food and water if there's an earthquake. Actually, five days would probably be better because you're probably not going to be able to get anything or go anywhere if there's a big earthquake. That's stuff they've been teaching all this time and stuff that we still need to do. Also, if you've got a neighborhood preparedness group, to look after each other when the responders aren't there, that's also, I think, something – the city can tell you about that.

01:33:55:13 Benja Thompson: Okay. Thank you.

01:33:56:12 Bob Harmon: And in the end, it's basically – it starts with your own preparedness and your own activism. One or two people can do – at least they can do that much close in. And so, the bigger picture, you do what you can. One thing we've learned in our travels is that history quite often is not something you make. It's something that happens to people. And if you're lucky, you stay out of its way.

01:34:29:03 Benja Thompson: Is there anything else that you would like to address or talk about?

01:34:40:17 Bob Harmon: Well, not that much right now. I just try to live in the moment. I do what needs doing, and it needs doing every day. I got somebody that needs me to care for him. I've got property that needs to be landscaped in my crude way. Fortunately, I've got the tools and the fitness for that. We've got – we've actually managed to get solar cells and house batteries so that if there are more power outages or just simply a major disaster, we can at least make do, a lot better.

01:35:22:18 Benja Thompson: That's a good start.

01:35:25:08 Bob Harmon: And if you've got a roof, at least it takes you out of the – it means that you're not so much a debit to the power grid. We're actually putting stuff into the power grid. But at least it mainly means that we are self-reliant. We have autonomy if there is a disaster or a public safety outage, it's something at least. We could do it, and we do it. The same thing is with, simply maintaining the tools and supplies necessary to cope with both the ongoing problems and any emergency. But I think what I've learned, basically, is quite often if you can achieve some form of self-reliance or at least self-initiative, it's a start.

01:36:25:07 Benja Thompson: Thank you.

01:36:25:26 Bob Harmon: Yeah.

01:36:26:28 Benja Thompson: That's really, really wise words to continue with.

01:36:37:04 Bob Harmon: Yeah. You just have to keep moving ahead. You win, you lose. You continue.